Sovereign

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Extract

Chapter One

IT WAS DARK UNDER the trees, only a little moonlight penetrating the half-bare branches. The ground was thick with fallen leaves; the horses' hooves made little sound and it was hard to tell whether we were still on the road. A wretched track, Barak had called it earlier, grumbling yet again about the wildness of this barbarian land I had brought him to. I had not replied for I was bone-tired, my poor back sore and my legs in their heavy riding boots as stiff as boards. I was worried, too, for the strange mission that now lay close ahead was weighing on my mind. I lifted a hand from the reins and felt in my coat pocket for the Archbishop's seal, fingering it like a talisman and remembering Cranmer's promise: 'This will be safe enough, there will be no danger.'

I had left much care behind me as well, for six days before, I had buried my father in Lichfield. Barak and I had had five days' hard riding northwards since then, the roads in a bad state after that wet summer of 1541. We rode into wild country where many villages still consisted of the old longhouses, people and cattle crammed together in hovels of thatch and sod. We left the Great North Road that afternoon at Flaxby. Barak wanted to rest the night at an inn, but I insisted we ride on, even if it took all night. I reminded him we were late, tomorrow would be the twelfth of September and we must reach our destination well before the King arrived.

The road, though, had soon turned to mud, and as night fell we had left it for a drier track that veered to the northeast, through thick woodland and bare fields where pigs rooted among the patches of yellow stubble.

The woodland turned to forest and for hours now we had been picking our way through it. We lost the main track once and it was the Devil's own job to find it again in the dark. All was silent save for the whisper of fallen leaves and an occasional clatter of brushwood as a boar or wildcat fled from us. The horses, laden with panniers containing our clothes and other necessities, were as exhausted as Barak and I. I could feel Genesis' tiredness and Sukey, Barak's normally energetic mare, was content to follow his slow pace.

'We're lost,' he grumbled.

'They said at the inn to follow the main path south through the forest. Anyway, it must be daylight soon,' I said. 'Then we'll see where we are.'

Barak grunted wearily. 'Feels like we've ridden to Scotland. I wouldn't be surprised if we get taken for ransom.' I did not reply, tired at his complaining, and we plodded on silently.

My mind went back to my father's funeral the week before. The little group of people round the grave, the coffin lowered into the earth. My cousin Bess, who had found him dead in his bed when she brought him a parcel of food.

'I wish I had known how ill he was,' I told her when we returned to the farm afterwards. 'It should have been me that looked after him.'

She shook her head wearily. 'You were far away in London and we'd not seen you for over a year.' Her eyes had an accusing look.

'I have had difficult times of my own, Bess. But I would have come.'

She sighed. 'It was old William Poer dying last autumn undid him. They'd wrestled to get a profit from the farm these last few years and he seemed to give up.' She paused. 'I said he should contact you, but he wouldn't. God sends us hard trials. The droughts last summer, now the floods this year. I think he was ashamed of the money troubles he'd got into. Then the fever took him.'

I nodded. It had been a shock to learn that the farm where I had grown up, and which now was mine, was deep in debt. My father

had been near seventy, his steward William not much younger. Their care of the land had not been all it should and the last few harvests had been poor. To get by he had taken a mortgage on the farm with a rich landowner in Lichfield. The first I knew of it was when the mortgagee wrote to me, immediately after Father's death, to say he doubted the value of the land would clear the debt. Like many gentry in those days he was seeking to increase his acreage for sheep, and granting mortgages to elderly farmers at exorbitant interest was one way of doing it.

'That bloodsucker Sir Henry,' I said bitterly to Bess.

'What will you do? Let the estate go insolvent?'

'No,' I said. 'I won't disgrace Father's name. I'll pay it.' I thought, God knows I owe him that.

'That is good.'

I came to with a start at the sound of a protesting whicker behind me. Barak had pulled on Sukey's reins, bringing her to a stop. I halted too and turned uncomfortably in the saddle. His outline and that of the trees were sharper now, it was beginning to get light. He pointed in front of him. 'Look there!'

Ahead the trees were thinning. In the distance I saw a red point of light, low in the sky.

'There!' I said triumphantly. 'The lamp we were told to look out for, that's set atop a church steeple to guide travellers. This is the Galtres Forest, like I said!'

We rode out of the trees. A cold wind blew up from the river as the sky lightened. We wrapped our coats tighter round us and rode down, towards York.

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THE MAIN ROAD into the city was already filled with packhorses and carts loaded with food of every kind. There were enormous forester's carts too, whole tree-trunks dangling dangerously over their tails. Ahead the high city walls came into view, black with the smoke of hundreds of years, and beyond were the steeples of

innumerable churches, all dominated by the soaring twin towers of York Minster. 'It's busy as Cheapside on a market-day,' I observed.

'All for the King's great retinue.'

