

To Prove a Villain

It was a wintry day, and the St. Maria church bells were striking ten. Richard curled his fingers around the balcony's banister and mourned the view beyond the palace walls, seeing clay roofs that stretched from the fog like lonely shipwrecks stranded at sea. His nails grated against the stone banister; a salty bout of wind came from the sea, stinking of wet fish and foam. This be the product of father's rule—a hog led by its own footsteps.

“Richard.” Henry's voice rose behind him. “It's our father. He wishes to see you.”

“Does he? Tell him he can wait till after I've lunched.”

Henry stepped to Richard's left and rested his palms on the railing, his jagged features grimmer than a corpse. “The Archbishop says his final breath is near. That it's only a matter of time till he passes on.”

Richard shoved away from the railing and entered the cover of his bedroom. Wind followed in his stead, sweeping through the room to shake the aged tapestries on his wall. He stormed over loose clothes and empty liquor bottles, threw open the door, and entered the narrow halls of the palace. His younger brother fell in-step beside him, and they walked with enough vigor to shake the hall's torchlight, their shadows bending against the aged stone.

“Slow down and try to calm yourself, he's a dying old man.” Henry said with one hand resting on the pommel of his sword. The blade beat against his leg like a drum. “Show him your restraint.”

“The man doesn't deserve my restraint. Not until he declares you the proper heir.”

“You know he doesn't have that power.”

“Right, he has the power to sap our treasury and to wage bloody war across all Europe.” Richard stole a glance at his brother's sword. The leather straps that formed the handle were frayed and warped: evidence of its frequent use. “But he can't well have the power to select his own heir. It's a load of bollocks.”

“Don't let the Archbishop hear your heresy.”

Richard scoffed and turned down another hall, his feet skipping over uneven stone and plaited rug. “I don't hear you objecting.”

“I believe I would make a noble king. But the Law of Succession is God's will.”

“Chin up, brother. If father won’t make you king, then perhaps a Frankian will poison my stew and have me killed.” Richard tried to rest a hand on Henry’s shoulder, but he was shrugged away. “Then you would be a king and live with all the supposed privilege it brings.”

“Don’t jest about such an act.”

“It’d save the kingdom much grief.” Richard muttered, then stomped into father’s bedroom.

The air inside the bedroom was stillborn, and oppressive on account of the burning incense and ground herbs that laid about every table and piece of furniture, of which there were many. Faces watched Richard from behind a hazy cloud of smoke; vipers dressed like men in long robes with somber expressions and ugly wrinkles.

“Your Royal Highness,” they chanted as one terrible voice, lowering their heads at Richard’s approach. But he didn’t slow.

“Where is he? Where is my father?” Richard hissed and threw aside the bed’s canopy curtains. Father, King Richard II, laid under the cover of several blankets. Thin white hair like the crooked branches of a bare oak tree sprouted from his pox ridden head. “There he is.”

Father didn’t turn his head, nor did he lift his eyes. His lips parted, though he didn’t speak for a moment. He just breathed. “My son.” He finally said, his voice fragile. “My boy. I am not long for this world.”

Richard leaned close enough to smell urine on the sheets, and to smell warm disease rising from the old man’s mouth. He whispered. “Shut up, and don’t pretend to be glad to see me. You will declare Henry king, do you understand me, old man?” But the old man just groaned. Perhaps he even chuckled, but if he had, it was fleeting. Richard threw a finger to the corner of the room and pointed toward Henry. “Him! Not me. You will declare him king. Do you understand me?”

“My boy.” This time he did laugh a dying man’s laugh. “You will be the king after me, not because I want you to be king. Not because I think you would make a good—a good king. No. You shall be king because it is your fate.”

“Pox on fate.” The incense had made the air toxic, and hard to breathe. Richard’s throat turned and rolled inside him like a heavy stone, tugging at his voice till it shook and quivered. “I will not be king. I shall abdicate the throne should it pass to me. I’m threatening this.”

“The people will never accept your replacement, even if it is your younger brother who replaces you. So long as you live, you carry the burden of authority. By God’s will, you shall

rule. Should you not rule, then God will have surely abandoned our kingdom. Only ruin will follow.” Father gasped for air.

“Your will is absolute.” Richard no longer hid his panicked voice. “Change the law and make Henry king. Your rule is ordained by God. Use that authority to change the law.”

“Richard, my boy.” A hand as thin as bone gripped Richard’s wrist. His toes curled, and his lower lip squirmed horribly. “No ruler is ever absolute. You will be the king. But that doesn’t mean you won’t have masters.”

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Those in the crowd lacked faces, and Richard passed through them as a ghost. He felt no warmth, nor kind welcome. Under the light of the Virgin Mary’s stained-glass window, surrounded by bishops and cardinals in white and red gowns, the golden crown fell onto his head. He was only an observer to this unnatural act. His body: a vessel. A means by which to carry that corruptible and contemptible power so recklessly thrown onto him.

