

The water is cold, the waves are huge, and the night is dark.

But he can swim.

Cold water. It sucks the heat from his body, threatening to suck life itself from him.

Huge waves. They're smashing down on him, violently. He knows that there are jagged rocks close at hand, stony blades ready to carve up his body. His heart leaps into his mouth every time a wave tosses him, awaiting the impact, awaiting the power of the blow that will tear the life out of him.

The dark. It's a moonless night, clouds hiding the stars. As he struggles in the grip of the waves, the water blurring his vision, the place where the black of the air and the dark of the water meet is unclear and always changing. He could dive beneath the waves on purpose and swim under the water when the sea surges. It would be a way of lessening its ability to toss him about like a toy at the mercy of the elements. But he doesn't want to go down into that black water again of his own free will.

He had plunged deep when he jumped from the side of the foundering ship. He hit no rocks but leapt into a peril of a different sort – his body going down and down. The water black, and the combination of disorientation and dizziness confounded him, making it difficult to see which way was up and which way down. All of it black and cold, as if he had vanished into a pool of oblivion. This is the portal of hell, he thought. Not a hot, fiery pit, but a cold, dark hole, sucking you down and down, away from the land and the realm of the living.

But up he came, in the end, like a human cork.

And he can swim.

He's lashing out, kicking, striking out with all his might. He knows that the waves are rushing to the shore, and so he too is moving in that direction. He's trying to speed between waves, hoping to reach the rocks and cling to them before the waves toss him onto them and grind him into tiny chunks of flesh. He's pulling through the water with his arms, kicking with his legs, thrusting with his entire body. Swimming. Moving towards the shore he cannot see.

—ΔΩ—

Let us move to the past. Not too far, only a couple of months. We begin at the end of summer, 1656. We begin in London.

Busy, noisy, filthy streets.

A myriad of sounds reach his ears. Merchants crying out to potential buyers, occasionally a customer crying out to be served. Drivers shouting to clear the road in front of their coaches, the whinnying of their horses drowning out human voices at times. Acquaintances greeting one another, friends calling out to each other across a street or square. Sometimes an argument, angry voices contending with one another about a deal, or religion, or politics, or a command to clear the way. A preacher chanting a psalm or verse, trying to gather a flock from the crowd that pushes on past him. Children laughing. Dogs barking.

A medley of smells too, but the unhealthy ones are stronger by far and overpower the others. The bitter fumes from the tanning house chimneys had lessened since he crossed the river, but there are still plenty of wretched odours here. The stench of animal and human excrement is the most prominent element in the entire mix. Smoke assails his nostrils now and then, billowing out of a house or tavern or smithy – something to be grateful for since it masks the other smells for a while.

And the bustle. It is at its worst on the bridge. Rhisiart has

come up from the south through Southwark and on across the bridge – the most congested, laborious and slow to travel of all the streets. He thinks of it as one whole small city uprooted by some crazed giant and pressed into a row along the sides of the bridge: dwellings and shops and workhouses squashed into tall buildings, sometimes containing as many as seven floors, leaning boldly over the river on one side and shadowing the narrow street on the bridge on the other, looming over the swarms of people that filled it. Travellers seeking to cross on foot or on horseback or in coaches, merchants doing business, the poor seeking alms – a microcosm of London's population squeezed into this confined route. He has to dismount and lead his horse through the crowd. It takes him nearly an hour to elbow his way through this mass of humanity to the other side of the bridge.

Although he is in a hurry, Rhisiart pauses in front of the gatehouse on the south side before stepping through the gate and starting to cross. He pauses and looks up, surveying the heads rotting away on pikes. *Memento mori*. Remember that death is near. He had destroyed engravings of the sort in English churches during the wars, skeletal shapes on tombs carved in olden times to remind the viewer that death lurks beneath the living flesh. A reminder of the end that will come to everyone of every sect and religion, but which seemed too much like papist images to the soldiers who believed they were doing God's work, purifying the churches and cleansing the land.