We rode slowly on, the throng so dense we scarce managed a walking pace. I cast sidelong glances at my companion. It was over a year now since I had taken Jack Barak on as assistant in my barrister's practice after his old master's execution. A former child of the London streets who had ended up working on dubious missions for Thomas Cromwell, he was an unlikely choice, even though he was clever and had the good fortune to be literate. Yet I had not regretted it. He had adjusted well to working for me, doggedly learning the law. No one was better at keeping witnesses to the point while preparing affidavits, or ferreting out obscure facts, and his cynical, slantwise view of the system was a useful corrective to my own enthusiasm.

These last few months, however, Barak had often seemed downcast, and sometimes would forget his place and become as oafish and mocking as when I had first met him. I feared he might be getting bored, and thought bringing him to York might rouse him out of himself. He was, though, full of a Londoner's prejudices against the north and northerners, and had complained and griped almost the whole way. Now he was looking dubiously around him, suspicious of everything.

Houses appeared straggling along the road and then, to our right, a high old crenellated wall over which an enormous steeple was visible. Soldiers patrolled the top of the wall, wearing iron helmets and the white tunics with a red cross of royal longbowmen. Instead of bows and arrows, though, they carried swords and fearsome pikes, and some even bore long matchlock guns. A great sound of banging and hammering came from within.

'That must be the old St Mary's Abbey, where we'll be staying,' I said. 'Sounds like there's a lot of work going on to make it ready for the King.'

'Shall we go there now, leave our bags?'

'No, we should see Brother Wrenne first, then go to the castle.'

'To see the prisoner?' he asked quietly.

'Ay.'

Barak looked up at the walls. 'St Mary's is guarded well.'

'The King will be none too sure of his welcome, after all that's happened up here.'

I had spoken softly, but the man in front of us, walking beside a packhorse laden with grain, turned and gave us a sharp look. Barak raised his eyebrows and he looked away. I wondered if he was one of the Council of the North's informers; they would be working overtime in York now.

'Perhaps you should put on your lawyer's robe,' Barak suggested, nodding ahead. The carts and packmen were turning into the abbey through a large gate in the wall. Just past the gate the abbey wall met the city wall at right angles, hard by a fortress-like gatehouse decorated with the York coat of arms, five white lions against a red background. More guards were posted there, holding pikes and wearing steel helmets and breastplates. Beyond the wall, the Minster towers were huge now against the grey sky.

'I'm not fetching it out of my pack, I'm too tired.' I patted my coat pocket. 'I've got the Chamberlain's authority here.' Archbishop Cranmer's seal was there too; but that was only to be shown to one person. I stared ahead, at something I had been told to expect yet which still made me shudder: four heads fixed to tall poles, boiled and black and half eaten by crows. I knew that twelve of the rebel conspirators arrested that spring had been executed in York, their heads and quarters set on all the city gates as a warning to others.

We halted at the end of a little queue, the horses' heads drooping with tiredness. The guards had stopped a poorly dressed man and were questioning him roughly about his business in the city.

'I wish he'd hurry up,' Barak whispered. 'I'm starving.'

'I know. Come on, it's us next.'

One of the guards grabbed Genesis' reins while another asked my business. He had a southern accent and a hard, lined face. I showed him my letter of authority. 'King's lawyer?' he asked.

'Ay. And my assistant. Here to help with the pleas before His Majesty.'

'It's a firm hand they need up here,' he said. He rolled the paper up and waved us on. As we rode under the barbican I recoiled from the sight of a great hank of flesh nailed to the gate, buzzing with flies.

'Rebel's meat,' Barak said with a grimace.

'Ay.' I shook my head at the tangles of fate. But for the conspiracy that spring I should not be here, and nor would the King be making his Progress to the North, the largest and most splendid ever seen in England. We rode under the gate, the horses' hooves making a sudden clatter inside the enclosed barbican, and through into the city.

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Beyond the gate was a narrow street of three-storey houses with overhanging eaves, full of shops with stalls set out in front, the traders sitting on their wooden blocks calling their wares. York struck me as a poor place. Some of the houses were in serious disrepair, black timbers showing through where plaster had fallen off, and the street was little more than a muddy lane. The jostling crowds made riding difficult, but I knew Master Wrenne, like all the city's senior lawyers, lived in the Minster Close and it was easy to find, for the Minster dominated the whole city.

'I'm hungry,' Barak observed. 'Let's get some breakfast.'

Another high wall appeared ahead of us; York seemed a city of walls. Behind it the Minster loomed. Ahead was a large open space crowded with market stalls under brightly striped awnings that flapped in the cool damp breeze. Heavy-skirted goodwives argued with stallholders while artisans in the bright livery of their guilds looked down their noses at the stalls' contents, and dogs and ragged

children dived for scraps. I saw most of the people had patched clothes and worn-looking clogs. Watchmen in livery bearing the city arms stood about, observing the crowds.

A group of tall, yellow-haired men with dogs led a flock of odd-looking sheep with black faces round the edge of the market. I looked curiously at their weather-beaten faces and heavy woollen coats; these must be the legendary Dalesmen who had formed the backbone of the rebellion five years before. In contrast, black-robed clerics and chantry priests in their brown hoods were passing in and out of a gate in the wall that led into the Minster precinct.

