



Dirty Work

Rooksbridge Chapbook One

*This story,
and every single one that follows it,
is for Prudence.*

Dirty Work is copyright 2009 Josh Roby.
All rights reserved.

It was pissing rain in the dilapidated town of Guilford, sheets of water coming down on bowed walls and makeshift windows, splashing mud from the churned-up ground so there seemed to be an even coat of runny brown on everything up to a man's hip. The sun might have set an hour ago, but it was impossible to tell with the grey and black storm clouds that canopied the river valley. A few yellow, oily lamps were posted outside the stables, the rectory, and the tavern; their meager light all there was until the lightning would light up the entire little town, and then whoever was caught out in the downpour would be blinking away the flash, the light from the yellow lamps forgotten.

Down the village's main road, such as it was, came two figures, moving slowly.

One stumbled ahead, the reins of a horse tangled in his limp fingers, his broad shoulders bowed as deep as the leaning walls around him. Slung over the horse and tipping side to side with its stride, the second figure could barely be said to be riding. It was more the horse's ability than anything else that keep the rider in the saddle and stretched out along its neck. The horse, in fact, beneath the muck that coated everything but its mane, cut the strangest figure: it was a destrier, a war horse, huge and strong and incredibly out of place in the forgotten little town of Guilford. But then, so were the colors the two figures wore, barely visible under their own patina of mud and blood: black and silver livery, bearing a raven crowing at the sky.

Just beyond the lamplight, hidden in the dark alleys between buildings, came the two figures' pursuers, such as they were. Hard-eyed villagers with rough hands and rough-spun clothes, hugging hammers and pitchforks in their trembling arms. They glanced sidelong at each other, then back to

their quarry, the tang of uncertain excitement hanging in the air. One spine short of a mob.

The two figures made their slow progress through the mud, reaching and then passing the lamp hanging outside the tavern, which also offered rooms but could hardly be called an inn. Were they lost? Too proud to take shelter in Guilford? Too exhausted to recognize shelter when they saw it?

As if in answer, the figure atop the horse chose that moment to teeter to the left, then slipped off the horse altogether and landed limp-limbed in the mud with a dull plop.

The villagers needed no further prompting and surged forward shouting. Their giddy hearts pounding, their pitchforks and hammers waving above their heads, they dashed forward with all the speed they could muster, descending on the pair behind the horse.

The first two rounded the horse's hind-quarters and found the broad-shouldered man's swordpoints already in their throats. They fell without a cry. The next three, lagging behind their quicker compatriots, stumbled over their twisting bodies. Two fell on the man's swords; the third managed a startled squawk before a flicker of steel flashed from the woman kneeling on the ground, and his legs seemed to go out from under him.

The remaining handful staggered to a stop where they were, eyes wide and chests heaving, watching the tangle of bodies beneath the horse in disbelief. The broad-shouldered man strode out from behind the destrier, a sword glinting yellow in each hand. The limp, the bowed shoulders, the stagger were all gone, replaced with the cold stare of a professional soldier. The villages broke and ran.

"Sophia!" the swordsman shouted, pelting after the stream of his would-be attackers.

The woman peered out from under the horse and then thrust her hands into the mud at her knees, chanting well-rehearsed lines. The muck beneath her hands churned and thrashed, then rippled out toward the fleeing villagers. The grey-brown wave snatched at the feet of the first few, then, gaining mass and momentum, plowed into the next and threw them against the wall of the stables. The swordsman cut down the stumblers seemingly without a thought.

Sophia then turned to the man gasping on the ground beside her. She slapped him, spattering mud across his face, then grabbed his chin and turned him to face her. “Where is Camwright?” she demanded. He blubbered, and she slapped him again, repeating her question and glancing back towards the swordsman.

“Deh- deh- deh-” the villager tried to tell her, but she dug her fingers into the man’s face.

“Don’t try and feed me lies, worm,” she hissed. “Camwright is as dead as you are. Will soon be, but isn’t yet. Tell me where he is.” She flashed another worried look at the swordsman, who was slitting the throats of the last dazed villagers flung against the wall.

“I doh- doh-”

She returned her attention to the man and pressed his face into the sticky mud, his nose and mouth down, one ear up. She held him there for a moment. “It will be very unfortunate for you if you don’t know. Death can come very slowly and very painfully.”

“What are you doing?” came the swordsman’s voice over her shoulder.

