

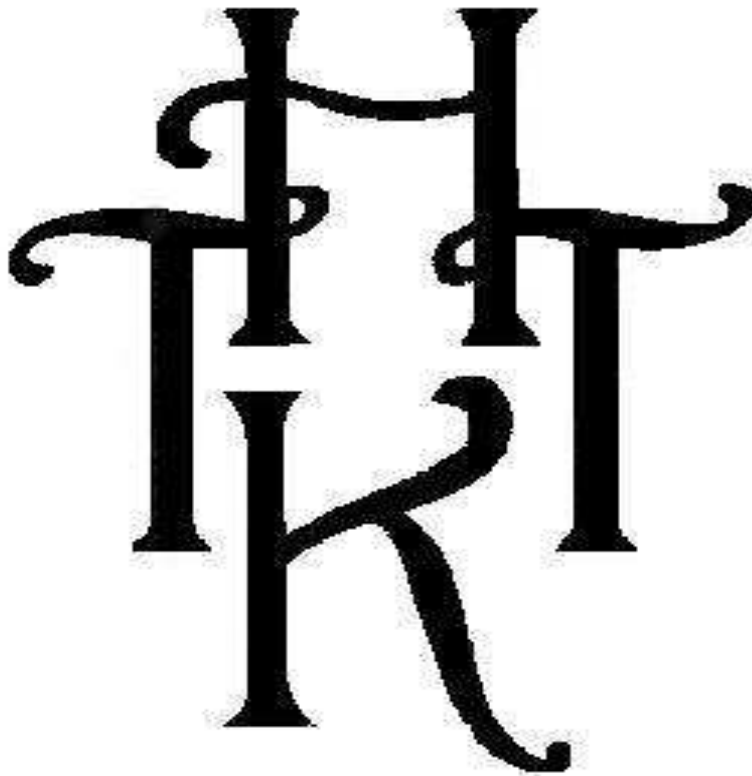
Heirs to the Kingdom. Part One.

The Bowman of Loxley

By Robin. John. Morgan.

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Front cover, 'The Bowman. ' Rear, 'The Lonesome tree.' © RJM 2007.

He stood on the bank as the barge drifted slowly into the mist across the Glass Lake, his heart was heavy for he knew that this was the passing of an era and he bowed his head in respect.

"Good Sir, tell me why you bow to the dawn mist?"

He turned, and faced a young girl dressed all in white, with a hood pulled over her face. "I mourn the passing of my lord, for there will never be another as kind, fair and even handed as he was."

The young lady lifted her arm and touched him gently on the elbow. "Know that there are those who can see what will become in the times ahead. This I tell you today as truth, another will come for his line has not been broken, Throw down your sword good sir and pick up thy quill and write down what has been said here today."

"How can this be my young lady no man knows what will become of the world?"

"Believe what has been said today and tell the world to watch for the Bowman, for he will herald the start of new days." As the lady in white turned, he saw a flash of blue from under the hood. He stood as if spellbound and watched her depart through the trees.

Turning, he headed for his horse and left that sacred place to head for Almesbury, and his father's church, where he would begin to write the history of his Lord and the hope for the future.

(Translated text of Geoffrey of Almesbury AD 421)

LOXLEY 2038

The Lox family was the oldest family in the area, they could trace their family back over hundreds of years and in the town of Loxley, they were highly respected. Since the dreaded red death of 2012, the family had played a very important role helping the other families around the area. What had once been a vast farm with many cottages for all the workers was now a small town surrounded by a huge wooden wall, where people fleeing the terror of the red death had come looking for safe haven outside the cities.

The outbreak had begun in London in 2012 and within three years had spread across the whole country wiping out most of the population. It was a painful lingering death that would start with flu like symptoms, and within a week, the skin would blister turning red. It had been chaos and people fled in panic out of the cities, the whole country just fell apart as death crept down every street.

Modern day transportation spread it world wide within weeks, and the age of modern man began to fail. Power stations ceased to run as oil ran out and the whole country ground to halt. Bodies littered every street rotting and stinking and people fought and killed each other in a mass struggle for survival. Riots exploded across the country as towns, and cities burned to the ground, looters ran wild and the cities and towns became desperate and violent places to be.

Within three years, it was gone but the country had become a very different place. Slowly nature began to take back what had been hers. Uncut grass verges became wild areas filled with coloured flowers, trees spread their seed in the gaps in cracking stone, and soon jungles of concrete created by man became shrouded, and clothed in green.

People of the countryside adapted quickly the old ways were not dead and they used the skills passed down to them by their parents to help them survive. It had been tough times but slowly as small communities banded together a new way of life began to evolve. Now as New Year 2038 began the country had settled into a life more of that from the dark ages spliced with the remnants of modern day living. Electricity was scarce and yet some had the old knowledge and wind turbines and solar panels provided lights and ran water pumps. Oil was now rare, and vegetable oil became the fuel of many.