Barak had ridden to a pie-stall a few paces off. He leaned from his horse and asked how much for two mutton pies. The stallholder stared at him, not understanding his London accent.

'Southrons?' he grunted.

'Ay. We're hungry. How much – for – two – mutton pies?' Barak spoke loudly and slowly, as though to an idiot.

The stallholder glared at him. 'Is't my blame tha gabblest like a duck?' he asked.

''Tis you that grates your words like a knife scrating a pan.'

Two big Dalesmen passing along the stalls paused and looked round. 'This southron dog giving thee trouble?' one asked the trader. The other reached out a big horny hand to Sukey's reins.

'Let go, churl,' Barak said threateningly.

I was surprised by the anger that came into the man's face. 'Cocky southron knave. Tha thinkest since fat Harry is coming tha can insult us as tha likest.'

'Kiss my arse,' Barak said, looking at the man steadily.

The Dalesman reached a hand to his sword; Barak's hand darted to his own scabbard. I forced a way through the crowd.

'Excuse us, sir,' I said soothingly, though my heart beat fast. 'My man meant no harm. We've had a hard ride—'

The man gave me a look of disgust. 'A crookback lord, eh? Come here on tha fine hoss to cozen us out of what little money we

have left up here?' He began to draw his sword, then stopped as a pike was jabbed into his chest. Two of the city guards, scenting trouble, had hurried over.

'Swords away!' one snapped, his pike held over the Dalesman's heart, while the other did the same to Barak. A crowd began to gather.

'What's this hubbleshoo?' the guard snapped.

'That southron insulted the stallholder,' someone called.

The guard nodded. He was stocky, middle-aged, with sharp eyes. 'They've no manners, the southrons,' he said loudly. 'Got to expect that, maister.' There was a laugh from the crowd; a bystander clapped.

'We only want a couple of bleeding pies,' Barak said.

The guard nodded at the stallholder. 'Gi'e him two pies.'

The man handed two mutton pies up to Barak. 'A tanner,' he said.

'A what?'

The stallholder raised his eyes to heaven. 'Sixpence.'

'For two pies?' Barak asked incredulously.

'Pay him,' the guard snapped. Barak hesitated and I hastily passed over the coins. The stallholder bit them ostentatiously before slipping them in his purse. The guard leaned close to me. 'Now, sir, shift. And tell thy man to watch his manners. Tha doesn't want trouble for't King's visit, hey?' He raised his eyebrows, and watched as Barak and I rode back to the gates to the precinct. We dismounted stiffly at a bench set against the wall, tied up the horses and sat down.

'God's nails, my legs are sore,' Barak said.

'Mine too.' They felt as though they did not belong to me, and my back ached horribly.

Barak bit into the pie. 'This is good,' he said in tones of surprise.

I lowered my voice. 'You must watch what you say. You know they don't like us up here.'

'The feeling's mutual. Arseholes.' He glared threateningly in the direction of the stallholder.

'Listen,' I said quietly. 'They're trying to keep everything calm. If you treat people like you did those folk you don't just risk a sword in the guts for both of us, but trouble for the Progress. Is that what you want?'

He did not reply, frowning at his feet.

'What's the matter with you these days?' I asked. 'You've been Tom Touchy for weeks. You used to be able to keep that sharp tongue of yours in check. You got me in trouble last month, calling Judge Jackson a blear-eyed old caterpillar within his hearing.'

He gave me one of his sudden wicked grins. 'You know he is.'

I was not to be laughed off. 'What's amiss, Jack?'

He shrugged. 'Nothing. I just don't like being up here among these barbarian wantwits.' He looked at me directly. 'I'm sorry I made trouble. I'll take care.'

Apologies did not come easily to Barak, and I nodded in acknowledgement. But there was more to his mood than dislike of the north, I was sure. I turned thoughtfully to my pie. Barak looked over the marketplace with his sharp dark eyes. 'They're a poor-looking lot,' he observed.

'Trade's been bad here for years. And the dissolution of the monasteries has made things worse. There was a lot of monkish property here. Three or four years ago there would have been many monks' and friars' robes among that crowd.'

'Well, that's all done with.' Barak finished his pie, rubbing a hand across his mouth.

I rose stiffly. 'Let's find Wrenne. Get our instructions.'

'D'you think we'll get to see the King when he comes?' Barak asked. 'Close to?'

'It's possible.'

He blew out his cheeks. I was glad to see I was not the only one intimidated by that prospect. 'And there is an old enemy in his train,' I added, 'that we'd better avoid.'

He turned sharply. 'Who?'

'Sir Richard Rich. He'll be arriving with the King and the Privy

Council. Cranmer told me. So like I said, take care. Don't draw attention to us. We should try to escape notice, so far as we can.'

We untied the horses and led them to the gate, where another guard with a pike barred our way. I produced my letter again, and he raised the weapon to let us pass through. The great Minster reared up before us.