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## SAINT'S-PAW by Alan Smale

All legends have a beginning.  
This is Rachel's.

~

Rachel ran. Death galloped after her on horseback, that grisly death reserved for nosy girls, witches, and saints-to-be. She almost tripped on the uneven stone steps, so focused was she on the oaken door above. Exultation filled her as she slapped the iron doorhandle.

Six soldiers rode into the clearing behind her on high-stepping horses, wearing swords at their belts and surcoats against the chill. Rachel couldn't help thinking that two or three of them would have sufficed, or even just one wiry old chap on a donkey. Perhaps they had nothing better to do.

Once the soldiers saw Rachel at the church they reined in comfortably, unperturbed at their failure to catch her on the road. Even if the door had been barred against her, denying her access, her hand on the iron would have sufficed to grant her sanctuary. But it swung open, and Rachel tumbled triumphantly into the Church of St. Stephan, His Hand, and spread-eagled herself on the flagstones. If she skinned her knees she barely noticed because that was nothing, the least of her worries. Couldn't it have been much worse than that? It could. How much worse? Immeasurably.

After all, St. Stephan himself was hung from a rope and then cut down still alive and choking, disemboweled but not completely, and then torn apart by four horses forced to gallop off towards the wind's four quarters pulling ropes attached to his limbs. And then they burned the various pieces of Stephan in a hastily constructed bonfire, all except for His Hand, which had gotten itself kicked aside into the grass in the excitement. And that had all happened right here in the clearing, a hundred years ago.

Of course, the Church hadn't been here then to grant him sanctuary. It was built afterward, in commemoration of his life and sacrifice. Stephan's blood and ash must have fertilized the very grass outside, some Stephan-essence sucked up into the trees with the sap.

It was a macabre conceit. Rachel realized that, once again, she was thinking too much.

As the door swung closed behind her and shut her into the dusty gloom of the Church, Rachel allowed herself to believe she had won. Her whooping laughter startled the birds in the church steeple and sent them aflutter. She sounded like a madwoman but cared naught for that, at least until a stern and disapproving voice came from the shadows: "Quiet, in the house of God!"

"Sorry," Rachel gasped, sun-dazzled, her eyes searching the murk. "Father?"

~

A priest approached her with a frown like thunder. "This is no place for child's play."

Old and tonsured, he was a soft butterball of a man who did not look strong enough to forcibly evict her. "Sanctuary," said Rachel. "I am pursued by soldiers." The priest's mouth twitched downward, and she added "Unjustly."

He sized up her skinny frame with a disdainful sniff: untidy ponytails bouncing on her shoulders, face a little too freckled and snub-nosed to be taken seriously. Brown-armed from the fields. Urchin girl.

Rachel did not recognize him. The Church of St. Stephan was set midway between five villages and used by all of them, but Rachel's parents were rare and grudging churchgoers who preferred to join those who performed the minimum Sunday devotions in the village square. Perhaps she'd seen this priest before, at a christening or a funeral, but to Rachel all clerics looked much of a muchness.

It was triply ironic that Rachel should be calling upon the power of a God in whom she didn't believe, to protect her from soldiers who sought to destroy her for acts a God-fearing girl would never have considered, via a priest who saw her as merely a disturbance and an embarrassment.

"Rubbish," he snorted. She eyed the age-spots on his hands as he waddled past the font to the door; hands, Rachel knew, gave away folks' personalities and vintage more readily than faces, and the elderly softness of the priest's hands reinforced her growing confidence.

He tugged the door open with some effort. Beyond, in the bright afternoon sunshine, the half-dozen soldiers were gathering sticks and branches to make a fire. Their horses, content to be far from longbow and cannon, grazed untethered by the trees.

The soldiers had good sight lines to the front and side doors of the church, and were clearly settling in for a long wait.

"Humph," He shoved the door closed again. "Well!"

A chill traveled Rachel's spine. It was probably soldiers just such as these who had performed the gruesome last rites on St. Stephan.

The priest glared. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Rachel's head hurt, and at that moment she genuinely couldn't remember. Nothing worth suffering bloodily at the hands of armed men, she was sure.

The priest fretted. Pointing at the door he began, “*They* wouldn’t--“

“I said ‘Nothing!’” she screamed in sudden fury, and stomped off down the aisle. She was sorely tempted to kick at the pews on either side in passing, to burn out some of her anger, but that would not be grown-up and would earn her even less sympathy than she was currently getting.

She recalled it now, of course: her father’s face static and waxy before her, her mother’s terrified screech, the ropes around her wrists, the icy chill of her ducking in the pond. Her breath scraped raw in her throat.

