



THE BADGER KNIGHT JAMIE M. STEAD  
A TALE FROM THE RYNGWOODE

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\* The Knight Of Ivy

Welcome traveller, welcome!

Ah, do I recognise you? Have you been here before?

Either way, what a story we have for you today.

Grab a seat while I pour you a drink, and prepare for another tale from the Ryngwoode...



Mocked as a child for his size and the colours of his house, Sir Robert de Mandeville grew to be bigger and taller than any other knight in the kingdom, and embraced the name once used to ridicule him.

It's a ridiculous name, and I'm not surprised people still find it funny behind his back, but I kind of like the guy from what I've heard of him, so you'll get less sass from me this time around. Plus he's a big bastard who you don't want to be on the wrong side of.

This is a tale of the Badger Knight...

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Blood. Bone.

Set free from the stranger's skull, smashed against the broken wall with little effort by the giant knight.

Over. And over. And over.

His hands dripped red with rage, wrapped tight around a neck with no head. Blood gushed forth as bone and flesh littered the floor by his feet.

The bloodlust had taken ahold of him, and God help anyone who got in his way now.

Behind the wall, a younger man was shouting, pointing across the clearing. He seemed familiar, but his words were just noise.

The knight turned around to see what the man had been alerting him to. Another stranger. Running straight at him. Sword aloft and ready to attack.

As the knight closed his eyes, time appeared to slow. He thought back to his training. Not the training at home with the castle's swordmaster, but the training he undertook by the hidden crossroads at midnight as a young boy. He took a deep breath, stepped back, lifted his sword to his side and swung it with all his might.

Opening his eyes at the last second, he watched as the stranger's body crumpled to the floor, its head soaring across the clearing, leaving a red mist in its wake.

More blood rained down on him. A cleansing shower from God above.

His tunic was no longer the colours of his house, white and black, but red and brown. Coloured by blood and dirt.

A noise.

He turned to his right. Two more strangers charged at him, side-by-side.

Idiots.

They were fast, but he was stronger.

His hands were still wrapped tightly around the hilt of his sword. Skysplitter. Forged for him when it became apparent all other swords were like a child's toy in his hands. With one brutal swipe he dismembered both men at the waist. Their legs hitting the floor, closely followed by their torsos, creating an inhuman pile of limbs.

He stopped. Looked around. The bloodlust was starting to recede. He remembered now, the bandits. All around him. Dead.

He'd needed this. But now he needed more. The "playful" fights at the tournaments were never enough. This wasn't enough.

He looked back at the man over the wall. His frenzy waning, he could now see who this man was. His squire. The young man was clutching at his side, blood seeping between his fingers.

"Are you okay, Oliver?" asked the knight, still tightly grasping his sword, prepared for a further fight.

"I... I think so, sir. It stings, but I don't think it's as bad as it looks."

"We need to get you out of here. There's something out there. In the forest. Something... not right. All around us. Watching us."

"Sir," Oliver said, whispering, "I think there's something moving over the wall at the far end of the camp."

The knight clasped his sword tightly and slowly made his way towards the source of the movement.

Two days earlier, the Badger Knight and his squire, Oliver, had left Helmsley after a reasonably successful tournament. Knowing the Knight's strength, and complying to the rules of the church stating that death should no longer be a part of the tournaments, most lords permitted the Badger Knight to only enter limited events. He was always interested to see what new challengers might appear, and was never going to turn down a bit of gold and glory. But the tournaments lacked the smell, and taste, of blood that he so longed for. Another few weeks and he'd be back home in New Castle, waiting to ride north in the hopes of a good fight fending off raids from the invading Scottish 'bandits'.

But before that, the knight and his squire had a mission to complete: visit Oliver's home of Killinghall and request additional soldiers to be sent north to the border.

They'd left Helmsley on the road to Rievaulx, as Sir Robert knew of some taverns along the way where he had hoped to bump into old friends. Then they would spend a few days in Killinghall and then on to Knaresburgh, petitioning the lord there for more soldiers also, before heading back to New Castle to train and prepare for whatever was to come.

That was the plan, anyway.

Nearing the town of Thirsk, they stopped in (another) tavern, to "give the horses a rest" (of course). The size that he was, Sir Robert could handle his ale. The size that *he* was, Oliver couldn't, so he was glad the water out here was cleaner than that back in the city.

They stabled their horses and went to enter the tavern, just as another knight was leaving.

"Good day and God bless, Sir William," said Sir Robert to the knight.