Britain was now a hostile place, small communities defended the little they had against bands of outlaws known as the Cutters who would sporadically appear and attack a small town carrying off all the food and precious metals they could find. The gun was now a rare tool used; it was crossbows and long bows that were the preferred weapons of the day. They were light and easy to make from surrounding resources, which was the way everyone now had to survive.

Living off the land, and with the land, was the only hope, and for many the old ways of the woodsmen resurfaced. The cottage industries boomed again as life began to take on a different form, and old cars and vehicles were now just seen as a source of precious metals used for the making of tools and utensils for survival, especially weapons for protection.

Robert Lox and his brother John were the local suppliers. John was a blacksmith and his brother a carpenter between them they had been able to create quite a store of high quality weapons and tools, which they would sell or swap for goods at the fortnightly markets in Hathersage.

Long journeys were made back to the cities to collect metal or cloth to use in day to day life, and trade started to grow in salvaged modern clothes and new woven garments.

Currency was, soon introduced as communities reached out to each other, which were based on quarter ounces of pieces of metal. Most towns minted their own coins from jewellery they had and gold, silver and brass bits were now the price of those who had nothing to swap or barter.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FINAL DAYS OF WINTER

Loxley is a town set deep in the wild moor on the border of Yorkshire and Derbyshire. It is a small place mainly made up from the local farms with a few extra cottages for farm staff. It is not somewhere that you would easily find especially on New Year's Day after a week of heavy snow. The wind was wild, howling and rattling the windows; the air was crisp as Robbie opened his eyes and peered out over the blankets. His door banged again and then with a click the light flowed into the room as the door swung open.

"Come on lad, Billy's up and John's already out in the barn, we have a busy day planned." The tall muscular frame of Robert Lox filled the doorway as Robbie peered across the room.

"What time is it Dad?" Robbie yawned as he began to move under the thick warm blankets.

"Time we were up and at it lad, come on your mum has breakfast ready." Robert Lox turned and headed out of the room as Robbie sat up and swung his legs over the bed. His dad's boots thumped as they headed back down the stairs.

Robbie stood up and shivered. "God it's freezing," he muttered as he quickly grabbed his pants and pulled them up, and reached for his thick jumper. Dropping his feet into his boots he stood and looked at the empty bed on the other side of the room, he hadn't heard Billy get up. Robbie looked into the mirror and was faced with a stocky boy of almost seventeen; his long brown hair was sticking out at all sorts of angles and had flopped over the right side of his tanned face. His piercing dark eyes twinkled as he tugged the cord out of the back of his knotted hair and grabbing the old wooden brush, he began to rake his long hair straight.

"Robbie your foods getting cold." His mother's soft voice resounded up the stairs.

"Yeah coming." He pulled his hair back and pulled the cord dropping his ponytail down his back. He smiled back to himself in the mirror and headed off down the stairs.

The kitchen was warm as Robbie walked in, his mum smiled as she placed his breakfast of scrambled eggs and tomatoes on the table. "Come on love eat it while it's hot."

"Cheers Mum." Robbie sat down and began shovelling his breakfast down. Billy was sat staring out of the window chewing his toast; he glanced across at Robbie.

"Flights or points?" It was going to be another day sat in the back of the old barn putting the arrow tips and flights on the arrow shafts. This would be the sixth day doing it and Robbie was not looking forward to yet another long and monotonous day.

"Points," he sighed, and Billy smiled he knew out of all the things they could do this would be the worst.

"I need a path clearing first to the greenhouse." Jess leaned over the sink and peered through the window at the large snowflakes and across the garden to where the outline of two very large greenhouses stood framed in white. "Must have had about a foot and half last night boys, make sure you check the stoves and keep them stoked up."

Jess Lox was the gardener in the family, although gardener was hardly the word to use. Her Mother was an ex teacher of Botany and Horticulture and Jess had grown up surrounded by plants from all over the world. With her sister in law Beth they grew all the food that they ate as well as a whole host of other types of plants including spices, coffee and tea. Her orchard was the biggest for miles and provided them with a good income from the market during the summer months. Robbie smiled back at his mum. "No problem," and slapping Billy on his shoulder he jumped up and headed to the door and the coat rack.

The snow now was well over three feet deep as it drifted across the fields and on to the house. A small channel had been dug from the door to the large barn where the sound of hammer on steel rang out, a red glow emitted from the gap in the doors. John had the furnace on full heat, and was pounding the steel of new sword blades, as they entered. He looked up his face was bright red from the heat of the fire and his bare muscular arms glowed with sweat from the effort of his labour.

