

Part I: A Purpose Reclaimed

With arrows and with bows shall men come thither;  
Because all the land shall become briers and thorns.

*-Isaiah 7:24*

*(King James Version)*

The inn was ominously quiet, a marked contrast to the wailing storm outside. The innkeeper kept casting nervous glances out the frosted windows. A superstitious man, like most of the village's residents, he knew no good ever accompanied a storm like this one.

Darkness was just starting to cloak the ashen sky over the village of Crestvale. The full moon cast a dim, ethereal glow on the low snow-covered buildings that huddled around the Red Lion Inn. The windowpanes creaked and groaned helplessly as the polar winds rocked them in their frames. The Ladies of the Evening lounged about upstairs, prowling the balcony like restless lionesses. Their whispers and giggles echoing off the high-beamed ceiling sounded like chattering imps plotting the night's mischief.

The innkeeper finished polishing his last glass and set it atop the crystal pyramid behind the bar. It was time to light the oil table lamps and add logs to the fire. As night approached, so would the inn's customary patrons, seeking warmth of one kind or another—be it fire, drink, or one of the Ladies' beds.

He dried his hands on his stained apron before reaching under the counter to retrieve a

box of wooden matches; then he wove his way among the roughly-hewn pine tables and chairs, lighting each lamp as he went to drive the looming shadows into the corners. That task completed, the burly man headed for the monolithic stone fireplace that dominated the center of the great room. His footfalls still echoed too loudly, and each creaking floorboard made him wince. He grasped two huge timbers in his beefy fists and flung them on the fire, sending a flurry of sparks sputtering up the chimney.

Now with something to feed on, the flames grew large enough to finally dispel the dense winter chill. The innkeeper stared into the mesmerizing flames as he warmed his hands, and he was reminded of the old woman who lived in the cottage on the outskirts of town; the one who always dressed in black and warned anyone who'd listen about the evil spirits that resided within fire, spirits that could enchant the unwary and transport them to other realms. The crone proclaimed herself to be a seer; even claiming to have beheld a vision of the Blessed Mother. But most of the town's residents whispered behind cupped hands that the woman was in fact an eccentric witch.

The innkeeper straightened up, his weary knees popping like whip cracks in the empty room. He turned to bark at the Ladies upstairs, but instead gasped in surprise. A man was standing right behind him.

Retreating a few steps, the innkeeper nervously stammered out his customary greeting. "Welcome to the Red Lion... Can I help you?" He had already begun sizing up this new guest—just in case he happened to bring trouble with him. A business proprietor could never be too careful in a lawless land overrun by roving bands of thieves and mercenaries.

The stranger before him was just over six feet tall with a lean build. Though the innkeeper estimated he had at least fifty pounds on the man, he could not deny his imposing

presence.

“A drink, if you please,” the stranger replied. He had a deep, somber voice that reminded the innkeeper of a cemetery on All Hallow’s Eve. “That is, if you are open for business.”

He was not clad in the simple, yet colorful homespun garb of the innkeeper’s customary clientele, but was instead shrouded in a faded gray cloak and dark green tunic, snow dusting his shoulders. He slid back his hood to reveal shoulder-length dark hair pulled back and streaked with slivers of gray, a few wayward strands framing his angular face. Beneath a strong brow, a single storm cloud-colored eye regarded the innkeeper coolly, his other eye concealed behind a weathered-looking black leather eye-patch. A hint of a scar ran from the corner of the man’s wounded left eye, down his stubbled cheek almost to his jutting chin. Slung over his left shoulder and across his chest was an archer’s bow; though surely no one still used one of those anymore—especially one such as this. It was fashioned from a dark, sturdy wood with bands of silver above and below the ornate handgrip. The tips of the upper and lower arms were carved to resemble wings.

But something even more singular about this mysterious stranger was revealed when he removed his gloves. In the dim flickering firelight, the innkeeper spotted the tattoo of a small, black and white four-pointed star, about two inches in diameter, on the back of the stranger’s right hand.