“Gathering information, Sir Sedgwin,” she responded without looking up, and then bent to the man’s ear and hissed, “Now you tell us, quickly and plainly, where your village mews is. Understand?”

The man nodded into the mud, and when she jerked his head out again, he gasped and stammered, “The rectory, the rectory. The mews is in the rectory, but Camwright—”

“Never you mind about Camwright,” Sophia cut him off.

“Camwright is dead,” the swordsman, Sedgwin, told the villager flatly. “As you will be. You’ve attacked the Baron’s men. That’s treason, and we can’t let traitors live. You understand.” Sophia shifted to the side and stood as the swordsman flicked his blade through the villager’s throat. “Dirty work,” he muttered once the man was dead.

Sophia rinsed her hands in the run-off from a thinly-thatched roof. “But necessary. This cult—”

“This cult needs to be stopped, certainly,” Sedgwin agreed, “but there’s no need for torturing the poor souls. He would have given up the mews for a lot less, Sophia.”

“Perhaps. I’m not used to this sort of work.”

“That’s funny, because you seem to take to it with enthusiasm.” He returned to the horse, patting its flank and making sure the beast had not been harmed.



Sedgwin held the silver piece in the air next to the lantern so that everyone in the tavern could see it. His travel cloak and colors dripped brown water onto the plank floor. “We need someone from the village to give us directions.” It wasn’t so much an offer as a command.

The room, already stilled by their entrance, seemed to grow cold despite the fire in the hearth. Villagers glanced at each other suspiciously or focused their attention at the bottom of their steins. No one met the eye of the two strangers in the center of the

room, but no one missed the scabbards and holsters on their belts. For a long moment, the only sound was the creak of chairs under shifting weight.

Finally, the proprietor threw his hands in the air and pointed at a young boy in the corner. "Phillip, go help them."

"But Father—"

"They're the Baron's men, and if you think they're going away anytime soon, you're mad," the innkeeper retorted, but it seemed he spoke more to the room than to his son. "Might as well help them," he said with resignation, but then gestured at the silver in Sedgwin's hand. "You can give that to me, sir."

The silver exchanged hands, and Sedgwin led the boy out the door into the pouring rain, Sophia following. Still struggling into a jacket two years too large for his shoulders, the boy asked, "You need to get across the river? Nights like this, the ford

is hard to—” His lips fumbled and his face went white, eyes staring.

Lined up side by side, down the length of the road, were ten dead men, lying in the mud and catching the rain in their gaping mouths.

Sedgwin prodded the first in the row. “These men attacked us,” he explained matter-of-factly. “Don’t look so surprised. It happened right here in the street, it’s not like you didn’t hear the fighting from inside. Some of these men were probably in the tavern drinking when they raised the alarm we were here.”

“Sedgwin, these were his neighbors,” Sophia said sympathetically, and stepped up beside the boy. He scanned her weathered face, then dropped his eyes to the ruby pendant peeking out from under her collar. The woman saw his distraction and adjusted her jerkin. The pendant disappeared. “We suspect that they were Camwright’s follow-

ers. Certainly you suspected that some in your village worked the mews.”

Phillip nodded numbly, and licked his lips before he found his voice. “Yes, milady. We’re— we’re very happy that the Archduke led the armies to fight them, and scourge the land of their—”

“She’s addressed as ‘Dame,’” Sedgwin corrected, “and spare us the groveling.” He pointed at the first man in the row. “We need you to tell us which of these men had families, and then take us to where they lived.”

The boy started. “What are you going to do to their families?” he blurted out before he could check himself.

“Assuming they don’t come at us with torches and pitchforks,” Sedgwin growled, “they will get a stern talking-to, and little more.”

“The mews often snaps up whole families,” Sophia explained. “We need to make it clear to everyone who was touched by this taint that such behavior is no longer... acceptable.”

Sedgwin nodded up and down the line. “Are any of these men the rector?”

“N-no, sir.”

“Damn.”

“You are not helping, Sedgwin.”

Sedgwin didn't seem to care. “The rectory is church land; we can't—”

“I know, but we'll have to handle that later.” Sophia placed a light hand on the boy's shoulder. “Let's start simply. Which of these men did not have families?”

Phillip swallowed and began pointing.



“You keep referring to us as the Baron’s men,” Sophia said, voice carefully neutral with a light hint of inquisitiveness. They followed Phillip up a muddy track towards a single glowing window, leading the horse behind them. The rain had slackened but not disappeared, and the wet night air was growing chill. Through the parting clouds, the distant stars glimmered.