Of course, the motive behind these sobering signs is different: remember that this is the end to be expected by traitors. But Rhisiart sees every head on a pike as a perfect *memento mori*, better than any carved in marble that he has ever seen. The skull gradually appearing from under the rotting flesh, mouth twisted ugly, lips torn to ribbons by birds, some without lips at all. All of them without eyes, the first delicacies to go to the beaks of the

gulls and ravens that croak and hop and half-fly from head to head, fighting for that last little bit of flesh.

He has seen their like many times before. His own hands have been instrumental in producing a number of them. On the battlefields at Edgehill, Newbury, and Naseby. And he has seen the heads adorning the pikes of this gatehouse before. He and his friends used to try to identify them. That must be Lord Burnet over there, with the raven boring into his nose. And there's James Parker, I swear: easy to recognize his face – only the day before yesterday that his head was cut off, and there's plenty of it left to see. This time the death tokens stay with him as he makes his way through the crowd on his difficult passage across the bridge. A face catches his eye for a moment as some other traveller pushes past him or some merchant tries to get his attention and he sees the *memento mori* there before his eyes. Take care, brother: death is at hand. Buying and selling worldly things is not important, sister – your death is upon you. The skull presses close behind the face of every one of us. That's what you will be tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that, sooner or later. A bunch of corpses, an assembly of skulls.

But he has crossed the bridge now, and although the streets are still busy, he's able to move faster. He hasn't remounted yet. He pushed his horse hard on the way up from Southampton, and he wants to give the animal a chance to recover. He's walking as swiftly as possible, leading his horse, not slowing to look at anything or anybody. All the wonders, all the wealth, all the wretched humanity woven together on the streets of London. He's not lost the way, knows precisely which streets to follow to his destination, though a few corners or squares have changed a bit since the last time he was here. Here and there a building has been torn down and a new one put up in its place, but the pattern of the streets has not changed. The feel of the place hasn't changed either.

Since the last time. Nine years ago. 1647. The year of the Little Plague. That's what some call it. It claimed just under 4,000 people in London that year. More had died in other places at other times, and sometimes very many more, and so some called it the Little Plague. But he can't think of it that way. It took too much from him, took too much out of him. So he has avoided setting foot in the city ever since. Nine years. Has used every influence he has to deflect any orders that would take him to London, reminded those above him of debts and favours they owe him, reminded them of what he knows and what he's done and chosen not to do for their sake. Everything, anything, to make sure that he would not have to visit the city again. But now here he is, returning of his own free will after receiving the letter from Colonel Powel.

He leads his horse along Cheapside, past the stalls of meat merchants. The morning is slowly yielding to afternoon and it's beginning to turn hot. Swarms of flies are everywhere, rising up from one stall and alighting on another, and the smell is assaulting his nose. It's that smell which announces blood drying and flesh rotting in the heat of the sun. He can hear the insects sometimes, despite all the noise – the voices of buyers and sellers, live chickens clucking, the clamour of carts clicking across stones or sloshing through mud and muck, and then the gluttonous buzz of the flies every now and then rising in a crescendo of buzzing. The path opens out a bit and Rhisiart moves faster, his horse following close behind. Onward, past the site of the Cross.

He was here that day. Witnessed the last moments of the Great Cross, the end of the Cheapside Cross. There were plenty of foot soldiers and cavalry there to keep the crowd away from the workmen, but Colonel Powel himself had ordered them to go as well. In case. One of the foot soldiers told him that he had been there the winter before by order of Parliament, guarding the