"Fuck off Robert."

“You were missed at Helmsley, didn't fancy the challenge this time around?”

“I said: fuck off. Some of us had real work to do, not ponce around pretending to hit each other for the entertainment of the Lords and Ladies.” Sir William headed into the stables, joined by his squire, who looked back at Oliver, staring straight into his eyes. There was something not quite right about him, thought Oliver, but he couldn't quite place what.

“Who was that?” asked Oliver.

“Sir William Wise of Welham. Even easier to say after a few rounds. You've probably heard of him by a different name, The Knight Of Furrows. Sees himself as a hero of the smallfolk. Come, food and drink await.”

They entered the tavern, Oliver expecting the usual silent stares.

As a child he was kept away from such establishments, apparently “not suitable” for the son of a lord. He imagined places of wonder, or danger. Taverns full of brave knights sharing stories, fights breaking out to see who was the strongest. Venturing up the stairs through velvet curtains to brothels with the world's most beautiful women, draped in fine silk.

Out here the reality was pretty mundane, sadly. All the taverns looked the same, and usually full of farmers or local guards drowning their sorrows. Every so often they might bump into a knight also travelling the roads, but usually for Sir Robert and his squire it was a case of in they walked, down they sat, quickly they drank, and moved on they did.

In the city there'd be a minstrel, singing songs of brave knights and wars past. However, Oliver knew that the further from a city you were, the more interesting the tavern tales became should you find someone willing to tell them. Stories of magic and fair folk, of



hobs and wisps, of demons and imps. Tales no longer told in the establishments found in cities. Tales Oliver longed to learn.

As for brothels, he'd yet to experience the inside of one of those, but he was still sure that when he came of age, and the time came, it would hold up to all his dreams.

For now he'd make do with the silent corner of another boring country tavern.

Silent. Boring. But peaceful.

"Well fuck me, it's the fucking Badger Knight," came a voice from the corner, laughing, "come to dig a new den out in the countryside, ya big twat?"

*Balls.* Oliver sighed, knowing what to expect next. More fighting. More blood. And more money, spent to appease the tavern owner for whatever damage was about to be done to his establishment.

Sir Robert approached the man and placed a large hand on his shoulder. Gripping it tightly he lifted the man to a stand. Placing a hand on either side of the man's head he gently started to squeeze.

The tavern was silent. Oliver knew he needed to intervene before something bad happened. The tavern owner opened his mouth, as if to speak up, but then his jaw snapped shut as if his mind had thought the better of it.

"I've crushed men's heads with my bare hands for less than that, old man, but mother would never forgive me," Sir Robert started, "if her favourite brother wasn't around for the Christmas feasting. Come here, uncle! God bless! I was hoping to bump into you on this road."

As the two men embraced, Oliver breathed a sigh of relief. Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last time.

“What brings you this far from home, young Robert?” said Robert’s uncle.

“Father has sent me to gather men to reinforce the northern border, the Scottish grow more brazen with their ‘bandit’ attacks. And we stopped at Helmsley on the way for a bit of fun at the tourney. Next stop will be Killinghall to ask Oliver here’s father to spare some men, then on to Knaresburgh.”

“Good to meet you Oliver. Son of Lord Osbert, I assume. Must be a right pain to have to tidy up the mess left by this twat everytime he goes off on one,” laughed the man. “I’ll introduce myself, since this wazzock doesn’t have the manners to do so. I’m Sir Hugo, or Uncle Hugo to this one. Taught him everything he knows...”

“Not quite everything,” interrupted Sir Robert, “but certainly a lot.”

“I thought maybe you’d come this far south to help with all these bandit attacks from the woods. Be a good lad Oliver, fetch us a few ales and I’ll tell you the stories that the minstrels don’t sing about the ‘Badger Knight’...” said Uncle Hugo, winking.

“Not sure we have enough time for all that,” said Sir Robert, half laughing, “and the lad doesn’t need to waste time listening to the filth that spews from your mouth.”

The men laughed together. This was certainly a side of Sir Robert that Oliver rarely got to see.

As a child, Sir Robert, or “Little Lord Robert” as he was then, wasn’t the biggest of children. In fact, he was so small and scrawny that the other children in his father’s castle mocked him and called him the Weasel Knight in their games of play fighting. He would get angry and tell them that when he was bigger than them they would regret mocking him.

As the first born son of Lord Peter de Mandeville, Robert was expected to grow into a strong knight, protecting the people of New Castle and leading his father's forces should the king call upon them once his father had passed on.