The innkeeper was still trying to surmise the significance of this mysterious mark when he realized he she should be taking the man’s order. “Hmmm? Yes, we are open for business. What can I get you?”

“Hot cider if you have it.”

“Have a seat, and I’ll bring some out to you.”

The stranger nodded and headed for a table, turning his back to the innkeeper and displaying a quiver of arrows. His footsteps were silent; his brown leather boots had somehow muted his approach in a silent room.

Then suddenly the stranger whirled back around. The innkeeper tensed.

“And bread too, if you have some.” He produced a coin from within his cloak and flipped it toward the innkeeper.

Instinctively, the innkeeper reached out and caught it. He wasn't sure, but it looked like gold. He slid the coin into the corner of his mouth and bit down with his back teeth. It sure felt like gold. His eyes lingered on the coin before returning to the stranger. Something about him seemed familiar...as if from a distant memory...or a forgotten tale, perhaps. He manufactured a smile. “Of course. Hot cider and bread coming up.”

The portly man scurried behind the bar and toward the pantry behind it. Judging by the giggles and whispers he heard coming from upstairs, the inn's mysterious new guest had not escaped the notice of the Ladies.

The stranger strode over to a small table toward the rear of the room which offered a clear view of the door and close proximity to the fireplace. He unshouldered the bow and quiver, leaning both against the table within an arm's length, before finally settling into his chair. Then he reached across the table and lit a single match from the lamp's flame before snuffing out the wick between a calloused thumb and forefinger. By the time the innkeeper returned, the stranger's long-stemmed pipe was lit and a ribbon of fragrant bluish smoke wafted lazily toward the ceiling.

The innkeeper delivered the bread and cider, avoiding the stranger's steely gaze as he did so. In return for the generous compensation of the gold, he had added a wedge of cheese and

some apples to the tray. Then with a silent nod, he returned back behind the bar to finish preparing for the evening's more typical and boisterous crowd.

While he completed his remaining chores, the innkeeper would occasionally sneak a wary glance over at the stranger's table, which was now shrouded in shadow and smoke. He could see the man eating and drinking methodically, though with relish, as if savoring each mouthful. The man's posture reminded the innkeeper of a predatory animal like a mountain lion watchfully dining on its recently caught feast, guarding against lurking aggression.

But the innkeeper's thoughts were soon diverted elsewhere as some of his more welcome and familiar patrons began to trickle in. It wasn't long before that trickle became a stream, and the stream a flood. By ten of the clock, the Red Lion was a bustling hive of activity. The Ladies had no problems finding companions; there were more than enough to share. Ale and mead ran in rivers. In one brightly lit corner of the room, a raucous dart tournament arose, laughter and cheers filling the room. In another, a more sedate but no less serious game of cards drew a comparable crowd of onlookers; more than a few losing their share of silver playing round after round of Hearts. But despite the heated competition, the crowd still remained peaceful and genial, as always. Crestvale was home to a tightly-knit agrarian community, as it had been for countless generations; each counted on his neighbors to survive. In such an arrangement of mutual dependence, one could not afford to isolate oneself by upsetting this delicate balance. Even the Ladies of the Evening, which might cause more than a raised eyebrow in another, more delusional and morally righteous community, were a tolerated—if not accepted—industry (as long as the revered covenant of marriage was never compromised). In the two and a half decades that the innkeeper had owned the Red Lion, he would have been able to count the number of disturbances on one hand.

Until tonight.

He was swapping out a keg of ale when one of his regulars, Wallace the silversmith, motioned for him. He leaned closer.

Wallace cast a nervous glance over his shoulder. “Hey, Jonas—who’s the one-eyed bowman in the corner?”

The innkeeper shrugged. “Didn’t ask him, and he didn’t say.”

“Haven’t seen folk like that in this area for time out of mind.”

One of the Ladies slinked up to the bar. It was Miranda, the most alluring of the bunch. Her cascading crimson curls were pinned up tonight, and her velvet lavender bodice caressed every voluptuous curve. Her ice-blue eyes were alight with curiosity. “I hear the stranger’s been flashing gold tonight, Jonas.”

