

The Inevitable
By Devon Stephan

"My lord, they have broken through the inner gate!"

In that moment I knew for certain that I, despite my best efforts, was going to die a most horrible and cruel death. I, Leon of House Rees, Earl of Cambridge and a Lord of East Anglia, would now be forced to watch the fruits of my labor crumble away, like this god-forsaken castle. My Castle. Reesworth I had dubbed it, and it was set to stand as a monument to the Rees lineage. But

now, I suppose it will be naught more than a den of savages, before becoming a great mound of pebbles. It truly is a shame. My line began earnestly with my Lord-Father, a once modest stonemason that was elevated to the noble title of Earl by his Grace due to impeccable military strategy. This burgeoning, hopeful, prosperous line will die with me and my heir, Lionel, cowering in the keep, waiting to be slaughtered, like a mere animal.

We sat in our wide, rectangular great hall, once reserved for receiving guests and hosting grand parties, but now it was but an empty, dark husk, illuminated weakly by a dying blaze flickering in the fireplace. All furniture, save for four chairs, and a small round table, had been axed for firewood or used to bar the door. At two of these chairs my son and I sat, huddled around the fire

like wretches around a candle's flame.

Without much else to do, I looked to my son, taking stock of him for perhaps one of the last times. Lionel is a man-grown, having seen fifteen years of life and yet was none the wiser for it. Granted, he has the spirit, but many days spent out in the sparring yard with his pages has left him with a strong sword-arm and an empty head. If only he had been more attentive to his studies, perhaps we would not be in this situation. Even now he chatters on, encouraging me to

hold onto my senses and have hope, whilst we watch the remaining soldiers wedge half of a table

between the door handles.

"It won't be long now, father. I have sent for reinforcements along the coast, and as long as we can hold out here a little while longer, they will surely save us!"

Fool, I thought.

How has he not learned already that the invaders come from the sea and therefore the coastline is

the first to fall prey to their raids? Mayhaps he thinks that our envoy will awaken the slain to fight for us, for surely, none remain alive. It is not these demons' way to spare any, save for women or children.

The townsfolk call them Vikings. I call them Death. A ravening wolf with a thousand heads, thirsty after a long voyage on the salty seas. And now, they're looking to slake their thirst with the blood of the good folk of England.

"Hah, that's unlikely." I say.

"Well, I suppose we'll see." Lionel replied, quietly.

I take count of the soldiers that still remain with us; six, three of which lay spread out and dying on woven mats. Those who still were standing were nothing more than ghosts; any spirit that

remained to them had long since departed, due to a sapping mixture of strict rationing and little sleep. Sieges tend to do that to people, and we were not spared from such attrition. Lionel was the thinnest I've ever seen him. In my own case, I find myself thankful for my beard, which kept my appearance regal, despite the withered, hollow man beneath.

At once there was a loud knock at the door. I thought, for a moment, that perhaps it was Death, but it was only my Man-at-Arms, Colten, the captain of this castle's defenses and a devoted servant to my family, who was rapping at the door.

"My lord, the intruders have been waylaid at the gatehouse-Agh-please, allow me in!"

I paused. This may very well be a ploy devised by the Vikings, but I knew that Colten was more of a mind to die fighting than to betray his honor by acting against his lord.

"Remove the barricade, let him in!" I commanded.

By the time it took them to remove the barricade I had half-a-mind to start lifting furniture myself, forgetting my higher station. But eventually the thick oaken doors were pulled open and in came Colten, clutching a bloody wound on his waist.. I could tell instantly that he was not without injury; New cuts and gashes decorated his already scarred face, and his breastplate was heavily dented.

"There is no-agh-end to them my lord, it's only a matter of time before they are upon us!"

"You were supposed to hold them back! How were they able to breach the gate?" I asked.

"A battering ram, my lord. We did the best we could." Colten's brow twitched, likely from pain.

"Well, your best clearly wasn't good enough. And now, we have naught else to do but sit here and wait for them to kill us!"

I could hear, beyond the clash of swords and the battlecries of my men being surmounted by the howling wolves they battled, distant peals of thunder, and a gradual pattering of rain.

Well, at least it will put out the fires.

As if God himself heard my thoughts, immediately after I felt a glob of rain drip from one of the myriad cracks in my castle and land squarely on my brow.

"Excellent." I sighed, and sat back into my armchair, adjusting the seat in a paltry attempt to stay dry.

My comrades only watched me, as they often did. The soldiers, awaiting commands. My son watched me with a careful and cautious air about him, as if I was to lose my mind at any

moment. Colten, meanwhile, began doffing his armor, then his gambeson, which was fairly indecent of him. Then, he proceeded to take my handkerchief (quite audaciously, I might add) from the table to staunch his wound, which was a very grisly sight.

I averted my eyes. "For God's sake man, if you're going to do that, at least go to the privy-"

I froze. A sudden inspiration had come upon me, an idea that could offer salvation.

