

THE WOODCUTTER'S SECRET

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LET me tell you of the strangeness of life. It was well after midnight when my father shook me awake, one finger pressed to my lips. I forced open my eyes to see that he had rekindled our night lanterns. That always meant trouble.

Driving autumn rain had lashed our lonely inn for hours after sunset, making the ceiling of my tiny room leak, and forcing me to once more drag my rope bed to our entrance room, where the roof was sound and all below it dry. Now the world had fallen silent again, and mist shrouded the sky and the full moon's light. I clambered from my bed, shook my head, then listened. From the old Roman road outside our small lodge came the *clop* of hoofs, that breathy sputtering of weary horses and the *clink* of gauntlets brushing chest armour.

"War mounts?" I rubbed my sleep-heavy eyes. "What sort of knight travels at this hour?"

"Whoever is out there," my father's good eye flicked to the door, "they didn't ring the bell on the gate post as they passed it." He gripped my shoulder hard. "Perhaps they intend to surprise us."

As we both glanced at the chest in the corner where our sword lay hidden, there came a thunderous *crack!* The door burst apart, its solid cross brace snapped effortlessly. Night air surged into the room and broken planks wheeled through its chill to clatter at our feet. My father and I stared in disbelief.

A great grey form appeared: the hindquarters of the huge horse that had just kicked our door in. A caped knight, armoured neck to toe, but helmetless, straddled the beast's back, peering over his shoulder at us. A taller, identically suited figure loomed behind him, clutching the reins of his own mount. My father took a stride for our hidden blade, but I lunged, grabbing his arm.

“No!” I tugged him back against the wall. “You have no chance! Wait, they may not harm us!”

The horse vanished and the tallest knight filled the doorway, sword drawn and brandished. Was he just cautious... or murderous? My blood ran cold as he shuffled into the room, head turning left and right. I flinched when he pointed his blade straight at my father.

“You there, in shadow! Step closer! Show me your face.” My father obeyed. The knight lowered his steel. “No. Aliforde the Woodcutter has two good eyes.” He sheathed his weapon.

His shorter companion, sword undrawn, appeared at his side. “Who shelters here this night?” he demanded. “Speak, man! Is it merely you and the boy?” my father nodded quickly.

“We... we will pay for the door, and for information.” The tall knight sighed. “Since clearly, at least some of ours is wrong.” I traded stares with the man. He was not that old, sharp-eyed, obviously the leader.

The fighters exchanged a glance, then the tall fellow spoke earnestly. “I am Sir Gareth Clover. My aide here is Sir Lionel Shelton. We were told that the man we seek, one Aliforde the Woodcutter, lives on this mountain. In the shifting mist that has followed the rain, we took your small inn for his hut.”

My father protectively encircled my shoulders. “Sirs, we cut no timber, making our meagre living instead by lodging a few travelers at a time, pilgrims and monks moving between the remote abbeys...though these days, with that new road cut to the north, less are coming.” He paused; no doubt reminding himself that, money aside, withholding information from a knight could lead to death. “We do know of your Aliforde, however. Indeed a woodcutter, he lives higher up the mountain, by a track that rises behind this lodge.”

Sir Gareth Clover edged forward. “Can you lead us to his hut? I would risk no more mistakes.”

Worried glances passed between my father and me. While little more than an acquaintance, Aliforde was a local, a neighbour, and has caused us neither offence nor harm. Clover saw our looks. Immediately, he pulled off a gauntlet and reached for a

pouch tied to his belt. My mouth fell open when he held up a gold piece with the king's head on it.

"If your flow of lodgers dwindles, best you look to the future, old man." The knight nodded my way. "Think of the boy." Narrowing his eyes, Clover turned the coin so that it caught the light. "Could your tiny inn make such as this in a year?"

My father bit his lip then looked down at me. His lined, tired face displayed his thoughts: whether these intruders proved to be robber-knights or men of honour, we had little choice. They seemed young, inexperienced, but were men-at-arms nonetheless, and they would get their way. Besides, the incentive they were holding out was, put simply, every commoner's dream. Yes, we would help them. Then I pictured my father actually going up our mountain with them, *in the dark*.