His mother had other ideas. Knowing he would never be strong enough to be a knight, she insisted on teaching him in the ways of the church with the aim of one day sending him to train as a priest. Around the age of nine he started to spend his winters away at various monasteries, learning the life his mother hoped he would follow, returning every summer to learn from their own priest, making sure he never lost touch with their local ways.

Every year the other children would grow bigger and stronger, practising with their weapons and training to become pages and squires, and to one day become knights themselves.

Robert stayed weak and frail.

But one summer, before the age of fourteen, Robert didn't return to New Castle. He spent that year travelling with a hedge priest, visiting other towns and cities, and even daring to journey through the disputed lands and over the border into Scotland.

That winter, just after his fourteenth birthday, he returned home, almost unrecognisable. He towered over the older children. His father was shocked, but overjoyed that his first-born son was growing into the man he had longed for. Insisting he stop his religious teachings, his father immediately started to train Robert to become a squire. However, to appease his wife, he agreed Robert could still carry on some religious studies if he so wished.

Rumours and whispers spread through the city, accusing Lord Peter of making a deal with the devil himself for the changes in his son. The children had different ideas though,

and insisted that Robert's mother must have lain with a beast, and Robert had finally grown from a cub into a badger.

His days were spent training in the courtyard, fighting as if he'd never known anything different, often having to be dragged off his opponents before doing any real damage.

His nights were spent praying, asking for the strength to always do what was right, and for forgiveness for those that mocked him.

For one month every summer, Robert would take leave from New Castle and head out for more religious training. Of course, the other squires had their own take on this, that he was out doing the devil's work as part of the supposed deal his father had made.

Around the age of twenty he finally stopped growing, reaching 6 foot 6 inches. Towering over not only the other squires, but all the other knights too.

On the day of his knighting the hall was silent except for the words spoken by his father. As Robert stood, no longer a squire, but a knight, the room cheered. Then a single voice was heard shouting "Long live the badger knight."

The room fell silent.

Robert surveyed the room, making eye contact with every single person. He stopped, and, dressed in his house colours of black and white, drew his sword, raising it above his head. The already silent room somehow became quieter, broken only when Robert himself shouted "Indeed. Praise be to God. Long live the Badger Knight."

Once more the room cheered.

A few years had passed since that day, but to Robert it felt like a different life altogether.

"You mentioned bandits earlier. Causing more trouble than usual?" Sir Robert asked, between sips of ale.

"Looks that way. Bandits from the Ryngwoode have been especially brazen lately, not just attacking people on the road around the forest itself, but venturing out further afield and raiding farms in areas that usually have no such problems. A few were caught down the road a few days past, all three were smiling and praying while they were hanged, never have I seen a sight like it. Most men beg for their lives while awaiting the noose, these fellas almost seemed relieved," replied Uncle Hugo.

"Relieved to be executed?"

"Aye, almost as if that was a better fate than... well, I don't know what. Some of the local lads claim they could hear them saying 'You don't know what's coming from them trees, we're the ones who are saved', or some such tattle. People have been telling tales about the Ryngwoode for as long as trees have grown there, about the demons that haunt the wood, the children of wol.... well, you know... those whose name we should not speak. Tales to keep people out. Maybe they are just trying to keep people away from something they don't want us to know about?"

"Something they are willing to give their lives for?" questioned Sir Robert. "Usually their kind will sell out their mothers to save themselves."

"Very true lad, very true. Either way, there's something in those woods that they are either trying to hide or has them spooked."

"Where exactly have they been raiding, uncle?"

"Oi, Harry, over here lad," Uncle Hugo called to someone across the room. A young man joined them, wearing simple armour. "Harry, this is my nephew, Sir Robert, the

Badger Knight. But you probably already knew that. Robert, this lad here is Harry, one of the local Countryguard. He's a local lad from Thirsk, he can tell you more than I can."

"God bless, Harry. Uncle here tells me there have been problems with bandits, more so than usual?"

"Aye sir, way more problematic than the norm. Used to be they would only rob at night, along the Ryngwoode Road. During the day it was usually safe, and by night anyone travelling was either a fool or armed. But then the attacks started happening during the day, just a few at first but then they became more commonplace."

"And these attacks, just on merchants or common folk too? And where are the local patrols?" asked Sir Robert.