"Could we...escape, through the privys?"

"The privys?" My son asked, as if he forgot what they were.

"It would be quite a-a drop." Colten grunted as he winced in pain.

"Let us find out then. Death can wait!" I announced, and headed to the lowest privy I could think of.

As I soon discovered, the lowest privy we had was in the servant's quarters, which evidently

wasn't very low. The three of us stood before the foul-smelling privy, my son holding a small candle for light. Shielding my nose from the stench, I peered down the filthy waste-shoot. I'd wager the drop was around thirty feet; and the moat was nearly dry, yielding only a few inches of mud as a possible cushion for our landing.

"Father, I don't think you or Colten could fit through that hole, let alone survive the fall."

For once, he was right, though I loathe to admit it.

"Yes, yes you're right," I said, wracking my brain for ideas, "But perhaps you could!"

My heir was suddenly aghast. "Me?"

Again I felt destiny bestow its wisdom upon me, and I felt pride, hope, and an overwhelming sense of duty overtake me as I saw the way forward.

"Listen to me," I said, placing my hand on Lionel's shoulder and leaning close, "My dearest child. We will not survive this siege, this is for certain, but you- you, could survive. You could

carry on the Rees legacy, perhaps even rally some men and retake the castle. You could avenge us."

"But Father, the fall could kill me, and, and, I doubt even I could fit!"

I patted his cheek lovingly. "I'm sure you will. You're a Rees, and we are not killed so easily.

Now go, the nearest village is that way!" I pointed westward and stepped back, waiting.

Lionel looked between me and the privy for a moment, inner conflict written upon his face.

"...No, I cannot! I will not!" He squeaked, his voice breaking upon his impression of a grown-man.

I sighed, disappointed. "Well, it's not up to you, unfortunately. As your Lord and your father, I command you to go, now! Colten, send him down there, at once."

Colten grumbled something I could not quite make out, but it did not seem to matter, as he quickly grabbed Lionel from under his arms and attempted to force him down the privy, despite his kicking and protests.

"No! I refuse! I won't fit, and even if I do, I'll die!" Lionel cried, and soon after proved himself right, by no action of his own.

Colten could not get his legs all the way through. Lionel was, indeed, too big.

I felt my heart sink into my bowels. Our last hope, dashed like a hen's egg against a stone wall.

Lionel pulled himself out of the privy, excrement now staining his fine tunic in a ring around his thighs. He was, reasonably, distraught, and began to gag.

There must be something else I could do, I thought. Perhaps I could trade the castle for our freedom? No, no... If I lose this castle, I will become Lord of nothing. Besides, I doubt they'd take such a deal, especially now since they have the upper hand.

Still reeling, I turned to Colten. "Colten, get my son a new tunic from his room."

"Get it your damn self!" was his reply.

I will admit, this caught me off guard, and halted my impending misery, if but for a moment.

"Excuse me? I am your Lord, Colten, you must do what I say!"

Colten's sudden grunts of pain obliged me to take note of his condition again; He was noticeably even paler now, his pants were completely soaked in blood, and the sudden exertion he had just undertaken only worsened his state.

"What is the point? We're all dead men now." He groaned in pain, and trudged off towards the great hall.

This, along with the other revelations, settled a great dread upon me. Colten had always been faithful, not once speaking out of line, but now...All was becoming undone.

Lionel looked at me, equally shocked, fumbling for words.

"H-he..."

"Go change, Lionel." I said, quietly, and turned away, returning to my chair to await my death.

This all turned out to be nothing more than a farce. And now, I would die here, with my son and my mutinous man-at-arms. Even now I could hear the screams of the enemy draw closer. They would be upon us any moment.

As I sat back down, I found that Colten had disappeared, but it hardly mattered. I felt all at once the walls close in around me. Great, tall walls loomed, cracked and crumbling, yet even still stood, resolute. On these walls I had placed many expensive portraits, of great heroes of legend,

of my late wife, and of my father, who all looked upon me with a judgemental eye. To avoid their gaze I looked elsewhere; my eyes landed on some of the dying soldiers in the room, only to find that all seemingly had already perished. Those that were uninjured leaned against the door, exhausted.

I suppose I deserve this—I was too arrogant, too proud, to see that I needed to make better preparations. My career had thus been met with ample success, and after flying so high for so long, I believed myself invincible. I gave no thought to the rising threat that came across the sea,

despite being warned many-a-time by my lessers. By turning a blind eye, I had all but ensured my downfall. It was well and truly inevitable. Despite all the blame I had laid on others beforehand, I found that, really, I was to blame, for this was my castle, and therefore was my charge to protect.

Colten soon returned, carrying in his arms fragments of furniture that he at once fed the embers of the fireplace with. As the fire came alive again, it beamed brightly against us, casting our long and thin shadows against the walls.

"If I'm going to die, I'm not going to die cold." He said, as much to himself as to me.