It was not a large church. A few more strides brought Rachel to the altar. Perhaps she had intended to prostrate herself on the altar steps; that might at least earn her some belated credit with the clergyman. But now she stood transfixed, with all thought of that gone from her head.

The Hand of St. Stephan sat on a velvet cushion inside a case of glass, mounted into the altarpiece.

~

Despite the obvious clue of the Church’s name, Rachel had had no inkling that the Saint’s real, genuine, honest-to-God Hand was housed here. As a rule they must have covered the relic with the altar-cloth. It certainly hadn’t been on public display at any weddings or harvest festivals Rachel had attended.

She found herself down on her skinned and stinging knees. Her head spun.

The Hand was curled like a claw, its fingers pressed together and the ball of its thumb pressed against the knuckle of the index finger as if working to prevent it from extending. She saw chipped yellow fingernails over a grey skin, the severed wrist capped with a sheath of twisted black leather.

The priest hurried up behind her, reaching out to grab, but when Rachel turned and raised her arms to ward him off he backed off quickly.

Why? Because despite the ducking, Rachel still had blood on her hands, real dark smears of her father’s dried blood.

“Holy Lord...!” said the priest. Not to her, obviously.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” she said. “He was dead already.”

In a wood-carving to the left of the altar St. Stephan consulted with princes, palms raised as if preaching. A companion piece to the right showed him buckled and bent, a noose around his neck in martyrdom. In both carvings his expression was beatific. Rachel doubted he’d really ever looked like that.

In that moment Rachel understood two things. That even here in church, she was far from safe. And that once a tribunal had found her guilty of witchcraft and handily killed her, no one would commemorate her story in a woodcarving. She’d be forgotten in weeks. Days, maybe.

The truth focused her. She gazed up at the priest and willed tears into her eyes, which at this moment was not too difficult.

“Help me, Father! By the Hand of St. Stephan, please help me!”

~

“Is curiosity a sin?”

“Sometimes. Often, if untempered by humility.”

Rachel sighed. Ask a silly question.

Despite his earlier vexation with Rachel, the priest certainly liked to lean in and put his hand protectively over hers. Rachel was not too comfortable with that. But if it made him more likely to help her, she could endure it.

When Rachel was three years old, her mother had found her crawling in the pigpen on all fours. Apparently little Rachel had wanted to know what it was like to *be* a pig, and had let no barrier prevent her from finding out. Thus, she’d also learned what it was like to be beaten by her mother.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” her mother had snapped, a phrase perhaps more prescient than she’d realized.

A few years later Rachel had helped her father slaughter one for dinner; a pig, that is, not a cat. By this time she was much more interested in the bright colors of the pig’s entrails than in preparing its carcass to roast.

In hindsight, such events marked the beginning of her problems. That unholy curiosity.

Of course, telling it to the priest, Rachel left out the word ‘unholy’.

”Well,” murmured the priest dubiously. “A little girlish enthusiasm. Children, always inquisitive....”

“I knew you’d understand. I *knew*.”

As a child Rachel had dug holes down into the earth to see what was below, but had not gotten far. When a tree was felled to make planks for a barn she’d rushed over to look at its entrails, and was disappointed to find only more wood inside the trunk. She had expected so much more: channels for water, perhaps, or tubes where rotting leaves and dead mice could be sucked up into the crown of the tree for food. She’d heard tell of ‘rising sap’, but was not sure what sap really was. How did a tree feed? What did it eat?

She’d wager humans were more like pigs than trees. But she didn’t know for sure.

“Ye...es,” said the priest. “But how does this....”

“I’m getting there. This is background. Without it, you won’t understand, either.”

Rachel was encouraged that the priest had not dismissed her speculations out of hand, or told her tree-parts and sap were God’s mysteries, or some other platitude. But now he spoiled it by glancing casually up at the light shining through the narrow stained glass of the church windows.

Rachel paused. Certainly she could see how the shadows worked, too. Knowing the church was aligned east-west, you didn’t need to go outside to guess the time of day. But what did that mean? Was he preparing to leave?

“And, food!” she said, trying to distract him anew. “The ways the colors and textures change when you cook things! And then there’s the mystery of rhubarb.”

“Rhubarb?” he said, startled.

“Imagine being the first person to ever try to cook and eat rhubarb, how did they know it would stop being poisonous once they cooked it?”

“Perhaps they gave it to the pigs first,” said the priest rather maliciously, and she pulled her hand away from beneath his.

The priest looked at her hand, and back up at her face, and she saw him thinking, but not about trees and rhubarb.