"Morning lads, Happy New Year." He gave them a huge smile as they picked two shovels and looked down as he pulled the long piece of steel out of the fire and laid it on the anvil and then pounded it with his huge hammer. Sparks flew off in many directions and the ring of the steel was deafening.

John Lox was the youngest of the three brothers. He was tall and heavysset with dark short scruffy hair. To meet him you would be wary, but to those who knew him he was a mild mannered and jolly man who was always the first to smile. He had only been angered a few times in the past yet the tales of the damage he inflicted on those that had crossed him were still tales told regularly on market days.

Billy and Robbie were glad to be out in the air, it was deathly cold and the wind seemed to bite at their faces but they felt a lightness at being able to mess about and not be cooped up in the back room of the barn. The snowflakes were large and fluffy as they floated down and it was not long before the snowballs were flying across the path as Robbie and Billy made the most of their time outdoors.

They made their way laughing and joking into the greenhouse. The whole of the roof was covered in snow and the greenhouse seemed insulated, and the sound of the door closing was dull. Gasping for breath and laughing the two boys made their way to the far end where there was a large stove and a tall round silver water tank. Billy shook his long blond hair as he dropped his gloves onto the stove. "Better check the supply tank, make sure that valve isn't sticking again." He stood on the stool and lifted himself up to look in the top of the tank that supplied warm water to the pipes running along the floor. "Thought so," he wiggled his hand and the tank made a gurgle as water flowed back into the system.

Robbie dropped his gloves on the stove next to Billy's, which were now starting to steam. "Oh that's good," he breathed as he held his frozen hands just above the boiler to warm them.

It was a vast greenhouse, over a hundred feet long and sixty feet wide. Robbie stared around at the hundreds of plants growing in rows up and down the house. This was his mum's turf, with help from his Aunt Beth and Cousin Alice; his mum grew most of the food they ate. Some were sold at market, and some was left to seed to provide for future years. Robbie loved the damp moist atmosphere of the greenhouses; they had a rich earthy smell that mingled with the scents of some of the flowers and spices his mother was growing. Robbie breathed a long satisfying breath.

He sat in the small chair in front of the stove and rested his boots on the edges, as his pants began to steam. Billy collapsed into the chair at his side and passed him a steaming mug. "Now this is more like it, I am sick of seeing sodding arrow tips."

Robbie smiled. "Yeah I don't think we have ever had as many in stock before, Dad seems mad about making more and more, I think it's the Cutters who have him worried."

"It's got John bothered, I heard him talking to Len over Christmas they have been moving north for some time now... I just can't see them finding here though, lets be honest this place isn't even on the map it's so small." Billy took a long slurp of his drink.

"This place is pretty secure even if they did come I can't see them getting in that easily, dad needs to relax a bit." Robbie looked at Billy. He seemed lost in thought as he stared at the snow covered roof panes.

"I don't know Rob; in all my time here I have never known your dad worry like he is now. Maybe he knows more than he is letting on... although I just can't see how they would

get through. You and your dad are the two best longbow men in the whole area and John is no push over with a sword. It would take hundreds to over run this place, especially with all he guards. Even then, they would have the toughest fight they have ever had to win. Not to mention that they would have to get over the wall before anything else."

Robbie thought about his dad. "Maybe he just wants to make sure he is prepared, you know keep plenty in just in case."

"Maybe, I suppose it won't hurt." The greenhouse door slid noisily open, the slender figure of Alice stepped in with two large watering cans in her hand. She smiled when she saw them sat in front of the stove.

"Morning guys." She trundled up towards them the two cans slopping water on the floor as she walked. "Don't let Aunt Jess see you drinking that, she is getting low on beans and the new crop is not ready yet, you know how she loves her coffee." She set the cans down and flicked her long brown bushy hair out of her eyes and over her shoulder.

Billy leaned forward and looked at the cans "Erg what's that it stinks?" The cans had a muddy green liquid slopping around inside them and it smelled like rotten cabbage.

"Its plant feed, we make it with comfrey nettles and a little manure, it's really good stuff got everything we need to create strong plants." She smiled smugly. "It's a recipe of my own."

Billy looked disgusted. "Please tell me you don't put that on the food we eat?"

Robbie smiled as he watched Billy retch as he moved just a little to close to the can and got the full flavour of its foul reek. Alice tutted at him. "You don't seem to mind too much when you are emptying the salad bowl on to your plate, it's this stuff that actually makes it possible for us to grow enough to feed you two. Anyhow one of you can give me a lift to get it in to the irrigation tank."

Billy seemed as green as the plants so Robbie laughing at him got up and lifted the can and made his way to the top of the greenhouse where a large metal water vat stood. He lifted the can trying to hold his breath, as it was putrid. He tipped the can and it slopped out in to the water tank. Alice smiling at his twisted expression passed him the other can and he poured it in. "Thanks Robbie... so what are you two up to today?"