I was glad for the sudden warmth, and felt, against my wishes, tears begin to stream down my cheeks. Like the other lords of England, I had spent so much of my resources suppressing those

who I deemed to be rivals. Like rams fighting over an ewe, we were oblivious to the wolf lying just beyond the meadow. And now, the wolf has come, as it always has. It became painful just to think of how foolish I've been, and now, I am left to wallow in my own tears. Despair crept over me like the onset of night, and though I am not a poet, I could only make sense of my dread through poetic verse:

O tower brave and tall,

All but certain was your fall,

Your skin was parchment, your bones were sand,

Only by miracle were you able to stand.

O lord, lame and dull

Slip now into your lull
Blind was your sight, foolish was your hope
Your failure is known to those you claim to own
The end is here, so come, weep into your robes.
I had not realized until I had finished that I chanted the words aloud, and now Colten's eyes were upon me. Have I ever done right by these people? So many risks I have taken for the good of the

Rees lineage, so many good men I have lost. Even still, I've never fought in any true battle. I've never known true fear, not like this, and now that I have... my shortcomings glare at me, stripping away the last bits of pride I have nestled in my breast. By what right do I call myself lord of this place? I've never even laid siege to another keep; no, my idea of success was to withdraw into my own, like a turtle within its shell. I once believed that this was wisdom, but now, I know it was merely cowardice.

"Colten... do you remember the siege you held with my father at Ludham? I was too young to fight, but my father must've told me the story a hundred times. I wonder what it was like to finally breach the gate."

Colten glanced at me coldly. "Your -agh- father wouldn't have known, as he did not involve himself with the breaching. It was far too dangerous for his liking."

I lowered my head, feeling shameful. I did not have to look at him to feel his scorn, his hatred. Was all of my family's glory just a lie, and our allies, just silent enemies?

"I see." I nearly whispered, still examining the dusty, porous floorboards.

"However," He spoke suddenly, speaking in a softer tone, "He did save my life in that siege. I had several arrows buried in my back, and laid amidst the fighting levies, dying. It was he that saw me and pulled me back to safety."

I looked to Colten again, having never heard this story before, much to my surprise. He regarded

me as he once did, with a heavy-brow and a slight smile.

"After he had saved me, I swore myself to his service, for the rest of my life." It was he who now looked down to the floorboards.

Then, there was a long silence between the two of us. It was I who finally broke the silence.

"Colten, you're a good man. Thank you for all you've done for my family." I then offered to shake his hand.

His eyes wide in surprise, he took my hand and firmly shook it. "You're welcome, my lord."

Once that was done we both leaned back in our chairs and looked into the now-roaring fire.

Lionel returned shortly after, in a new set of clothes and carrying even more in his hands.

"Father, I thought you might like your cloak, to keep you warm." He then handed me my cloak, a finely made, tyrian purple silk cloak with an ermine-fur inlay, and a circular bronze brooch that had House Rees's coat of arms upon it. He quickly put his own cloak on, a copy of mine, and I followed suit.

"Thank you, Lionel." I smiled, and placed my hand on his shoulder. Despite his occasional thoughtlessness, he was still my son and heir.

"You're...welcome, Father." He looked at me, thoroughly surprised. I suppose it was one of the first times I had thanked him, now that I think about it.

I felt a change come over me, then; at first, a rush of embarrassment, as I now saw in the light of

my impending doom how unjust I had been all these years, followed by a strong resolve to do something about it.

"Hear me, son." I said suddenly, without thinking.

The main door buckled, being struck once with something hard from the outside, then twice, then

many times. A veritable chorus of slamming was calling us to our deaths now, like some infernal war-drum. This was the end of the line.

Colten remained sitting, as he seemed to have fallen asleep, but my son jumped and squirmed, as

fear suddenly gripped him.

"I am sorry for how I treated you in the past. But you must be strong now. Remember who you are."

"I-I don't..."He stuttered, looking towards the failing door, and the soldiers who were pressed up against it.

I turned his face towards me, locking eyes with him. I was beyond fear, now. "We must face our destiny together. Whatever happens, we face it with dignity. These happenings have been out of our control, but whether we fear and hide away, or turn towards it and face it, that we can decide."

I relieved two swords from the dead men, and armed myself and Lionel with it. He was uncertain, but as the seconds passed I could see my words had begun to reach him.

Suddenly, he drew his sword from his scabbard, causing it to sing a high note.

"Okay, I'm with you!" He announced, his eyes wide and wild.

I felt a cold sensation of family pride will within me, and I suddenly realized that perhaps this was a fitting end for the Rees Line. To die with honor

is something not every lord can ask for, and no matter what happened, I knew that I nor Lionel would go down willingly.

And perhaps that was enough.

It was then that the barring finally snapped, and doors swung open.

"For Reesworth!" I yelled, and the men and Lionel took up the call, our words echoing up and out of our castle, forevermore.