"We barely have the men to patrol this area sir, ne'er mind down on the Ryngwoode Road itself. All our spare men were sent north to help guard the Scottish border," replied Harry. "As for the attacks, bit of a mix, truth be told sir. Gold and goods from merchants. Horses. Food. People stopped using the road, but the further from the Ryngwoode people keep, the further out the bandits reave. Merchants with any sense, or with no armed guard, don't travel the Ryngwoode Road these days, so take a longer route. And the bandits travel further out to plunder those roads and raid the passing farms on the way. I've heard tale of them taking full stocks of food, with horse, cart and all from some farmers. It's not the raids themselves that are surprising now, but the number of them, and the amount they are taking. Like they are..."

"... preparing for something?" Sir Robert finished.

"Aye sir."

"Tell him the rest, Harry," said Uncle Hugo, with a glint in his eye.

“Well, sir, not sure how much I believe it myself, but one of the other guards, Henry, he was on the patrol that caught those lads. While the bandits were brought back to the local guardhouse he took upon himself to check the edge of the woods, the Ryngwoode that is.” Sweat started to form on Harry’s brow. “He says... he says he saw a demon, clear as day.”

“A demon?” Oliver blurted.

“Carry on lad,” said Sir Robert.

“Aye sir, a demon. I don’t know what to believe, and I don’t want to believe it, but every lad and lass of the north knows the tales of the Ryngwoode, as you well know. Henry said it was sat there in the trees, looking down at him. Its face as pale as the moon and its body as black as night, covered in thorns. It stared at him, into his soul he said it did, stared at him and said ‘First we cleanse the woods, then we cleanse the world’. He ran, ran all the way back to the guardhouse. He’s refusing to go back out to where he saw the demon. He’d be executed for derelact... deralec...”

“Dereliction of duty,” said Uncle Hugo.

“Aye sir, he’d be executed for that, if it weren't for the fact most the other guards believe him, including the commander. Superstitious lot, this side of the Ryngwoode.”

Oliver glanced at Sir Robert. He could tell from the look in his eyes there would be a further detour.

“Maybe for the rest of our journey we should take the Ryngwoode Road and see what happens. What say you, Oliver?” said Sir Robert, the joyous look of adventure on his face.

*Balls*, thought Oliver.

Early the next morning, the knight and his squire left the tavern and headed south, towards the Ryngwoode.

As they travelled, the lands became increasingly barren. Farms laid abandoned, windmills left to slowly turn in the wind, but with no flour to mill. The fields had been harvested already, but there was no one around to tend them for the next season.

After an hour or so they reached the Ryngwoode Road and turned west. All being well, straight to Killinghall, hoped Oliver.

The two men travelled in silence, slowly, taking in the scenes of the countryside as the autumnal colours set in. It made a welcome change to the sights and sounds of the city. Wind gently whistled through the trees, rabbits played in the long grass at the side of the road, safe while the foxes slept. *I could get used to this*, thought Oliver, *a life on the road, surrounded by nature*.

A few hours down the road Sir Robert slowed and motioned Oliver to stop. Something had caught his attention.

"Now that looks interesting," said Sir Robert.

"Something in the trees?" asked Oliver

"Not in. Above," said Sir Robert, pointing to the crows circling the edge of the wood like a black whirlwind. "We'll stop here."

Oliver jumped off his horse and helped Sir Robert dismount.

"There," said Sir Robert, pointing to an opening in the treeline, blood dripping from the leaves.

The knight drew his sword and slowly entered the treeline as Oliver secured their horses.



Before Sir Robert lay the bodies of multiple men, some dismembered, some decapitated. Blood covered the small clearing, slowly dripping from the trees and bushes. Fresh.

Oliver appeared beside him, both disgusted yet unfazed by the sight before them. “There’s signs of a cart going off the track, opposite,” the squire said, pointing across the road. “By the looks of the wheel marks it went off the road and got stuck in the ditch. There’s shards of wood and a few bits of rope but nothing else. Looks like multiple horses too. Someone who was attacked, maybe?”

“Most definitely,” replied Sir Robert. “But I’m more interested in who attacked these poor bastards.”

“Looks like they picked on the wrong cart this time...”

“Possibly. But I doubt it was the cart owner that did this. There’s little blood out on the road. Judging by the bodies, and the blood, I’d say these men were surrounded here within the trees by a larger force. See how all the bodies... or body parts... are all so close together? No chance to run. Someone surrounded them and massacred them where they stood.”

“You almost sound sorry for them sir.”