"Not bloody arrow making that's for sure." Billy took another swig of his coffee.

"I have plenty of seed to sow and plants to water, you can both give me a lift if you want." Alice started back down to the bottom end of the greenhouse. "I will be in the potting house if you feel like it Ok?"

Billy seemed keen but Robbie didn't fancy doing it much, He felt restless and wasn't really sure what he wanted to do. He walked back towards the stove and sat down; Billy was watching Alice as she headed out of the door and across the snowy yard to the potting house. Robbie smiled to himself, "Why don't you go and help her?"

Billy blinked as if coming out of his thoughts. "What?"

Robbie nodded towards the greenhouse door and smiled. "Go and help her... You know you want to." Robbie laughed, as Billy looked surprised.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"God Billy it's so obvious that you really like her... Just go and spend some time with her, I will be fine in here."

Billy looked down at the floor he was amazed at how Robbie had picked up on his feelings for Alice, he had been so sure he had kept it hidden, he looked up at his friend and smiled, "You don't mind then?"

Robbie lifted his feet back up on to the stove and laughed "Alice really likes you too; I don't understand why you have to make such a big pretence... To be honest it's sickening the way you stare at her and pine away in secret... Go on get out a here and give me some peace."

Billy seemed unsure, the fact his best friend had rumbled him did quite surprise him but he was also glad that Robbie knew. Alice was Robbie's cousin and he was very close to her, Billy had somehow thought that he would not like it; after all he was just a guest in the Lox household.

He smiled back, and got out of his chair. "Cheers Rob... Shout me if your dad wants us." Billy wandered down the greenhouse and out through the door, Robbie settled back in his chair and enjoyed the few moments alone that he was about to get. He leaned back and closed his eyes; the peace and quiet created by the snow covered greenhouse was bliss. His mind wandered around his many thoughts, finally coming back to rest on Billy.

His mother Jess had found Billy nine years ago battered and bruised, and freezing to death on the old moor road. He was barely alive when she had brought him home and it had taken weeks for him to recover fully enough to tell them what had happened to him.

Billy had lived in the country somewhere outside of London with his parents, Kate and Arnold Avalon. Cutters, who killed his parents and burned the place to the ground, had attacked their house in the daytime. Billy who had been playing in the nearby fields had been terrified and hidden in some thick bushes, where he saw his parents dragged out and murdered.

He had stayed in the same spot for two days until his uncle Tobias had arrived. Tobias had taken him back to his place and set him to work on a loom, but he was a brutal drinking man and when things went wrong, it had been Billy who had suffered horrific beatings. After one specific very bad beating, Billy had waited until nightfall and escaped through the pantry window and run north to get as far away from his Uncle as possible. Somehow, Billy had lost his way on the road during a bad blizzard, and found himself up on the moors lost unable to find a way to a village. He had collapsed in the road and was very lucky that Jess had been the one to pass him in her cart.

Now Billy was a member of the family, he was more like a brother to Robbie than just his friend. It now felt like they had grown up together since birth, Robbie could not remember a time in his life when he had not had Billy at his side. Billy's only possession had been a golden chain round his neck with a silver lion and a golden dragon on it. Robbie slid his hand inside his shirt and pulled on his own chain and looked at the silver lion with two small diamonds for eyes. They glinted as he turned it around in his hand. He thought of the time on his 14th birthday when Billy had undone his chain and slid it off and given it to him as a gift.

Robbie had known how precious it was to Billy and had refused it, but Billy had been so insistent and deep down inside he knew how thrilled he was to have it and how deep a symbol of friendship it had meant to him. To Robbie that moment had sealed their kinship and he had thought of him ever since as more of a brother than a friend. Yes, Billy was now family in his eyes.

The large water tank gurgled and Robbie came out of his thoughts. He stood up and looked at the tank and the pile of wood at the side of it. He crossed over to the wood pile and lifted several pieces into his arms. With a block in his hand, he rapped the catch on the front of the stove and slowly tapped the door open to reveal the small bright embers inside. He pushed several pieces into it through the door and watched the red sparks fly as the wood settled in the midst of the heat. He closed the door with his foot and knocked the catch back with the small block. Picking up more wood, he headed off to the other stove on the other side of the greenhouse.

With all the stoves full and burning and the under soil pipes heated, the plants would be kept at a good temperature to protect them through the cold snap. Robbie pulled off his coat and loosened his sweater. The air was warm and moist and he enjoyed walking around the growing crops and having the space to think.

He peered through the glass at the two stone houses stood side by side across the yard. The snow seemed to have lessened as the flakes were a lot smaller now and falling less frequently, he loved his home and yet he had a nagging doubt about it that had been in his mind more and more.

The farm was now the centre of what over the years had become a community. Just under a quarter of a mile away was a group of fourteen houses, which as he had been told was once the residence of all of the workers from his grandfather's time as farm owner. Now they were home to a whole host of assorted families who had escaped the red death, and they all looked to his dad as landlord and local leader.