"I could lead you," I blurted. I heard my father gasp, felt his grip on me tighten, but still I went on. "My father has but one eye, its vision poor, and his back is often disagreeable to riding or climbing. But I too know your man by sight. We last traded with him for cut wood only a moon ago."

"Come then." Clover tossed my father the coin, raised a gauntleted hand and beckoned me.

"This Aliforde." My father swallowed hard. "You...you're going to kill him, aren't you?"

"His fate," Sir Lionel Shelton replied coolly, "is tied to the king's own business, good fellow."

I offered the warriors a compliant bow. "Ready, sirs. But forgive me, I have never ridden."

"Fear not," Shelton grinned. "As long as you know how to grip tightly."

My father passed me my boots and a rough-weave cloak. "Sirs," he said meekly, "the boy is but fifteen, and all the family I have left. I depend on him for so much. If he should come to grief—"

"I will protect him," Colver said. "You have my word." He looked me up and down. "Courage, lad. Seems you are about to enter the royal service."

"Andrew—" My father brushed the back of my hand. I paced to the horses, fighting a wave of fear. Then I glanced back once, a lump in my throat, trying to look confident. My father stood in the doorway, his one good eye on me. It was empty; his

heart bleeding. Would I return? Most likely these warriors *were* here to slay Aliforde, and if here was to be combat, could Clover truly guarantee my safety? Why kill a woodcutter? A quiet, honest, unremarkable, middle-aged hermit. What had he done?

Clover helped me onto Shelton's horse. Nervously I leaned back against the knight's chest armour. Giving my father a final nod, I indicated the way to the track. Shelton took the lead and we started uphill through the dripping forest.

We rode for some time, the moon bright through the trees, the only sounds the clinks of armour and the muffled steps of the horses. But as we climbed higher, I heard the distant, echoing shriek of a hunting owl and, though I tried not to, I took it as a bad omen.

At a familiar fork, I gestured to the right. Shelton nodded. The horses slowed and we entered a half-hidden clearing, a lone hut in the center of it.

The knights dismounted and I awkwardly slid from Shelton's beast. Clover studied the approach to the woodcutter's hut. In the moonlight, his breath plumed into steam as he whispered, "We will try for a *quiet* surprise this time. Stay back with the horses, boy." He thrust their reins into my hands. "If they react, hold firm. Anything could happen. I know not how much of our briefing to trust, but it is said that this Aliforde suffers from a peculiar madness. It causes him to flee or attack at the mere sight of a man in armour."

I blinked, weighing his words. This grew stranger! If they held Aliforde to be a lunatic who would either run or fight them, and their goal was to capture him, their sudden, violent entry to our inn made sense. But was the story true? I had never seen Aliforde behave oddly, but to be fair, I had also never seen Aliforde in the presence of a knight.

The pair crept forward, perhaps five strides apart, each angling for the door of the hut. Only paces from it. Shelton stepped on a twig that snapped noisily. Both men froze, gripping their undrawn swords. Clover waited then made a hand sign, and he and Shelton moved on with ever more careful stealth. I drew in the smell of wet leaves and night flowers, felt the pre-drawn chill on my face, but my eyes never left the door of that hut. What would I see? Combat, flight or murder?

With a sharp creak the door flew open and I caught sight of Aliforde the woodcutter, though as I had never seen him before. He wore the usual woollen cape,

but now he stood tall and strong like a knight, braced for action, a sword in his hands. His head snapped in the direction of each intruder, then, to my amazement, he rushed Clover. The knight shouted something, but the sudden anxious neighing of the horses smothered his cry. Clover leapt back and drew his blade with desperate haste as Aliforde closed with him. Shelton let out a muffled curse, unsheathed his weapon, and charged for the woodcutter.

It all happened at blinding speed, swords gleaming in the moonlight, moaning as they cut the still, cold air. The woodcutter hacked at Clover, who barely blocked his strong descending cut with a ringing blade. While the knight was still off balance, Aliforde bobbed low with surprising agility to slice at Clover's armoured leg. The blow glanced aside but sent the knight tumbling to the ground. Shelton tried to ambush Aliforde from behind, but the woodcutter spun around in a low stance, bounded to one side then swatted hard at Shelton's forearm guard with the flat of his blade. With a cry Shelton stumbled, the sword whirling from his hands. The tip of Aliforde's weapon darted straight to the fallen knight's throat.