“I have sorrow for the death of any of God’s children, Oliver. No matter what path life took them on, there is always a chance at redemption. God forgives all.”

Oliver still couldn’t balance the two sides of Sir Robert with each other. One side ready to fight, one side ready to pray.

“Dear God in heaven, have mercy on the souls of these men and judge them as you see fit. Mother Mary tend to them until judgement is passed. Seed of Mary guide them to their eternal resting place, above or below. Amen.”

“Amen,” echoed Oliver.

“Time to find the scary bastards that put these ones to the sword, and send them to meet their maker. Let God be the judge. Bring the horses.”

*Balls*, thought Oliver once again.

“I’m not sure this way is best for the horses, sir,” Oliver said after a few minutes pushing through bushes and branches. It didn’t take long for the path to narrow and the forest to thicken, becoming far too dense to navigate on horseback. Maybe this meant they would have to go back, he hoped.

“I think you may be correct, Oliver,” replied Sir Robert, looking around, deciding what to do. He drew his sword and claimed a large branch from a nearby tree. Stabbing the branch into the ground he said “Tie the horses to this, not loose enough that they can easily get away, but not too tight they can’t bolt if they need to. We’ll continue on foot.”

That was not the response Oliver was hoping for.

“Sir, far be it for me to question your judgement, but where are we going to go? We have no way of knowing what direction any of these men went or came from...”

“Someone survived. I can smell their blood.”

As was often the case, Oliver wasn’t sure if Sir Robert was serious or not, but he had that look in his eyes. The look of a wolfhound with the scent of its prey.

Silence followed, but all around them Sir Robert could sense a darkness, watching.

Eventually the dense forest thinned out before them, with natural paths once again appearing through the trees.

“This way,” said Sir Robert.

A canopy of orange and brown covered them. Glimmers of light shone through, catching on leaves slowly starting to fall as autumn prepared to make way for winter.

Minutes later they arrived at a crossroads, the paths well trodden with marks from both man and beast. Roots reaching out, as if nature was reminding all travellers that this was still very much hers. Sir Robert confidently carried on straight forward, as if he already knew his destination..

Hanging from the trees were what appeared to be small people, or animals, most holding weapons or tools. Effigies made from sticks and straw. Dozens of them just hanging there, slowly swaying in the gentle breeze. Hallowed bones gently tapping together, chiming.

Oliver pulled at one of the straw men to get a closer look when something distracted him down the path to the right.

Something was moving out of the thicket. A young stag, aglow in a single ray of sunlight breaking through the thick trees above. It stopped for a second, staring straight into Oliver's eyes, like it was questioning why he was here, in its domain. It lowered its head, licking at the dry soil around its feet, before turning and disappearing back into the trees.

Birds landed on the branches above Oliver's head, causing leaves to float down like coloured snow. He was starting to enjoy the forest. Unlike the city, it was quiet. Natural. It felt as though nature was reaching inside him, calming him. He was starting to envy those that made these woods their home.

Sir Robert was out of view now. Oliver hurried forward across the path to catch up with the Knight, but as he did he sensed something watching him. He turned to look down the left hand path. A black goat, alone in the middle of the road, eating the thickest, most

luscious grass. The only grass on an otherwise dry, soil road. Was it wild? Had it escaped from a nearby farm?

The goat looked at him with red eyes, causing Oliver to stumble backwards, falling to the ground. The trees started moving. He was being dragged towards the animal by an unseen force. He dug his hands into the dry soil to stop himself, but it was to no avail.

He opened his mouth to scream but all he heard was silence. Even the birds were silent. He could no longer breathe.

Desperately, he withdrew his dagger and stabbed it into the ground, grasping it tightly with both hands.

He looked up.

The goat was gone.

Shocked and confused, he sat for a moment, catching his breath. Standing up, he sheathed his dagger and as he started to dust himself off he noticed his hand was covered with some kind of purple powder, staining his skin. *The straw effigy?*

Maybe the forest wasn't all he thought it was. Maybe the stories were all true. Time to go.

A few minutes later he caught up to Sir Robert. It was almost as if the knight was unaware of his surroundings, focused purely on the prey ahead, wherever, and whatever, it may be.

"Sir, I just..." started Oliver.

"There," Sir Robert said, pointing through the trees to the ruins of a building. "Sounds quiet, but be prepared."

"But I..."

“Shh, be prepared I said,” replied the Knight.

Oliver gulped, slowly drawing his sword. Sweat forming on his brow.