Over the years, the huge forest that had surrounded the farm had been thinned and the tall wooden trunks had been sunken into the ground to form a huge perimeter fence. Everyone now called the farm, the stockade, and it was a small community bound and enclosed behind the high rough wooden walls. Loxley was now a protected town surrounded by dense forest and those who did not know of its existence would find it very difficult to locate. On New Years Day surrounded by three feet of snow in a blizzard, it felt like the most remote and isolated place on earth, especially to Robbie who was used to being able to wander and hunt outside the walls. Winter had felt like a very long time this year, and as Robbie stared through the glass out into the white of the winter scene, he felt more trapped than ever. Spring was only seven weeks away and he could not wait for it to bring him sunshine green grass and a chance to slip out of the walls and roam in the forest.

Figures moved in the greenhouse opposite and he noticed Billy all smiles talking to Alice as he carried a large sack of compost on his shoulder. Robbie smiled to himself to see Billy and Alice talking away as they worked, they seemed so much happier than he felt. Alice was very special. Although they were cousins, it was mainly due to the fact that she lived in the house next door, yet spent most of her time either in his house or working with him. Robbie had grown up side by side with her, and she was more like a younger sister to him. She was also one of his best friends and he had on many occasions shared many of his secrets with her, which she had always kept to herself.

The irony of the day hit him and he laughed to himself. Fancy telling Billy to stop pining and go and talk to her, when all his free time had of late been spent alone and thinking about Rune. He had not seen her since Christmas, where he had to admit that he had watched her all day and had only had the briefest of moments with her, at which point he had felt so awkward that he had hardly been able to express an audible word. "Fine one you are Rob to preach to Billy," he said out loud.

The pictures flooded into his mind of the pale slender figure with waist length red hair streaked with golden flecks. What he would not give now, to look into those sapphire blue eyes that seemed to him to hold such a life force? She was everything he imagined a woman could be and more, and yet the sight of her would send his heart racing and he became so nervous he could hardly speak. His embarrassment, at all of the other occasions when he had made such a fool of himself in front of her, rose inside him.

He kicked the watering can and felt like an idiot, it rattled on the floor and fell over clattering on the stone pathway. Robbie pushed his hands in his pockets and walked past it as he headed back to his chair by the stove and flopped down. His gloves were now dry and felt stiff as he threw them onto the floor at the side of the chair. He reached over for the coffeepot and poured another cup full.

Robbie sat in the old chair sipping his drink and lost in thought for some time, the house door banged shut and a figure in a black cloak walked up towards the greenhouse. Jess Lox opened the large sliding door and stepped inside the greenhouse. She looked up the path at her son sat lost in thought in front of the stove. She smiled at him as he looked back at her. "Go easy on that coffee, it is getting a little low now and the new beans are not ready."

Robbie smiled back at his mum. "Don't worry your secret sack is still unopened," and he laughed. Robbie knew about the sack in the potting shed that she had hidden at the back of all the large plant pots. His mum looked surprised.

"How do you know about that?"

"Not a very good place to hide it was it? John wanted some big pots last year and I had to move about a dozen to get to those really large ones at the back. I saw your stash tucked down behind all the bell pots."

His mum shook her head and laughed. "I will have to find a better place now."

"Don't worry Mum I won't tell." Robbie grinned as his Mum walked up towards him and sat in the chair opposite.

"So why are you here all alone and not helping the others? Don't fancy being a gooseberry?" Her hazel eyes glistened with glee.

"I just felt like being alone with my thoughts for a bit."

Her eyes seemed to fill with concern. "Winter gets to us all, you know some how I think you suffer the most. Don't worry spring's almost around the corner and life will feel full again." She leaned forward and patted his leg as she rose up and moved to the table to gather her basket and knife.

Robbie sat back in his chair as he watched his mother cut away the sprouts on the stored canes. She expertly pinched the tips of the spinach and laid them neatly in the basket, and pulling hard on a stem she lifted a potato plant out of the loose earth and shook it so that the hundreds of small new tubers fell onto the top of the earth. Collecting them carefully she wiped each one on a rag hanging from the cord of her apron and placed them into the basket. Those that were left she gently pulled into a pile and covered them with the loose earth for next time. "I've told your dad to give you all a day off from arrows, it used to drive me nuts as well. What with thousands of the things filling the cellar I think one days break won't hurt." She smiled as she stood up and picking up her basket she began to walk back to the door. "Keep the stoves hot wont you Robbie dear?"

"I will mum.... And Mum?"

"Yes Robbie?"

"Thanks I bloody hate arrow making." Jess smiled as she pulled the door closed, turned and headed back to the house. Robbie took a long swig of his coffee, settled back down into his chair and breathed a long sigh.