“You’re not going to help me, are you?” said Rachel. “I haven’t even told you what I did yet, but you’ve already decided.”

He studied the floor.

"You're going to leave me here, and then they'll come for me. When? Sunset?"

"I have to think of my family. And my flock." He raised his head. "Confess your sins, girl. Maybe God will spare you. And if not, at least you'll die in the grace of His forgiveness." He paused, thinking. "It may go easier for you if you do not resist them. It will not take long. And they might let you live."

"...What?" said Rachel.

Oh, stupid girl. Stupid.

Rachel might think of herself as just a kid with skinned knees. She knew she wasn't even ready for a boyfriend. Yet, girls in the village younger than her were pregnant.

Tribunals were for important people, not village brats.

"Oh, *hell*," she said. The priest flinched primly.

Panic bubbled in Rachel's throat, and she tried to redirect it into fury. "I'm a witch, you know. Aren't you afraid of what I'll do to you if you don't help me? Rot your balls off, stop your heart beating in your chest?" She stood. "Oh, yes! Curses are the first thing I taught myself!"

He smiled a little sadly, unimpressed. "Such beliefs are for the village, not the House of God."

"*He* wouldn't leave me here," said Rachel, the sweep of her hand including Christ above the altar and the holy relic of the saint below. "And if you were a true man of God, you'd protect me too."

"God does not protect witches," said the clergyman. "No more do I."

"But, if you don't believe in witchcraft..." She stopped, hamstrung by the logic.

"Well," shrugged the priest, his standard something-to-say that was no answer at all.

"You're curious, though," she said. "Admit it. You want to know what the crazy girl did. Don't you? That's the only reason you're even still talking to me. It's got nothing to do with absolution. But it'll make no difference. Whatever I say you'll still abandon me here, and once you leave they'll break sanctuary and take me. Won't they?"

He reached for her again. Comfortingly. "Pray to God..."

Rachel pulled her hands away. "Stop. Give me a weapon. Give me anything. Or just shut up and get away from me."

~

Outside, the shadows lengthened. The roads in both directions were empty. The countryside was not like the city; honest people did not stray after dark, and made sure to be home in good time. Once night fell, nobody would witness whatever happened here at the Church of St. Stephan, His Hand. And if any from her village had been planning to follow after Rachel and the soldiers, they would already be here.

The soldiers. Rachel looked out at them now from the small window at the top of the steeple, thirty feet above the ground.

Their bonfire blazed cheerfully, and around it the soldiers lay, sat, or stood, according to their temperament. It was rare that Rachel saw men gathered together without some story-telling or ribaldry, but these were quiet and inward-looking, and kept their own counsel. Grim men, deadened by their experiences, their souls beaten out of

them by what they'd seen and done in the Holy Land. Their silence made them even more frightening than if they'd been sitting around swapping lewd jokes.

Even silent, the threads of power in this group were easy to discern. Growing up in the village, and even more so during her brief stint in the city, Rachel had made a study of such threads.

Lying by the fireside on this cool afternoon was their leader, a balding man in his forties, as muscular as Rachel's blacksmith father. His air of authority radiated from him as surely as the fire radiated heat. Even when he was looking away the other soldiers behaved as if they were constantly under his scrutiny. He was the stillest of them all, with a patience earned through a lifetime of campaigning. He directed them with a minimum of effort, hoarding his energy against later need.

Near him sat two other veterans. One of them was polishing something shiny that was too small for Rachel to identify at this distance. The other, longer-haired and more twitchy, looked around him with a constant sneering grin on his face.

Two more junior soldiers guarded the perimeter. These were the men who would come running if Rachel were foolhardy enough to make a break for it. Last, and lowest in the pecking order, was a gangling tawny-haired youth who kept the fire going by fussing with the logs and adding kindling from a pile by his side, while also taking the water bottle from man to man. As Rachel watched, the smiling man handed the bottle back to the youth and cuffed him over the head with ill-concealed contempt, laughing for no reason Rachel could fathom. The boy took the blow without comment and moved on.

Harsh fellows. And perhaps this was Stephan's true legacy, to bring discipline and military skill to men like these who had not possessed it before. Stephan had united the country against the freebooters in their narrow dragon-prowed ships, and the foreigners had been driven off, but as a result he had acquainted the people with soldiering as a profession. Confidence at arms and force as a way of life; these were among the Peacemaker's gifts to his people.

Rachel saw no gesture pass between the soldiers, but in one motion they all turned to stare at her.

It was Rachel's most terrifying moment yet; their cold eyes, their matter-of-fact appraisal. None called up to her, and Rachel had nothing to say to them in return. She had nothing to barter that they could not readily take for themselves.