The innkeeper finished tapping the fresh keg. “So?”

Miranda winked. “So I thought I’d see if I could earn some, too.”

Jonas rolled his eyes as he filled another mug of the dark brew. Though he was approaching seventy winters now, Wallace’s eyes still followed the sway of the woman’s hips as she glided over to the stranger’s table.

The stranger appeared to be studying the roaring fire as Miranda approached. His gaze never wavering, he spoke. “Not tonight, thank you.”

She halted in mid-stride, her smile faltering briefly. Being the most sought after of the Ladies, Miranda was not accustomed to being dismissed so quickly. But she persevered; she *would* have some of the stranger’s gold tonight. In a graceful and practiced motion, she poured into a nearby chair, treating the stranger to a glimpse of her pert and ample cleavage.

“You looked a little lonely over here... I thought I’d come over and introduce myself.

I'm Miranda.”

The man continued to puff thoughtfully on his pipe, his focus still on the fire.

She leaned closer so he could get a whiff of her perfume. “Do *you* have a name, handsome stranger?”

He turned to face her, regarding her clinically. “I don't wish to be rude, but you'll have more success with some of the other clientele here this evening.”

Unfazed by his refusal, she maintained her manufactured smile and rose from her chair with a slight shrug. “Well...if you change your mind, you know where to find me.” And with a teasing twitch of her behind, she melted back into the crowd as the stranger returned his attention back to the fireplace.

The hours ticked on, and the patrons carried on with their merrymaking. There were too many other distractions for them to devote more than a passing suspicious glance in the stranger's direction.

The clock on the wall had just chimed the witching hour when three men burst into the inn. Conversations paused. Card games were momentarily suspended. Heads swiveled toward the door.

The three visitors were clad mostly in black, from their cloaks and tunics to their leggings and boots. The eldest stood in the center, his dark hair swept back from a cruel brow. An unruly beard framed his pale, sallow face. His smoldering eyes flitted from one patron to the next like a lunging cobra, a mirthless smile creasing his face like a scar. His companions, by contrast, were clean-shaven, including their skulls. Each wore a series of three silver hoop earrings in his left ear. The trio strode into the room, their bootheels ringing off the scuffed floorboards. All eyes were drawn to the pistols jutting from their belts.



They were Brigands; a particular band of thieves that prowled the countryside in packs, preying upon small villages and unwary travelers.

As they approached the bar, the crowd parted like waves of grain before the plow. The eldest Brigand leaned across the bar and grasped the innkeeper by the front of his apron.

“Innkeeper!” His voice was a gravelly shriek. “Three pints of your finest ale now!”

The innkeeper nodded and obediently went about filling his request, his hands trembling slightly. He hoped that if he followed their orders, they would be on their way quickly with nothing more lost than his ale. He topped off the three mugs and gingerly placed them on the bar before the three men. The eldest—obviously the leader—grasped his in a scarred and grimy fist and drank deeply while his companions continued to survey the room. Then the Brigand leader screamed.

He spat his mouthful of ale back at the innkeeper, soiling the man’s apron. “THIS is your best?” He flung the mug at the innkeeper’s head. Fortunately, the man saw it coming and ducked just in time as it whistled past him and shattered against the wall.

The Brigand leader then drew his pistol and aimed it at the innkeeper. It was a clunky, unwieldy thing; rusted and uncared for. But it was still far superior than any weapon available to these simple townspeople, who were mostly farmers and tradesmen. Some still hunted with ancient muskets for sport, but they were unreliable at best. Pistols, on the other hand, were even rarer, and usually brandished only by Brigands and other criminals.

His greasy bangs hanging in his eyes and spittle flying from his lips, the Brigand leader cocked his ancient six-gun. “Since your ale tastes like piss, innkeeper, we’ll need compensation to get some elsewhere.” His companions now drew their weapons. A venomous smile slithered across the ringleader’s face. “I’m sure your customers won’t mind contributing too.”