Over the following week, the dark brooding sky seemed to lighten and as the winds picked up the snow ceased and the sun broke through turning the whole area within the stockade a dazzling bright white. Icicles hung from the gutters and dripped sparkling like jewels, the whole area began to come alive and work began clearing paths and roads.

It was a busy time and Robbie's sense of foreboding seemed to lift, as he joined Billy and his dad clearing the snow and getting the road down to the cottages open. It was hard work but with a few snowball fights with the local children and a lot of laughter the task seemed to flow by quickly as did the time. The small cottages built in two rows formed a little village street of fourteen houses, each with its own courtyard and in some cases the homes of the residents doubled as shops, and one such resident was Len Rimmer.

Len Rimmer was an older man whom seemed to be very wary about giving his true age. His role in the small community was that of chemist and medic, and he could often be seen walking down the street with his little bag of potions clutched tightly in his hand, and his long snow-white hair blowing behind him with his goatee beard twitching in the breeze.

Len was often a topic of talk in the small community; as for his age he appeared to be a remarkably fit man. He looked at least sixty years old and yet he had the strength and vitality of a man half his age. His eyes were the brightest of green and when you looked him in the eye you somehow felt that the life behind them was young and powerful. Robbie liked

Len a lot, there was something about him, an air of mystery, and yet somehow he always felt that when he spoke with him, Len understood more about him than he had revealed.

The house next door to Len's was Robbie's favourite; it was the home of Len's daughter Steph. Stephanie Rimmer Lane was the local weaver and supplier of clothing and jewellery. Outside her home Len had built a large wooden roof over the yard to give her the space to sell her clothing and set out her jewellery.

The real reason that Robbie loved this place more than ever was not because of the clothes or the jewellery, which were of the highest quality. No, he loved it because Steph had two daughters and one in particular was the focus of all his spare moments alone thinking.

Jade and Rune were as alike as chalk and cheese. Jade had her grandfathers green eyes and blond hair, but she was more of a tomboy dressed in collar-less shirts and dark canvass pants, which were usually patched. Jade made the jewellery and was at her happiest working in the back yard with her small furnace and metalwork tools. Robbie liked Jade she had a great sense of humour and was always looking for fun, even if at times she could be loud and rough with some of the smaller boys in the village. They had always got on well but her sister was something to behold.

Robbie took a break and leant on his shovel. He had just cleared the yard for Ann and Alice Kirk, who were now busy putting up a table so they could get out the daily stock of fresh baked bread. The smell wafted out into the street and his stomach rumbled. Across the street Rune was hanging garments on the clothes rail. Her long red hair glinted in the sunlight and shimmered as she moved. Robbie watched as she moved elegantly around the rail making sure all the garments were neat and orderly, her bright blue eyes darting from side to side as she inspected each garment.

His eyes covered her whole slender body as he took in the vision before him; her slender wrists and hands covered with silver bangles, bracelets and finely crafted silver rings. He absorbed the pictures in his memory of each fold of her long flowing top in the richest of dark purple velvet, as it flowed down and over her matching heavy flowing skirt down to her delicate boots. "Pretty isn't she?"

"What?" Robbie turned to see Anne Kirk smiling up at him. "Sorry Miss Kirk, what did you say?" he felt a little awkward having been caught staring at Rune.

Anne's eyes twinkled. "I said she is a very pretty girl Robbie." He felt his face warm with embarrassment and looked down for a moment. Anne laughed. "Don't be shy boy, she is a very lovely girl you could do a lot worse than Rune." She patted his shoulder and pushed a small bag of warm scones into his hand. "Thanks for clearing the yard, maybe you should wander over and offer her one of these whilst they are still warm."

Robbie smiled. "Thanks Miss Kirk." He lifted his shovel up on to his shoulder and stepped out of the yard as Miss Kirk walked back into her shop and in a light hearted mood; he took one of the scones out of the bag and bit into it. He stood for a moment and considered the point, why not he thought to himself and stepped into the road. Robbie walked across the road towards the small stonewall that surrounded the front yard. Len stepped out of the door as Robbie approached.

"Robbie lad." He beamed as he stepped down into the yard, Rune peered from between the garments and seemed to be a little pink around the cheeks as her bright blue eyes sparkled.

Robbie nodded at her and gave a weak smile. "Hi Rune." He turned to Mr. Rimmer who was now almost at the gate. "Hi Mr. Rimmer, how are you?"

"I'm fine my lad, yes fine." His bright green eyes sparkled as they looked Robbie up and down and made note of every aspect of him. "I see you have come to the aid of the good ladies Kirk, that's very good of you Robbie. I like a man who will always aid others."