The youngest lad was barely older than Rachel's oldest brother, Seth, who also aspired to be a soldier. Rachel wondered if the day would come when Seth would lay siege to a young girl in a church.

The smiling man cackled and turned back to the fire. The others followed suit. It wasn't time for Rachel yet. Everything in its due course.

The late sun shone on her, yet she felt chilled.

~

She descended the narrow spiral stairs from the steeple to find the priest on his knees at prayer in the tiny Lady Chapel in the back corner of the church. A sallow statue of the Virgin Mary gazed down upon him. Hey, ma'am! thought Rachel, over here! I'm a girl. Shouldn't you be helping me?

Assuming the priest would leave with just enough time to make it home to one of the nearer villages before sunset, she had at most another hour of his company.

She cleared her throat. "I need to tell you about my father."

"You're just trying to keep me here, to buy time."

"And you wouldn't?" she said.

"They'll wait till sunset whether I leave or stay, you know."

"I know. But someone ought to know my story. Someone has to speak for me, once I'm gone."

He turned and stared at her.

~

The two things Rachel had loved most about the city?

Firstly, the castle, with its giant keep that loomed over the streets to protect them all (as she thought then), its battlements the picture of strength, a stone bastion that might have been there since the dawn of time. Its dry-ditch moat was spanned by a dark creaking drawbridge, cranked down with chains. Surely its dungeons must be brimming with treasure, and stockpiles of bright swords and shields for the soldiers; in Rachel's innocence she'd never thought they might keep human beings down there.

Her second favorite was market day, bustling with colorful strangers and exotic wares. Cloth from the Silk Road, copper pots, strange foods and herbs and spices, ducks and pigs a-squeal, and over it all the smell of meat being roasted on skewers. Rachel's marketplace was full of friends, from the younger men who winked and joked with her to the older women who pinched her cheeks and mothered her so much more effectively than her own mother did. Rachel had been an inquisitive girl, peeking through everyone's baskets and wagons, into everything with their blessing, the darling of the market with her blonde swirl of hair and her magpie curiosity. She'd gotten her head patted so often it was a wonder she wasn't bald.

She was there with her father, while her mother and brothers stayed back in the village. At the start of the Crusade the lords had called in all the blacksmiths they could find to shoe the horses of the army marching out to war. Her father had been keen to do his part for the war effort and line his pocket accordingly, and he'd taken Rachel along as his little domestic servant to make meals and run errands for him. A regular enough role for a daughter, yet Rachel was delighted at the sign of favor this implied, and this chance of a lifetime.

Back then she had charmed the soldiers effortlessly, and they had bent ears of corn into little toy horses for her. She didn't think it would be so easy to charm the ones outside the church of St. Stephan, His Hand.

By her mother's reckoning the city had "turned Rachel's head something fierce," and about this at least, her mother wasn't wrong. The city had shown Rachel how large the world was, how wild and varied its people and products, and how convoluted its patterns of power. It had been intoxicating.

And her mother had also said "Nothing good can come from the city," and in that she was probably right too. Yet, in the end, it was Rachel's father whom it ruined.

In the beginning he'd been too preoccupied with shoeing fifty horses a day to fret over Rachel's absences as she scampered the streets. Freed from her mother and the straitlaced regime of the village, Rachel became a whole new daughter to him, bringing home tales of the broader city he did not have time to visit himself, and revealing more of her personality than she ever dared back home. Later on, when her contacts and insights

proved useful, his trepidation turned to pride. It was in the city that the father came to really know the daughter, and bless her curiosity.

“Be canny,” he’d said. “Aye, be inquisitive. Think for yourself. By all means find ways to make us more comfortable here. Bend rules if you may. Don’t get caught.”

And perhaps he followed his own advice, in his lingering friendships -- “pleasant company”, as he’d gruffly say -- with two of the market-women Rachel brought home to meet him, “and we don’t have to tell your mother about that”. Rachel loved their sparkling eyes and their full swaying skirts, and how they stood with their hands on their hips. She told her father she wanted to be like them when she grew up. Momentarily astonished, he smiled and ruffled her hair and thanked her for the introductions. “Keep it up, lass,” he said, and the soldier whose horse was being shod at the time had laughed and laughed.

And perhaps it was down to one of those women, and perhaps not, when her father began to sicken of a wasting disease just a few weeks after he and Rachel returned to the village.

~

It took him a long time to die and his coughing made the whole village miserable. Again Rachel heard her mother’s refrain that “nothing good can come from the city.” But from the look in her eyes Rachel knew what she really meant was: why couldn’t it be Rachel dying, instead of her husband?