Sir Robert went first, walking into a small camp that was obviously still in use. Spears and swords were propped up against an old wall. Horses were tied to what was left of a nearby fence. A fire smouldered in the centre and there were signs of food having been recently prepared. Inside the remains of the building were various chests and barrels, filled with grain, vegetables, meat, and fine clothes.

“Not what I was expecting,” said Sir Robert, as he looked through each one.

A corn effigy in the shape of a man hung from a nearby tree, catching Oliver’s eye. “I agree,” he said, “not at all what *I* was expecting.” He pulled the doll from where it hung. “Sir, what I was just trying to tell you...” he started, before he felt a warm, wet sensation in his side.

He looked down to see blood. A small, sharp blade had punctured his skin. Another blade flew past his face, stabbing into the tree.

They were no longer alone.

“Sir Robert,” shouted Oliver, as he clumsily threw himself over the nearby wall, “bandits!”

“Finally,” said Sir Robert, walking out of the dilapidated building. Instantly his vision turned red. Before him five men, which became simply five targets. He ran and grabbed the nearest bandit by the throat, surprising the man with his speed, punching him in the face. Over and over.

Oliver peered over the top of the wall to see Sir Robert lifting the next man up by the throat, but he quickly ducked back down as the man's head came crashing down on the stones.

As blood rained down on him, Oliver dared to look over the wall once more, to see another bandit running towards Sir Robert. "Sir, behind you, another!" he shouted, pointing across the camp.

Oliver watched as the knight appeared to go into a trance before decapitating the man in one smooth swipe, followed by a single strike to take out the last two men.

A wave of calm slowly enveloped Sir Robert, the rage subsiding. As he was checking on Oliver, his squire whispered to him, warning him that something was moving at the other end of the camp.

The knight slowly walked towards the wall, aware this could very well be a trap. Peering over the wall he found a young man cowering. Moving quicker than a man his size should be able to, he grabbed the man by the neck and dragged him over the wall, throwing him to the ground.

The man whimpered, blood dripping from his chest. The cuts appeared to be precise, almost like a wolf's head.

"Speak, boy!" Sir Robert shouted, pushing the tip of his sword into the man's neck.

"Kill me if you like," the man spluttered. "There's no escape for me now, either way."

"Explain," the knight said, firmly but calmly.

"There's something else in these woods, scarier than you. Says it's cleansing the forest first, then the fields, then the towns."

"I felt it. What is it? Did it kill those men by the road?"

“It’s evil, pure evil. It’s the children... the ones whose name we must not speak. Pray to God you escape before it comes back.”

“I said explain.” Sir Robert started pushing his sword into the man’s neck.

“We... we were waiting by the road... for merchants. One had just appeared. We jumped out of the trees, ready to... to rob him, when the drums started. Then the screams. Ungodly screams. We ran back into the trees only to be surrounded by... by... it.”

“It?”

“I don’t know how to explain it, it was like a single spirit that was many. A black essence, floating in the trees, with many faces. It slaughtered everyone else in seconds. I closed my eyes, ready to die. I felt the blade in my chest as it told me how it was going to cleanse this world. The cutting stopped and I opened my eyes to see it had gone, so I ran back here as fast as I could. I swear to you, swear to God, that’s what happened.”

“I believe you. Whatever it was, I think it left its mark on you,” said Sir Robert, pointing his sword at the man’s chest. “I imagine it’s allowed you to live as a warning to the others, but without help that infection will soon take you.” He knew this was a lie, the man was beyond help already.

“We’d heard tales from other groups in the forest. We’d also started to hear strange noises and see things in the shadows. We all knew the tales told of this place, but we thought *we* were the shadows that made people afeared.” The man paused, sitting himself up against the wall. “If we go home we’ll be hunted by lords and the likes of you, so some of us thought if we could steal enough gold and horses then we could escape this land altogether. But I think I’m the last one left. We all pledged we’d rather die here with nature than out there on the executioner's block. But that doesn’t mean we *want* to die.”

“Escape? To where?” asked Sir Robert.

“Some wanted to go north to Scotland, hoping they would give us work.”

“Give a bunch of Englishmen work? Good luck.”

“Some wanted to go on pilgrimage,” the man said, coughing up blood. “The king may judge our bodies, but only God can judge our souls.”