‘King Richard,’ the Archbishop declared as he performed the holy unction and ordained him in oil. Yet it was all shallow and baseless. That regal name was nothing more than a hollow stump left in the ground to rot and fester, never bearing fruit, nor leaf or seed. The manifestation of a curse that Richard had never desired.

The congregation prayed, and asked God for his mercy and guidance. But Richard felt no God in that church. Only men. Foolish men without faces. Men no gentler than vipers. Aristocrats and clergymen bent their knees and turned their noses to the dirt, and their king lifted his chin to Heaven, but only saw the Virgin propped in her stained-glass, with cold and unyielding eyes.

“You’re king now. Congratulations.” Henry said with eyes that were cold and callous, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword. “I trust you’ll lead us well.”

“I’m king. I do not lead. I’m led.”

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Richard awoke in a sweat one night after having suffered a terrible dream, or a nightmare, one that gripped him tightly and made his heart thump faster than a marching drum. Wind rasped against the bronze windows and beat the shutters, and flashes of lightning washed the room with golden light that illuminated his shaking hands and quivering lip. He pulled the blanket close and tried to remember.

He and Henry were children. Young lads with cropped hair, which was strange, because Henry had never cropped his hair so, though Richard had. The two played in the woods beyond the palace, running and vaulting past jagged roots that broke through the dirt and crossed rolling glades of trimmed grass that rolled like ocean waves. Henry tripped going up a hill, and Richard helped him up.

They ran and played until they came to a large apple tree, one whose leaves were green and large, and whose branches reached all the way to the sun. Henry had wanted an apple. Richard didn't. But Henry couldn't understand why that was when the apples were so red and plump and delicious.

I don't want any apples.

That's a mistake, said Henry, who promptly stole an apple from the great apple tree and treated himself to a bite. And it was plump and red indeed, and balanced well in Henry's small hands. Then it wasn't an apple, but instead had become a head, bloody and gouged, but plump and red all the same. It was Henry's own head, and Henry himself had become Richard, and Richard had become the apple tree, with the green leaves and the long branches. Then poor Richard couldn't stop himself from taking a bite.

It was a horrific dream. That night, the poor King couldn't return to sleep on account of his fright.

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There were rats and insects among the Great Hall, vile vermin that scurried across the cut stone and ran past the sconces, so their shadows lingered along the walls and ceiling longer than they deserved to. It was warm, the air reeked of lamp oil and stiff cloth, and King Richard found the site before him grim.

Amongst the vermin that called themselves his Council—those same men with viper eyes and without faces. Those men adorned with crucifixes and white linens—was a single man chained at the wrists and beaten till his sharp features were stained with blood and plagued by purple welts and lumps. The man was Henry, and Richard thought him naked without the sword that was always at his waist.

“Out, the lot of you.” Richard barked, stood to his feet, and nearly collapsed. His legs were softer than wheat, and he seemed to sway like a ship in a storm. “Out now!”

After the rats and vermin had excused themselves, Richard stepped from his father's throne and approached his brother; a bloody man who could still hold Richard's gaze. In fact, Richard was the one forced to look away; his cold fingers absently pulling at his royal robe.

“You were never supposed to be king.” Henry’s spittle rained onto the rugged floor. “You’re a lousy drunk, and the weaker brother.”

“So, you tried to have me poisoned? Why?” His voice splintered like wood. “I would’ve abdicated, if you had only asked me.”

“No one would claim my rule legitimate so long as you live. I’d have no claim to the throne.” Henry spat. “Father always hated you. You don’t deserve to sit in that seat.”

“You think my blood would bless your own regency with legitimacy? I am a king ordained and gifted by our Lord, cursed to wear his shackles around my wrist and ankles.”

“You’re no king.” Blood dribbled from Henry’s open wounds and slithered toward his chin where it dripped onto the floor. “You could never do what’s needed to secure your station. I could. Not you. Me.”

Richard met his brother’s stare, not with cruelty or anger, but with an understanding. He rested his hand onto Henry’s shoulder. “And what would you do to secure your station?”

“You see them too, don’t you?” Henry didn’t shake Richard’s hand from his shoulder. “Those vermin that cavort around the palace and try to buy your ear with pretty words. Father let his strings be pulled, till he lost our kingdom’s soul to countless wars. You are no king either, as you sit in his throne room and hear them speak. It was never about God, or tradition. It was about greedy men.”

Richard pulled away and took a seat at his throne. His brother shivered and squirmed; his eyes starved for something more than just food. King Richard curled his finger around the throne’s armrest, letting his nails grate against the carved wood. “I will see your head roll at dawn. But I want to thank you. Before your execution, I shall let you watch the rest of the vermin be bled. You may pass on knowing that I’ll secure my station. And my kingdom.”

Henry smiled.