Robbie now felt a little out of sorts, he had wanted a chance to talk to Rune, but he was faced with having to talk to Len, he considered his position whilst noticing the two blue eyes that flashed through the garments as Rune continued her work. He looked back over at the small bakery and then back up at Len who was watching his every move. He held up the bag of scones. "I was given these by Miss Kirk and thought it would be nice to share... after all it was not really my idea you know?" Robbie moved his cold feet from side to side. "My dad thinks we should all muck in and help out."

"He is very right my lad, very right indeed. In times like this it is more important than ever that we all should stand together and help each other." Len smiled a warm and friendly smile. "Never the less my young friend you chose to share your earnings with this household, and I am very honoured by the gesture, so I feel it only right to offer one of my own."

Len rubbed his hands together and pulled open the tiny gate. "Would you join myself and my Granddaughter for coffee, to wash down such fresh baked delights?"

Robbie looked up at Rune who was appearing around the end of the garment rack. He could feel his throat constricting as it always did in such close proximity to her. He coughed. "That would be very nice." He smiled and stepped through the gate.

With a swish of her garments and a tiny rattle of bangles, Rune disappeared through the door in front leaving Robbie alone in the yard with Len. Len patted him on the back softly. "Come along lad let's get in where its warm, I feel it quicker these days." He briskly rubbed his hands again and led the way into the house.

The old cottage was home to three women who were all gifted at the crafts that they did, and the house reflected it. The front room was just like an extension to the front yard and was filled with fine clothes and jewellery, all displayed with care and labelled very neatly. There was a small table by the door, which Robbie assumed was a counter, and all around the fireplace there were endless items from sculpted metal to picture frames as well as more jewellery. The fire crackled in the hearth, which had large baskets either side filled with shawls and intricately embroidered cushions. Robbie's eyes wandered around trying to take in every item in the room. "This place is fantastic," Robbie muttered.

"All my girls have far more than their fair share of talents. You would be surprised what they can do if they put their minds to it." Len spoke with pride even though his tone was kind hearted, Robbie could see how important they were to him. "Now my boy lets move through to the back room, where we may sit and enjoy our delights and talk as friends." Len moved through the small wooden door at the other side of the room and Robbie followed.

The back room again had a roaring fire, and a large rug decorated with a mighty coat of arms surrounded by a black and white circle. Three large comfy chairs were placed around the fire and a long old three-seated suite was pushed up against the wall. All had the same cushions and were covered with bright hand woven throws. Len gestured to a chair by the fire and Robbie loosened his jacket and sat down. Len sat opposite smiling. "That's better... nice and cosy here so much better than my shabby old place."

Robbie's eyes wandered the walls looking at the many paintings that were hung there. Most of them were of places he recognized as they were all painted within the walls of the stockade, a few he did not recognize and yet he felt they were familiar, which was unusual to him. Len watched with a satisfied look on his face as he studied each painting from his seat.

"You like my daughters work lad? She is a very fine painter. I just wish she had more time to do it, she has a very natural talent."

Robbie nodded to Len as he spoke but his eye was drawn to one painting in particular. It was an old ruin surrounded by trees. Whether or not it was the way that the sunlight broke through the dark clouds he could not tell, but as he looked harder at the

picture, he could just make out a small stone slab hidden under the low shrubs. It was as if a one beam of sunlight seemed to find its way through the dense growth and illuminate that single stone.

"You like that one do you?" Len's voice seemed soft in Robbie's ear.

"Very much so... Yes." It was almost a whisper as he nodded. "Where is it?"

"That's the old Priory at Kirklees." The voice was soft and caring. Robbie looked round as Rune placed a large tray containing plates and cups of hot steaming coffee on the table at the side of him. Her face was almost level with his and he could see her white pale skin with faint freckles and long red eyelashes decorated with the finest amount of lilac pale powder. She gave him a small shy smile and began to pour.

"The Priory was a convent many hundreds of years ago." Len leaned forward to pick up a cup and passed it to Robbie. He took the scones out of Robbie's hand and passed them to Rune, who sliced them and added fresh butter and strawberry preserve. "They say in legend that is where the son of the Earl of Huntingdon was buried." Robbie had no idea of who that was; he just loved the picture and felt strangely drawn to it. He put his cup to his lips and drank the hot fresh coffee as he looked back up at it.

There was movement and a faint tinkle of bangles. Robbie looked down from the painting and his eyes met Runes, she was watching him very closely. Her bright sapphire blue eyes seemed to dance with life. Len was still talking and his voice seeped back into Robbie's ears as he awoke as if from a dream.

"Yes it is so sad it was one of the best examples of architecture for its time, such a shame most of it has gone forever now, this country has lost so much since the red death, now it's just a waste land of ruins." A bell rang in the other room and Rune jumped up and walked past him into the shop, Robbie's eyes followed her through the door.

"My granddaughter is very beautiful is she not?"