Cross from violent townspeople who wanted to pull it down. But Parliament had changed its mind by spring, and now that same soldier was stationed there as part of a troop making certain that the Cross was destroyed. A memorial some ten yards tall, a great mass of stone and lead presiding over the bustle of the street, all of it colourfully decorated. Images of saints and angels. A large, beautiful cross its crowning glory. The centrepiece of Cheapside life for centuries. A dozen workers had been labouring for hours, cutting into it with hammer and chisel, rending it with crowbars. Some began the assault on ladders, chipping away at the engravings on the topmost part. The face of an angel, its eyes gazing upward, pointing the beholder towards the mysteries of Heaven. The face of a saint, eyes looking down upon the crowd, urging the people to pray with him. Each one losing a nose, a chin, a mouth, ears. The hammer depriving the saints of their accoutrements, a blow of the chisel clipping the wings of angels. Bits of stone, plaster and lead falling to the ground beneath the ladders. The crowd responding, some showing their approval with shouts of joy, others abusing the workmen and the soldiers who protected them. A rope was tied to the cross itself and it was pulled down from the top of the memorial, the roar of the crowd surging as it fell to the ground. Shouting, screaming, clapping, swearing. Singing psalms. Uttering curses. Acceptance and protest mixed together. One of the soldiers began to beat a drum, another raised a trumpet, the clear, metallic notes breaking through it all. The workers set to completely destroying it, the column of the Cheapside Cross descending in pieces, stone by stone, panel by panel, angel by angel, saint by saint.

May, 1643. He was eighteen and had been a soldier for a year or so. He had been in Reading with the Earl of Essex's army that year, a fever decimating the ranks, killing more of them than the King's guns. Camp fever. Rows of the dead laid out, turning the encampment into a nightmarish vision, as if they were practising

for Doomsday. Rows of them, ready to be rushed into a hasty mass burial. Like with the plague in London four years later.

He tries to push that plague out of his mind, the Little Plague that took such a big chunk out of his life. He tries to remember as much as possible about 1643, makes his mind dwell on that year, trying to relive it. He was eighteen and had been in Reading, witness to the devastation of the fever in the Earl of Essex's army. And in London with the others, summoned by Colonel Powel, making good the will of Parliament. Like that day at the beginning of May, keeping the crowd back and letting the workers bring down the Cheapside Cross. And again, a week or so later, at the site of the old Cross. Nothing left now but a mound of rubble, the most colourful pieces having been taken. A piece of the face of a saint seized by someone who held to the old faith, to be hidden in a church or home. The nose of an angel taken by someone who adhered to the new mode of worship, a memento of the victory over the papist remnants of the old pagan times. The lead was taken on the very day of the destruction of the Cross, seized by soldiers before they left the scene and carted off to one of the armouries in the city to be melted down and turned into bullets. The Army of the Saints at work: turning crosses into weapons of war. And so nothing but a mound of rubble was left when he returned to the site. Debris and stone, devoid of meaning. The devastation of war. Aftermath of a siege. Like the walls of Wexford and the ramparts of Drogheda. Some weeks later, Colonel Powel asked them to come back to that same site once again, this time to keep the crowds back from the fire. They were burning *The Book of Sports*, proclaiming that the Sabbath was the day of the Lord alone, announcing that the old pastimes were no longer to disrupt Sunday prayers. The roar of the crowd swelled with the flames. Acceptance. Protest. Shouts of joy, curses called out. Some singing psalms. Others crying out verses: remember the Sabbath day, keep it holy. The flames

rising higher, paper burning, and the smoke carried off into the wind.

Rhisiart Dafydd walks past the site. There's nothing left to show what happened here, not a bit of the cross left. It's like every other spot in this part of the lane, but Rhisiart knows exactly where it is. There's a small cart there right now, full of empty baskets – their contents already sold – its owner standing in front of the horse, having paused to talk with some acquaintance. Rhisiart continues on, leading his own horse, heedless of the racket around him. Shouting, calling out, laughing, barking. Onward through that mass, that noisy, stinking press of humanity.

He has left Cheapside and is walking up a narrow street. It's not half as busy and he is able to move along unhindered. Although he cannot see the brewery, he can smell it; the familiar sourness irritating his nose and giving his stomach a turn. And then he comes to the gate. There, on the right, in the middle of the biggest building on the street, the only building with an open gate rather than a small wooden door. He leads his horse through the gate and the short passageway to the courtyard. The tidy cobbles are different from the uneven, muddy and muck-spattered street outside, and his horse's hooves make a pleasing sound on them. This brings a young stable boy out of a small door in the far wall, the lad running towards him, shielding his eyes from the sun and reaching out to take the reins.