Rachel had questions of her own. Why was her father dying in the first place? How did our bodies work, that they could falter and fail on such little notice?

And the more immediate question that Rachel tried not to think about: What would become of her, once he died?

~

The leaves were crisping on the trees as summer gave way to fall. The breeze ran clean and brisk. Her father’s body, bathed in vinegar and kept in the shade, did not smell overmuch, and surely not riper than the rest of the village’s natural stinks and aromas.

Rachel stood over him, knife in hand. He was such a gentle soul. How could she harm him?

But there could be no harm to it. Whatever her father had once been, he no longer resided in this silent shell.

“Why did you go?” she asked, out loud.

Her father would not speak again. But it was as if he did. “Do what you must, to find out. But be careful.”

~

In life his skin had seemed as ruddy as leather. Yet the flesh of his arm gave way easily enough under the knife.

Hearts pumped blood around a human’s body, the same as around a pig’s or a rabbit’s. Different from a tree or a slug. Animals didn’t talk using any language humans could understand. Animals cried but did not frown. Which was odd, since no animal



could put up a hand to shade their eyes. Wouldn't you suppose that all animals would be able to frown?

Even in death, Rachel's father bled for her.

His legs were stiff, but not his arms. This must surely mean something, but Rachel could not imagine what. A day or so earlier it had been the other way around.

His blood oozed, rather than flowing, almost like a jelly. His skin was blue where it had rested against the bed; obviously the blood had pooled there now his heart was no longer beating. Probably all corpses were like this.

Well, now. Her father had died of coughing, clutching his chest. Rachel flapped her hands to drive away the insects, unlaced the rough shirt he had been dressed in, and placed the knife blade against the cold skin over his heart. She would clean him up afterwards. No one would ever know....

From behind Rachel came her mother's scream.

As always, her timing was terrible.

~

"Sweet Jesus!" said the priest. "Sweet Holy Jesus...." He backed away from her, unable to take his horrified eyes from her face.

"He was dead!" Rachel shouted. "Gone! My mother was supposed to be gone, too, arranging for his burial in the next village, where he was born! She wasn't supposed to be back!"

Rachel followed the priest, desperate to tell him the rest of it; how they'd dragged her into the street, tied her up, ducked her as a witch. How they'd argued whether floating or sinking meant innocence, and how in the end it hadn't mattered a jot anyway.

"I needed to know! I was only trying to help!"

They'd summoned the soldiers; it was the law for cases of witchcraft. Rachel waited a long, agonizing day trussed up like a turkey. And then came the incomprehensible moment almost at the last, when the drum of their hooves on the road could already be heard, and Rachel's mother had turned to her and cut her bonds, muttering, "For God's sake, you little cow, just run, get out of my sight and never, ever come back."

The story's ending mattered, and if the priest had known it all, surely he'd have understood and taken pity on her.

But he wouldn't hear her. He shouted words she'd never heard before, some in Latin, and then he made a terribly obscene gesture and hurried out of the church, slamming the door behind him.

The sudden stillness terrified her. Rachel held her breath, convinced soldiers would pour in through both doors in the next instant. They did not.

She glanced up at the stained glass windows, weighing the shadows.

She had maybe half an hour left before nightfall.

~

Again, Rachel ran: down the aisle of the church to drop the big wooden cross-bar into place across the inside of the big front door. Then back up the aisle, skidding around the font, which rocked alarmingly, to shoot the bolts on the side door. Her blacksmith's-

daughter's eye could see how little security these bolts would provide; a few good kicks would tear them out of the wood they were mounted in. The church's safeguards were meant to deter vagrants and casual pilferers, not an armed assault from determined men. Rachel did not, of course, have the keys for the locks in each door.

Rachel spun around twice, eyes darting. What else?

Off she went again to fetch the flints and the tall pole; she lit the candle mounted on the pole's end and used it to light some of the others, high up in sconces on the church walls. Having them come for her in darkness, or lit only by the brands they themselves might carry, would be too awful. Then she retreated into the stairwell that led to the steeple, taking with her a couple more lit candles and everything flammable she could find, which wasn't much: the Bible, a few prayer books.

Would she really have set fire to the Bible? Would it have helped?

Outside, night was falling with horrific speed. There were no more shadows, merely a dull cloudy haze beyond the stained glass windows.

Rachel could not hear the soldiers. What if some miracle had occurred and they'd packed their saddlebags and left in the meantime? She ran up the stairs.