The innkeeper nodded nervously, backing toward the lockbox he kept secure behind the bar. The two younger Brigands had advanced into the crowd to relieve them of their hard-earned money and valuables when a voice pierced the tense silence.

“Stand down.”

The younger Brigands halted and their leader whirled around, training his pistol on a new target.

The stranger had risen to his feet. His face was still hidden in shadow, but the gleam in his eye was unmistakable.

The lead Brigand slicked back his hair from his eyes and cocked his head in mock curiosity, his sneer widening. “Are you addressing me?”

The stranger remained silent and steadfast.

The Brigand leader exchanged glances with his companions. “I believe he is, boys.”

His maniacal leer snarled into a malevolent rictus.

“Take ’im!” he shouted.

The two lesser men drew their antiquated pistols and fired. In the brief instant it took for them to aim their weapons and squeeze off a round, the stranger became a blur.

In one graceful and fluid motion, he kicked over his table and dived into a roll behind it, crouching into a ball. He grabbed a silver-tipped arrow from his quiver on the floor and nocked it to his bow; the polished shaft gleamed menacingly in the firelight.

Bullets slammed into the table’s surface, spraying up slivers of wood. Only a few slugs managed to penetrate the thick wooden surface, narrowly missing their intended target. The stranger closed his eye and inhaled deeply, silently reciting the mantra he was taught those many years ago in a long-forgotten place and time:

*An Archer must be:  
As swift and true as the arrow flies,  
With aim as keen as an eagle's eyes.  
As gallant and wise as a king,  
With wits as sharp as the arrow's sting.*

And when he opened his eye again, there was a renewed gleam of purpose there.

For once, he was an Archer of Laummoren.

The Archer rolled out from behind the table into a low crouch, simultaneously drawing and releasing the arrow. As always, it was precise and lethal, piercing the nearest Brigand's chest and into his heart. The young thug's corpse shuddered briefly before toppling forward, his last round discharging harmlessly into the floor.

The grip of fear and uncertainty that had kept the inn's patrons in a stunned silence was now released, and the crowd began scattering for safety while the remaining Brigands turned and vaulted over the bar for cover. Once concealed, the younger of the two reached blindly over the bar and fired off several shots in a random fanning pattern, prompting more screaming and scrambling. The Archer avoided these desperate attempts easily, scooping up his quiver and stepping behind a thick wooden post. He readied another arrow.

The gunfire stopped, and the shouts of terror and outrage from the crowd were reduced to muffled whimpers. A bluish-gray haze hung in the air, along with the sharp odor of gunpowder. The silence was ominous.

The Archer remained motionless, contorting his body behind the post to minimize his silhouette. These were desperate untrained thugs; nothing like the more skilled and cunning adversaries he had been trained to deal with. His most valuable weapon here would be his patience.

After several minutes, the remaining younger Brigand chanced raising his bald head just

enough to peer over the bar. The Archer caught sight of the thug's movement in the reflection of a nearby table lamp, and he whirled out from behind the post, releasing his second arrow.

The arrow whistled through the air and punctured the thief's right eye and into his brain; his lifeless body crumpled out of sight, twitching involuntarily as neurons fired off their final impulses.

The Archer nocked a third arrow and stepped out into the room. "Come out, cutpurse. Come relieve me of *my* money." His voice was even, unwavering. The inn's patrons looked up from their cowering positions as he passed, awed by his commanding tone.

But there was only unanswered silence.

Then: commotion from the kitchen entrance behind the bar.

The door flew open and out stepped a young woman in her late teens. Her blonde hair was pinned back, her white apron blotched with stains, her face pale and her eyes wide with fear. The barrel of a rusty pistol was at her temple, clutched by the man ducking behind her. The Brigand leader had acquired a hostage.

The innkeeper stood up and reached for the young woman. "Rebecca!"

"Poppa!" the young woman strained against the vise-like arm coiled around her neck.

"Back off, fatman!" the Brigand growled. He cocked the hammer, a confident smile slithering across his face. Then he leveled his malicious stare at the Archer. "You too, bowman!" He was slowly edging his way toward the door, shielding himself with the innkeeper's daughter while the Archer followed his progress with a steady gaze and aim. From behind the young girl's smooth and flawless cheek, the Brigand chief leered back at the Archer through yellowed and gnarled teeth as the innkeeper wrung his hands helplessly.