He suddenly realizes that a soldier is standing beside him. He has been there the whole time, no doubt, but Rhisiart only notices him after his horse has been led away. He's a young man, with a smooth face, in the uniform of a dragoon or cavalryman. A large coat of buff leather dyed yellow, tight around the waist with two belts, one of heavy leather with a sword hanging from it, and higher up a wide red cloth sash holding two long pistols. No armour, no helmet, only a simple woollen hat, the same



colour as the sash. Exactly like Rhisiart himself, except that he has put his pistols in a bag behind his saddle and is wearing a large black hat with a wide brim. The two soldiers recognize one another as belonging to the same brotherhood, though they have never met before. Each knows that the other is in the service of Colonel Powel. In the service of Parliament and its government, but answering first and last to Colonel Powel.

Rhisiart puts his right hand into his coat, pulls out the letter and shows it to the young guard. His left hand rests on the hilt of his sword, fingering it lightly. He studies the young soldier as the other examines the letter he's holding. How old is he? Eighteen? Twenty? Has he cut flesh with that sword? Hardly. Has he shot at a man with his pistols? Not likely. Unless he has been in the Low Countries. Has he seen bodies on the battlefield, has he looked upon a *memento mori* of his own making, looked upon the eyes of the dead before the crows came and plucked them out? Hardly, unless he has served on the continent. Lucky him. One of the soldiers of peacetime.

The lad gives the letter back to him, then turns on his heel and leads him to one of the small doors along the interior walls of the courtyard. He says something as he opens the door, some courtesy or other, though Rhisiart doesn't catch it. Rhisiart removes his hat as he crosses the threshold and begins to climb the steps, his heavy footfall striking the dark wood, the echo loud in his ears.

It's quiet inside, yet not as quiet as he has been expecting. Some low voices can be heard coming from the other end of the building through partition and wall, occasionally one louder than the others. Someone laughing somewhere, even, surprisingly raucously, and another voice joining in the hilarity, all within earshot of Rhisiart, though the dark wooden panels of the walls dull the sounds somewhat. It's surprising, and the unexpected sounds sharpen his senses, refreshing him and

reawakening him from the weariness that has overtaken him after the long journey.

He has not been in this part of the building before – only in the rooms beside the stable at the back, between the courtyard and the back of the big brewery that faces the next street – and he imagined that it would be different somehow. He expected that everything would be quiet inside. He imagined that silence would roll down the corridors like mist on the surface of a river, that quiet would collect in the chambers like water gathers in a fountain's pool, turning sound to vapour and dulling the ear, keeping secrets secret. For that is what is dealt with and discussed in those chambers. Secrets. And the master of the secrets is Colonel Powel.

–ΔΩ–

He swims as fast as possible between the waves, trying to reach some sort of refuge. Wave after wave comes, fiercely regular, tossing him on as helplessly as if he were a rag doll. Every time he feels the power of the water surging behind him he holds his breath, his heart in his throat, half-expecting this to be his last moment on this earth. Ending his time on earth in the sea, a body bruised from the sharp rocks, slipping back into the water – a bit of dead flesh, a toy for the waves to play with, until he sinks and becomes food for fishes and the creatures of the deep.

But he doesn't hit the rocks and he doesn't surrender to the cold water. The dark of the night, the chill of the water, the cruel waves are all against him, but there is still strength in his legs and his arms. He swims on, striving to reach the land he cannot see. He thrusts with his entire body, striking out with his arms, kicking with his feet. Moving. A huge wave comes, one that feels much larger than the others, and it lifts him up and tosses him right out of the water, hurling him on to the dark of destruction.

He hits hard, the force of the impact knocking the wind out of him and delivering a hard blow to his jaw. But he's alive. It's not the sharp rocks that are beneath him but small round stones. Shingle.

A beach.

The shore.

America.