The smiling man and the youth were banking up the fire. The soldiers at the perimeter stood stretching and bending to work the kinks out of their muscles. Their leader sat up straight. Doing what?

Sharpening his sword.

Readying themselves. They'd come for her soon.

Stark terror swept her, at the thought of those men swarming over her and dragging her from the church. For a moment Rachel's energy deserted her and she sank down with a sob. "Oh, Jesus..."

But, no. Why would God come to the aid of someone who only called upon Him at the last? Sudden devoutness, through panic? He would not.

Besides, St. Stephan had surely kept the faith till his last breath. And look what had happened to him.

Rachel pulled herself up and ran downstairs, ran through the church again tugging at the pews, the communion rail, the lectern, but it was as if they'd all been welded in place. What wouldn't she give now for a hammer and chisel from her father's forge?

The Hand of St. Stephan glowed in the half-light.

"Go away," she muttered.

A big brass cross stood on the altar. She pulled at it and amazingly it came away in her hand, not fastened down.

And the pole, of course, that she'd used to light the candles so she could see her enemies coming. She snuffed out the candle atop it and tossed that aside, then whirled the pole around her head. It felt good.

Again, Rachel peered down at the Hand in its casket. Her logical eye could see how the crystals that lined the case took every scrap of candlelight and cast it back out into the church. The Hand had no luminous power of its own. It was just the optical artistry of the smiths who had fashioned the case. Flummery, all of it.

She swung the pole once more. It came around in a fine arc and bounced off the glass case. She stumbled and fell forward onto one of her skinned knees.

Furious now, indignant, she grabbed the cross and beat at the case till it shattered into a thousand glass shards. Several of them were large and jagged, and she picked these up, her best weapons yet.

As an afterthought Rachel took the Hand with her. Perhaps she felt braver, holding hands with greatness. Perhaps she planned to take the thing apart while she waited. Who knows?

She piled her weapons on the stairs up to the steeple and went back for the font, tipping out the water and dragging the large piece of carved masonry back across the floor, heedless of the broad scratches it left in the flagstones. Let the priest get on his knees and scrub at *those*.

In the narrow entrance to the steeple Rachel arrayed her defenses. The font before her, partly blocking the doorway; the pole to hold the soldiers back; the prayer books and Bible to set alight and shove into their faces; then the cross and the shards of glass for close-work, to jab and gash and blind.

Surely, so well prepared and pumped up with fighting pluck, Rachel could take a *few* of these swine with her.

Surely.

~

Waiting in the cold, silent church, Rachel put the Hand of St. Stephan up on the font in front of her. The relic of a hero had to be of some use as a good luck charm.

"Please," she said. "Help me."

Rachel had never prayed before and was not doing so now. Merely asking. But the Hand stayed mute.

"At least you achieved something before they got you." Alone and against the odds, Stephan had united a country.

She looked at it more closely. It was smaller than she'd expected. And its skin felt surprisingly robust; Rachel might have expected a century-old Hand to be a fragile, flaky thing.

"Don't you ever miss the other one?"

That was better. Her voice was strengthening. She was not done yet.

"Drink?" she said. "I suppose you're not thirsty. But I have to say, you look pretty parched."

How on earth long would they make her wait? For full dark? For their dinner to digest? For next Tuesday?

~

Even as the thoughts floated through her mind, the church was rocked by a blow as if it had been slapped by a giant. Rachel half expected the stained glass window to explode inwards.

The side door fell in on the second crashing impact, the nails that held the bolts and hinges ripped out of the frame just as Rachel had predicted. Two soldiers, the perimeter-men, leaned in and looked up and around for traps, then came forward to guard the doorway. A third, the one who had whittled by the fire, headed down the aisle to take up position in front of the main church door, knocking a signal on it as he arrived.

So, none of the alternative schemes Rachel had considered would have been any use. Hiding by the side door and waiting for them all to run in past her wouldn't have worked, and neither would dashing out the main door as they came in from the side. Clearly at least one of the soldiers had been standing outside the front door until he heard his companion's knock from within.

The whittling man had slipped very briefly on the holy water she'd spilt in the aisle, though, which had given Rachel one tiny jot of satisfaction.

A satisfaction that was ruined when their leader strolled in and spotted her immediately. He had not yet drawn his sword, but his mere presence was intimidating, and when his eyes locked onto Rachel's, the chill to her stomach was as painful as if she'd swallowed a nugget of ice.

They swaggered towards her, the gangling boy to his leader's right and the smiling man to his left, much taller and broader than they had appeared from the steeple. Church-fillingly immense men.