Sir Robert thought for a moment, taken aback. He shouldn't be surprised that the lord's reach came this far into even the darkest of places. “As a man of God myself I'm willing to help, if you can help us. If what you say is true then maybe I can get safe passage to the Archbishop in Kings Town for you and any left in your band, where you can do penance for your past sins and look to cleanse your souls before you eventually meet God.”

“I have nothing left to lose. I'm sure my brothers are gone. It, whatever it is, is out there. It will come for me and then for you. I want you to know I'm not scared of what you will do to me, but if you take my life now then you save me from the fate *it* will bring me.”

“We could take him with us, take him to my father. Let him hear the man's story,” said Oliver.

Sir Robert lowered his voice, “I'm afraid this man won't be leaving this clearing, his wounds are infected. I don't think he'll last much longer. I need you to take one of their horses, head back to the main road and head straight to your father's castle...”

“But sir...”

“But nothing, Oliver. Listen to me. Something is here and I intend to find it.”

“Sir, you can't believe his ramblings. He's infected, he's probably delirious, seeing things. I was trying to tell you before, there are these effigies, these straw men, hanging throughout the forest. I touched one, and then saw things I'm not sure were real.”



“They keep appearing. We take them down, and then we find more,” said the injured bandit. “Every now and then someone will pull one down and see things, as you say, things that can’t be real.”

“Who hangs them?” asked Sir Robert.

“Them. It. Whatever is out there. Some are shaped like animals, some like men. Some with weapons, some with tools. In the end we stopped touching them out of fear. That one you see there, that wasn’t there before. It appeared overnight, and then this happens to me. They are cursed and they curse anyone who touches, or even sees them. Kill me, then run. Save yourselves if you can... but it’s too late.”

“Oliver, go. Now,” said Sir Robert.

“But...”

“Oliver, you will get on one of those fucking horses and you will ride to your father’s fucking castle. Understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Now bind your wound, last thing we need is you bleeding out on the way home. I know it doesn’t look bad, but keep an eye on it for infection. I don’t think this man’s wound became infected this quickly on its own, I think the blade used on him was poisoned, and whatever was used could be mixed into those straw men.”

“What about you sir, what are you going to do?”

“Find whatever is out there. I’ve felt it, watching us, ever since we first entered the trees from the road. If what this man says is true, then I intend to stop it before it does come for us all.”

“But sir, you have no idea where to go. The Ryngwoode is vast, there’s no way...”

“I’m going to walk,” interrupted the knight, “and hope *it* finds me. Maybe I’ll drag *him* along with me, it might come back for him.”

“Too late,” said Oliver.

Sir Robert turned around to see the young bandit slumped over, blood dripping from his mouth. Whatever poison it was, it had done its job.

“That settles it, go now Oliver. Tell your father what transpired here, if he doesn’t believe you then find someone who does. I’ll meet you in Killinghall when I’m done.”

Hours passed. Sir Robert was starting to think he was walking in circles, until he stumbled across a stone marker, worn too much to be of any real use. *Pointing the way to an old village, maybe*, he thought.

Carved into the stone was a symbol he didn’t recognise. It looked like a recent carving, yet to be worn by the elements like the rest of the stone.

He carried on down the path until he found another stone marker. Atop it sat another of the straw effigies, this one a man holding an axe. No, a hammer. Sir Robert knelt down to get a closer look, knowing it best not to touch it. It looked fresh and obviously hadn’t been there long. A trap? He prepared to draw his sword. A strange but sweet smell was emanating from the effigy. Compelled to sniff it deeply, he picked it up. The more he inhaled, the more he needed. And the more he needed, the more he inhaled.

His head started to spin. The trees started enclosing in on him, branches grabbing at him. He dropped the effigy and drew his sword, lashing out, cutting all that came close to him.

He fell backwards, falling deep into the ground itself, staring up at the sky through the roots that covered him like snakes.

He screamed, emerging from the ground as if being born again, the trees enveloping him like a soft blanket.

“It’s not real,” he told himself. “Remember the training. Remember the training. Seed of Mary, give me the strength to see past these illusions. Guide me past this evil.”

The trees bounced back towards the sky. His path was clear.

He stood and shook his head, his vision now clear. He started to walk down the road in the direction of the marker, his legs feeling heavy. He looked down expecting to see mud, but the ground was dry. Why was it so hard to walk?

Black eyes watched him.

The trees screamed.

The sun fell.

The moon rose.

Stars danced across the sky.

He felt at one with nature.

At one with the beasts in the forest.

At one with life itself.

And yet also distant from everything around him.