For a long moment, nobody moved. My heart stalled in my ribs. If Aliforde slew a high knight, whether acting in self-defense *or* out of madness, furious royal vengeance might find us all.

"Woodcutter!" I bellowed. "Don't kill him! They are the king's men!"

Aliforde looked round at me then stepped back and studied his assailants carefully. Clover struggled to his feet. Propping himself up on one elbow, Shelton stared warily at Aliforde's sword.

"Prove his claim, you puppies," the woodcutter said. "Or this old wolf will bury you both, right here, before dawn's first light."

Sir Gareth Clover dropped his sword and limped to Aliforde. "Here," he said painfully. He took off a gauntlet once more, freed the leather pouch from his belt and held it out. Its coins jingled. I couldn't see the pouch's markings then, but later I learned that it was adorned with the royal crest.

Aliforde stared hard at it, then motioned to me. "Let us all go inside." He pointed at a sapling, "Tie the horses there, boy."

Within the hut he took up a flint kit and fired his candles. As the smell of their wax filled the little room. Aliforde looked the knights over. "You are not wounded?"

“No,” Clover replied, “merely bruised. Our apologies for startling you. I tried to shout that we were on royal order, but as things turned out, my cry was not heard. Thankfully, no one fell.”

The woodcutter gestured at me. “You have this one to thank. He called out just in time.”

“Who are you, sir?” I smiled with shameless admiration. “Surely no simple woodcutter.”

“Oh, I am a woodcutter now,” Aliforde said wearily. “But as you say, it was not always so.”

“This man was the king’s own champion,” Colver said, bowing low to Aliforde. “I’m told that once, none could match him with lance or sword. It seems that second skill has not faded with time.”

“Good sir,” Shelton said gently, “it is a relief to see that much we were told about you proves untrue. Please, end your self-imposed exile. We are sent to compel you thus.”

The woodcutter turned away to stare at a lantern. “How?” He angled his head. “What has changed? Can you turn back time? Give the dead new life?”

“What happened?” I said, instantly realizing that it was not my place to ask. Nonetheless, Colver saw fit to answer me. In hindsight, I now think he was actually speaking to Aliforde indirectly.

“Aliforde the woodcutter is in truth Sir Alfred Pierce, King’s Champion, as you have heard. Three years past, after the death of his son by the plague, he accidentally slew a respected rival during the annual Great Joust. All judged it but cruel fate and forgave.” Clover fixed his gaze on the back of Aliforde’s head. “All but Sir Alfred. Holding himself accountable, he withdrew from royal service. Begging the king to discharge him, he left court and hid himself, out here in the world.”

“Huh!” The woodcutter turned, eyes bleak with painful memories. “Hid myself? Not well enough, it seems.” He folded his thick arms. “So tell me then, what could possibly tempt me to return?”

Clover smiled. “The king has a new son, whom he has named Myles, after your lost boy and in his honour. Our liege was told you had succumbed to madness born of grief, but given his affection for you, I doubt he ever really believed it. His heartfelt

dream remains that you return to court, to accept a post as the lad's fencing instructor. His majesty says that if you do, his own wound at your loss shall be healed, his recent joy made all the more complete. He would have you become, as it were, an uncle to the new prince."

Sir Alfred turned away. "Myles," he whispered. "A new Myles." He looked around his squalid hut and sighed piteously. "Perhaps it is time for renewal." The woodcutter-champion eyed me thoughtfully, and then rounded on Clover. "I will accept on one condition. Any knight at court, regardless of role, needs both squire and groom." He motioned at me.

"This plucky boy and his honest father are surely fit to serve me as such. What say you?"

"My orders were to capture you if mad, and if sane, to convince you by any means," Clover said. "So, on behalf of the crown... yes!"

And strange as the whole affair was, that was the start of *my* renewal. I, but a peasant, became a squire and after two battles and my nineteenth year, a royal knight whom his majesty named Sir Andrew Inman. My widower father met a widowed cook after we joined the court and is now happily remarried. He still loves to say that Lady Destiny is a trickster who can lay her ambush anywhere.

Even on a lonely mountain, wrapped in a woodcutter's secret.