When the Brigand and his hostage had finally reached the door, he licked his lips

lecherously. “Perhaps I’ll take this pretty with me for some fun later in compensation for the piss-poor ale.” His eyes flitted to the door behind him.

In that sliver of a second, the Archer acted.

His first arrow punctured the Brigand’s knee, causing him to bellow in pain and loosen his grip on the barmaid, his hostage now freed and forgotten.

The Archer then drew and released a final fatal arrow through the Brigand’s throat, pinning the thief to the door behind him. The thug gagged and gurgled for several seconds, his fingers clawing to remove the arrow. His choked gasps quickly trailed off, his eyes rolling back into his head, and his body went limp, snapping the arrow off at the head, sending his lifeless form collapsing to the floor with a dull thud.

The innkeeper’s daughter wafted to the floor, crying openly. Her father scrambled over to her, scooping her into his arms as if she were still a child. The rest of the inn’s patrons remained frozen, their eyes trained on the Archer as he proceeded to systematically retrieve his arrows, wiping each arrowhead clean on its victim’s clothing before replacing it in his quiver. Except for his last; he frowned at the broken arrow, but salvaged its missing head by jerking it free from the door. He hated losing an arrow—especially wasting one on such an unworthy thug.

His final arrow back in its place in his quiver, the Archer glanced over at the innkeeper’s daughter peering at him from the safety of her father’s embrace. It wouldn’t be until much later when the Archer would make the connection between the incident at the Red Lion and a similar confrontation in a different inn a lifetime ago. But for now, all he knew was that there was something unsettlingly familiar about the situation. He didn’t know if it was the way the young barmaid’s hair had come loose from her ponytail and now hung in damp tangles around her face,

but something about her appearance reminded him of someone he once knew.

He quickly severed this thought as he felt a twinge of pain from an ancient but still unhealed wound, the scar of which ran deeper than any of those that were visible. The hollow ache in his soul and a glance back at his latest victims brought him a stark realization: he had cheated the Reaper once again and would therefore be forced to continue to bear the burden of his quest.

The Archer uttered a sigh of weariness and wondered if he would ever know peace.

Heading for the door, he deliberately avoided eye contact with all of the inn's patrons, feeling their stares like hot needles on his back. It was always this way; he had become a spectacle for them to gape at. Because of his abilities. Because he had forfeited rational thought and acted as he had been trained.

Shouldering his bow and quiver, he slid his gloves back on and raised his hood against the winter storm. His hand was on the door, when he heard a voice behind him.

“Wait—don't go.”

The innkeeper was standing behind him, one arm protectively around his daughter, his other hand offering the return of the Archer's gold coin.

“Please. I cannot keep this. You saved the life of my daughter, and quite possibly mine as well.” He gestured outside. “This is not a night fit for travelers.” As if on cue, the wind howled and battered against the windows. “Please, stay the night in the room of your choice. It's the least I can do.”

The Archer considered this, his gaze wandering over to the sultry Miranda who was now prowling near the foot of the stairs. She favored him with a wink and a seductive smile. He had to admit that the lure of a warm bed and a warm body beside him—even if only for one night—

had its appeal.

But as much as a part of him wanted to—even needed to—he knew he couldn't stay. He remembered a line from a poem from his youth; something about promises to keep, and miles to go before sleep.

The Archer shook his head slowly with a strained smile. “Thank you for your generous offer, but I must be off.”

The innkeeper lunged forward and grasped the Archer's hand, shaking it vigorously, his eyes brimming with tears of gratitude. He bowed his head. “Thank you, sir. Thank you.”

The Archer, no longer accustomed to—and clearly uncomfortable with—such gestures of naked gratitude, politely tugged his hand free of the innkeeper's grip.

And without another word, he turned and exited the inn, bracing himself against the storm outside and the continued uncertainty that lurked beyond.