Paths appeared before him, leading him through multiple abandoned settlements.

Villages, large and small. Farms, once a place for growing crops, now only fields of trees. Nature had taken back what was hers and she was taking no prisoners. *It’s beautiful*, he thought.

Formless but human-like figures skirted the edge of his vision. Green and red danced before him, a show of light that gave both comfort and fear.

Darkness fell as the moon and stars burst into life, and consciousness faded from him fast.

The sun burnt the sky once more, the light awakening him.

The formless shapes guided him. Fed him. Watered him. Time passed. Months? Weeks? Maybe only days? He could no longer tell. Time was an enemy already conquered by nature.

The trees screamed. Again. And again. Herding him with their branches. Human figures with thorns for arms beckoned him from within the thicket.

He felt so heavy. And tired. So very tired.

Sir Robert stopped before a river, the flowing water looking like the manifestation of peace. Before he knew it, the human-like shapes helped him shed his armour and guided him into the water. He lay back, relaxed, letting the water guide him. At peace with the world he floated downstream, ready to meet whatever god or demon awaited him at his final destination.

The knight awoke, trees rippling before his eyes.

His mouth full of water, he thrashed around, panicking. His hand hit something hard. A root from a tree. Grabbing it, he pulled himself out of the river, gasping for air.

How long had he been in the water? How long had he been in the forest? He'd lost all sense of time. Judging by the sun it was early evening.

*Oliver!* How long had it been since he sent Oliver to his father?

He started to remember all the things he'd seen and heard these past hours (Days? Weeks?). Shapes guiding him, eventually bringing him to this place, wherever this was. Had it all been a dream? He felt truly lost. Or was he exactly where he needed to be?

“Seed of Mary, is this a test? Did you guide me or have I been led by demons?”

He made his way through the trees and onto an old road, where once more signs of life started to show. Footprints in the dried mud. Signs of repair to once abandoned buildings.

Ahead he could see a clearing with a round altar, some kind of effigy sitting above it. Another of the straw men perhaps? Entering the clearing he realised it was no altar, but a well, the bucket above it slowly swinging in the breeze. He dropped it into the darkness, a loud splash echoed back towards him. Pulling the bucket up, he tilted his head back and took a long drink.

Opening his eyes he could see grey clouds starting to form above. He was already wet and cold from the river, he needed to get somewhere warm and dry before the rain started.

Looking around he could make out more buildings through the trees, and towering above them the remains of a once proud church. If there was anywhere that would provide him with safety, it was there. That is where he had been guided.

He made his way through the trees towards the church, the path opening up into another, larger clearing. The remains of a once large village spread through the forest around him.

The sky darkened, and the sound of thunder rumbled in the distance.

Rain started to pour, splashing off the stonework of the abandoned buildings.

In the trees he could see a shape moving towards him, a white orb. It stopped, hovering in the air. The orb had a face. A face as white as the moon but with eyes that crackled with black lightning.

The face hovered there, between the trees. Staring through him and into his soul.

He stumbled backwards against a wall. Lighting filled the air, revealing multiple floating orbs in the trees, all with the same face.

“What blasphemy is this?” he shouted. “Seed of Mary, guide me! Show me your light!”

The rain grew heavier, the ground beneath him making it increasingly harder to stand. He slid, the woodland floor turning to mud.

Thunder crashed through the sky like the sound of a thousand horses.

Then silence again, except for the rain.

The orbs still hung there, unmoving.

"Father, son and holy spirit, protect me this day from these demons. If this is a test then guide me. If this is hell then forgive me. Mother Mary show me your mercy. Seed of Mary empower me with your strength," he prayed, crossing himself.

Lightning lit the clearing once more. Around twenty orbs sat there, floating motionless in the trees. All with the same featureless face, eyes as black as the traitor's soul. The rain was deforming each orb, as if it were melting in mid air.

He pulled himself up and looked around.

Thunder filled his ears.

The abandoned church. Surely he'd still be safe there. No demon could enter such sacred ground.

He slowly started to walk sideways, keeping an eye on the orbs. Slipping in the mud with each step, he made it to the wall surrounding the church remains.

The rain slowed. The orbs had gone.

Thunder. But no lightning.

No. Not thunder.

Drums. Faster and faster and faster. Then screams. Inhuman screams filling the air. It was coming from within the ground around the church.

This was no holy place. This was pure evil.

The entrance to hell itself.

The End?

Sir Robert de Mandeville, the Badger Knight, will return...