Rachel set fire to one of the prayer books, but it looked pathetic even to her own eyes. She dropped it into the empty font where its pages sizzled on contact with the drops of water that remained. The soldiers watched with interest. As yet, nobody had said a word.

She raised the stick like a lance. The laughing man laughed.

As if this had been the signal, they ran at her all at once, the door guards leaving their posts and sprinting pell-mell down the aisles just as the three in the vanguard stormed Rachel's pitiful defenses. She shrieked and lashed out with the pole; the leader deflected it with ease, grabbing the shaft with his gloved hand. She let go before he could yank on it and unbalance her, and scooped up the burning prayer book. No one even bothered to avoid that, and it glanced off the laughing man's breastplate and fell to the floor, spitting sparks. Then their gauntlets landed on the font, dragging it out and away. The cross fell to the floor, and Rachel turned and fled up the spiral stairs.

She had a good start, and fear lent her wings, but even so she made it only halfway up before an arm swept her legs out from under her. She fell heavily.

If Rachel had reached the window at the steeple's peak she would have faced two stark choices: defend herself using only splinters of glass, or leap to her death. Perhaps it's as well that she was not forced to decide.

The leader dragged her downstairs and handed her off to the smiling man and the youth. The smiling man immediately let go of her arm and left it to the boy to secure her, whereupon Rachel got in three good punches to the boy's nose and cheek before he got a tight enough grip on her forearms to quell her.

Rachel howled like a stuck pig. Not from fear or rage, for she had no space in her brain for either. Rather, this: if the only damage she could do was to their ears, she'd scream all night.

The whittling soldier thumped her in the face, closing her mouth with a snap. They seized her legs and hoisted her to head height, and all at once Rachel was being carried out of the church on her back like a sack of grain, passing through the doorway and out of sanctuary.

After the mold and stifle of the church the night air smelled heart-achingly fresh and autumn sweet.

"You did well, Rachel," she said to the skies. "None could have done better." From below came a scornful laugh.

She looked down. The boy was taking the weight of her shoulders, while Whittling and Smiling carried a leg apiece. The perimeter men were out on the flanks of the group, naturally enough. The leader must be bringing up the rear, because she couldn't see him.

Something bumped against her stomach. Looking along her body she saw the Hand, gripping her belt. It must have somehow fallen off the front and gotten itself hooked on her.

Beyond that she saw the soldiers' cloaks draped on the ground by the fire, and even further out, a shallow grave scraped at the edge of the woods.

So much for her waning hopes that they'd just bind and hobble her and carry her off to face witchcraft charges after all. Truly, she was not important enough for that. There would be no tribunal for Rachel, and no tomorrow. Just a harsh using, and then death. An icy calm descended upon her. What was left? Where were her choices?

Plead? Beg? Never.

Holding her aloft in a gloved hand that felt like steel around her calf, the smiling man reached up with his other hand to squeeze her thigh, as if appraising fruit at the market.

The Hand stared at her. Even with no eyes, the focus of its attention was clear. In the early moonlight, in the approaching firelight, Rachel peered back at it as well as she could from half a body-length away.

Ridiculous.

Rachel looked at its knuckles and joints, and with what was left of her rapidly dissolving presence of mind, marveled that anyone could possibly have mistaken such a feminine-looking hand for that of St. Stephan.

Was *anything* in the Church genuine?

--The saint exploded into her brain, then, on the precise instant the soldiers carried Rachel off consecrated ground. The arrival of the saint was not subtle but large and terrible and rending, and in those moments of awful recognition Rachel dreaded Stephan far more deeply than she feared these tawdry, foolish soldiers who planned to violate and bury her.

Stephan changed everything. Stephan was lightning in her limbs, thunder in her head.

The soldiers eased Rachel down onto the cloaks by the fire, and it began. But not as they anticipated.

~

"Who are you?" shouted Rachel, as her hands closed around the first man's throat and crushed the life from it. The Hand that still hung from her waist gave a reply, but not in any language the soldiers could hear, its power curling into her brain like fingernails.

The second death of St. Stephan, born Stephanie Cutter in a village not so very different from Rachel's, had been by disemboweling. Now the soldier who whittled met a thrust from his own sword, snatched out of its sheath by Rachel, and fell screaming and staring in anguish at his own intestines as they slumped out onto the grass in front of him.

The third death of Stephan, no saint by any sane definition, involved being ripped into pieces, and the less said about the fate of the perimeter guard who joined the melee at that moment the better.

She smashed their leader's limbs and threw him onto the fire, and in dying he at last broke his silence.

That left only the laughing man, and the boy.

Rachel stood, sword in hand, as the Hand of St. Stephan tumbled off her belt and landed at her feet, its power spent.