Robbie felt the flush of embarrassment rise to his face as he turned to Len sat opposite in the chair; he smiled knowing the old man had noticed his attentions. "She is sir."

Len let out a mighty chuckle, and his eyes twinkled with delight, he leaned forward laughing and patted Robbie's knee. "Don't look so worried boy... you are a young man I would be very concerned if you did not take notice." He sat back in his chair and his old green eyes danced with delight. The moment was long, as Len seemed sat in thought as he stroked his small goatee beard. Robbie took another sip of his drink and looked at the floor. He finally spoke and his voice and manner seemed very reflective. "I am a lucky man young Robbie; I have a very beautiful daughter and two very beautiful granddaughter's, all of whom have exceptional talent." He seemed to pause and spoke more to himself than Robbie. Robbie sat watching the old man who seemed lost momentarily in thought. "Yes lad, even I never realized how gifted the three of them are, they have gone well beyond what was expected of them."

Len moved forward slowly in his chair and lifted a scone off the plate. "So young Robbie, soon you will be old enough to choose your own path in life, I have seen you grow into quite a man not unlike your father I might add. Tell me, will you stay here and make bows and hunt or will you leave this prison of a stockade?"

The question seemed to come right out of nowhere and Robbie felt the surge run through him as the surprise hit him, did Len know of the feelings of restlessness inside him? Was it so obvious to all around him? His words faltered a little.

"I err... I have not really thought about it, I guess for now my place is here my dad needs me up at the farm, and at the markets I suppose."

"For now you say?" Len considered the phrase. "Well it is still early, you have youth and there is still plenty of time. All men have their own destiny young Robbie, don't ever forget that. You have a path to follow like all men, and if it forks from what you know into

the unknown, do not be afraid to let your instincts guide you. I can see you are already questioning your path, which is a good thing. Time will lead you to where you need to be."

He gave him a kindly smile and Robbie smiled uncertainly back. His words had resounded deeply within Robbie and he was not sure if Len knew more than he was letting on. One thing Robbie did know was that this old man was no fool and he had spotted something inside himself that no other had spotted.

"How well are you schooled?"

Robbie was surprised. "How do you mean? My mother has taught Billy and myself for most of our life like all the other families around here.

"Aha you're Mother." Len nodded. "Of course her mother was a school teacher in the days of the old ways; I would say you are well grounded in English and maths and botany, but what about sciences?"

"I am not sure sir; I think I know enough, if not more than most people around here, my Mother was always very insistent we had a good education."

"I have no doubt that with Jess as a teacher you have a very advanced education young Robbie. I just think that somehow you are the sort of person who would benefit from a little; well let's just say more advanced education. I was once a professor at a university in the days of the old ways, I could offer you a chance to let that enquiring nature of yours explore other avenues lets say."

Robbie looked at the old man and considered his point. He had after all read every book at home and he was the one who was always asking questions. "I would have to discuss this with my father first, he has a heavy work load and he will have to let me have time off."

Len shook his head. "Of course lad you must have your fathers approval, I will speak to him if you want? Although the lessons will not be free of charge, you will have to do a little teaching of your own in return."

Robbie was very surprised. "What can I teach you?"

The old man smiled. "Not me my dear lad, my granddaughter's."

"What?"

Len leaned forward in his chair. "I believe if rumours are true you are quite a dab hand with a long bow. In fact if rumour is correct you are probably sharper than your father, which I have to admit would be quite something to see."

Robbie nodded. "I can handle a bow."

"You can do a little more than handle one from what I have heard. Therefore, I will fill in the gaps in your education and you can give my granddaughters guidance in using the long bow. Is it a deal?"

Robbie smiled with a little relief. "Yes sir it's a deal."

Robbie entered the shop with Len Rimmer as Rune, handed the neatly wrapped package to the young girl and she left the shop. Rune smiled at the two of them and her eyes seemed to sparkle, had she heard their discussion in the back room?

"Well my dearest granddaughter it appears that you have some company for your lessons with your old bookworm, and in return I have found you a very accomplished teacher of the long bow. I believe young Robbie's visit here today has been just the moment we were looking for." He patted Robbie hard on the back.

Robbie felt a little foolish in front of Rune now, and his stomach seemed to squirm slightly, especially considering the large smile on Runes face.

"That's wonderful grandfather, so Robbie I hear you are very good with the bow, I will really look forward to my lessons."

Robbie felt suddenly very hot, but also very happy. Half an hour later as he walked slowly back up the lane towards the farm, he found his thoughts drifting around at the prospect of being alone with Rune and showing her the subtle aspects of bowmanship. It was

something that seemed to fill him with great warmth, and he smiled as his pace quickened. Teaching Rune was definitely going to be the highlight of his week from now on, and he broke into a run to go and find his father and ask him about lessons with Len Rimmer.