Horrified at her brutal mutilation of these men, Rachel screamed and threw the sword away. Her heart was hot and full, pumping the blood around her body in a flurry of beats per second.

Saint Stephan was out of her system. Yet right in front of her was a man who had treated her like a side of beef just seconds before, a man whose laughter would have rung in her ears as they humiliated her, had it gone according to the soldiers' plan.

Rachel went for him under her own steam, rage filling her.

He smiled no longer; his roar of anger boomed out at the same time his fist slammed her backwards onto the ground. He leapt on her and seized her hair, and Rachel saw his wicked studded gauntlet rise up all the way to the stars and begin its long fall down towards her face.

The sword-tip that bloomed out of his stomach almost reached far enough to skewer Rachel as well, but did not. The soldier's look of surprise lasted an eternity. His gauntlet never landed. His weight drifted off her body, leaving only air above her, and all Rachel heard was the rush of blood in her veins and a terrible gurgle that was part cackle and part wail. Whip-smart though she was, it took her ten full seconds to understand that the tawny-haired lad had stabbed the smiling man in the back, then pulled him away and dispatched him with a savage slash to the throat.

Rachel rolled into a crouch and vomited. A few feet away, the boy did the same.

Like a fire rekindling, the scarlet haze of violence surged anew in Rachel's brain, the sick desire to mutilate and tear.

The boy stumbled towards her. "Are you all right? Is it... Are you...?"

"Stay away!" she shouted, fighting the impulse to batter him, rend him, rip him into tiny globules of flesh. The Hand curled and flexed on the ground. Rachel seized it and the bloody curtain in her mind grew thicker and even more vile. She took a step away from the boy, and another, and gradually it got easier.

Rachel walked to the door of the Church of St. Stephan, and threw in His Hand. It bounced and skittered across the flagstones, still squirming, leaving a trail of new blood in its wake.

She backed away, and went to help the boy.

~

"What did I do?" said Rachel, aghast. The boy shuddered and said nothing.

St. Stephan was hung, drawn, quartered, and burned. That must have been a lot to bear, even for the hero of a nation. Add to that a century of powerless incarceration within the Church, and those feelings of murderous vengeance must have swelled and multiplied. A few prayers to her in a subtly-disguised Lady Chapel wouldn't have done much to ease that.

And hence these devastated bodies, which Rachel felt not at all tempted to inspect or dismantle further. She knew enough about what was under these men's skins. She needed no more details of the human condition. Rachel's days of dissection were over.

For a while.

“Stephan was a woman,” Rachel explained, much later. By now she and Julian had dragged the remains of the other five soldiers off to the shallow grave intended for Rachel, and built up the fire again. Dawn was only a few scant hours away. “No one knew. All those years she traveled and rallied the lords against the freebooters. All the deals she arranged, the treaties and the feasts, the politics. Pretending she was a man. Always wearing gloves, I’d wager. So, of course, at the end, when the lords found out how they’d been duped--“

“Hush,” said Julian uncomfortably, which was mostly what he’d done so far; beg her to stop, to avoid putting into words the remorseless truths that couldn’t be taken back once spoken.

“They had to build the Church *around* what was left of her, to contain her rage. It was the only way to finally subdue her--“

“But what of us, now?” Julian interrupted.

Rachel had been thinking about that, too. “If anyone asks, I’ll say you died here with the others. All right? And you’ll do the same for me.”

Taking a horse should be safe enough, if she stripped off the military saddle and rode with a blanket like the common folk did. Who was to know? Who was to follow? Perhaps she was delivering the horse somewhere, to the city, maybe. Rachel was a blacksmith’s daughter. She had the gab to carry it off.

“I thought we might ride together,” he said, looking into the fire. “Brother and sister. Draw less suspicion.”

Rachel studied his blunt, honest fingers. It was tempting to accept his company, and under most circumstances it would be safer. But Julian was now an army deserter. Sooner or later someone would recognize him and he’d probably be blamed for the other soldiers’ deaths. Rachel could do nothing about that, short of confessing to the crimes herself.

“Our paths lie separately,” she said. “Let’s be far from here by noon, in opposite directions.”

He nodded. Rachel marveled that she’d made a man do her bidding so simply, till she realized the look in his eyes was relief, not regret.

At dawn the boy was still fussing with the fire as Rachel climbed aboard the best-shod of the horses and put the Church of St. Stephan behind her. She could not resist urging the horse into a canter for at least the first mile.

She was not running away, she reasoned, but towards.

For the first time in Rachel’s life, her future was in her own hands.

And so, it began.