“We serve the barony,” was Sedgwin’s gruff reply, but he didn’t meet her eyes.

“We serve the Baroness,” she corrected. “I don’t see what’s to be gained by implying to these people that the Baron Bramwood still lives.”

“The Baron is a figure of respect, fear, and justice.” Sedgwin’s voice was like gravel, his shoulders tense. “The Baroness, less

so. She is an unknown quantity to these people.”

“And to you?”

“I have known the Baroness for more than ten years.”

“You’ve known her ladyship as the pretty thing the Baron carried on his arm, not as a ruler. Not as your ruler.” He could feel her eyes on him, even in the darkness, appraising him.

“I am sure the Baroness’s rule will be fair and just for as long as it lasts.”

She laughed, a strange and light sound in the stillness. “For as long as it lasts, Sedgwin? I hope you mean she’ll marry, and not anything... less fortunate.”

“One hopes,” was all he would say, quickly and curtly, as if to end the conversation.

“Sir Sedgwin, understand that I hold you in the highest regard as a loyal and tal-

ented knight,” she said carefully, lightly, as if it was a change of subject. “But I must ask... are you ashamed of serving the Baroness?”

“Of course not,” he answered quickly, and then lapsed into silence. For a long moment, there was only the sound of feet and hooves avoiding puddles. Finally: “I wish her the best, and her barony the best. We’re here.”

The building was an old construction, expanded half a dozen times and now quite large. The original portions were half dug into the turf, the wattle-and-daub walls aged tan, but additional wings added a room here, more space there. Even in the murk, the newest walls shone bone white. An adjoined stable brooded off to the right, the sound of livestock knickering at the approach of strangers. A broad porch embraced a wide door and a handful of windows, all shuttered tight but one. Its thin vellum glowed with the wavering orange light of a fire within.

This was the last house, and the grandest of the lot. The others had been hovels and shacks filled with desperate and then sobbing women, the occasional elderly father or young son. Two of those young sons and one daughter had thrown themselves at Sedgwin; he counted himself lucky that he only had to kill one of them.

Mostly, however, after the news was delivered, the family collapsed in grief: husbands, sons, and fathers dead, punishment for crimes they had hoped would go unremarked now that the tide of war had passed. They wailed and cried, asking what would become of them; they were sentenced to forbearance, no punishment at all except to have lost family, to have their household destroyed. In the coming days the village of Guilford would see many of its villagers shuffling between houses, widows returning to their parents, new bridegrooms stepping into houses of grief. They had gutted this village like a fish — and then thrown it back into the river as if it could still survive.

The door opened before they could knock, the weary woman behind it giving them a blank expression and then stepping further into the house. "Mrs Blakescroft?" Sedgwin asked as he ducked through the door. "Mrs Samuel Blakescroft?"

"I suspect I am the late Mrs Samuel Blakescroft now," the woman replied, drawing deeper inside, glaring hatred at the strangers at her door. The interior was warmly lit, the firelight glinting off of polished wood and a few pieces of silver set out for display.

"Your husband is dead," Sedgwin confirmed without passion. He shifted for Sophia to enter and stand beside him. "He and nine others—"

"—attacked you on the road, yes," Blakescroft finished for him. "How convenient for you." She stepped behind a thick table and set her hands on the back of a finely-carved chair.

“Ma’am?”

“It was a trap,” she explained, a manic titter touching her words. “I told them it was a trap, that they were fools. Two easy targets, wounded, wearing the Baron’s colors? Bait. Bait for them and bait for their families, and taking that bait would bring down the pogrom on all our houses.” Her thin fingers knotted around the chair’s backing, and her shoulders wound up with tension.

“A ruse, yes,” Sedgwin allowed, not moving. “A simple means to determine who would raise a hand against the barony.” Sophia stood silent at the swordsman’s side, her eyes tracing the contours of the home: the silver, the folded linens on the sideboard, the long and graceful tapers standing in the center of the table.

“And now you’ve come for me,” the woman gasped, one trembling hand raised to her throat.

“We wish you no harm—” Sedgwin began, but Sophia put a hand on his elbow.

“You have a lovely home, Mrs Blakescroft,” she said, nodding to the corners where the finery was kept. “Much cleaner than I would expect a farm house to be. And rather large, by the looks of it.” Blakescroft stared at the other woman, hand clutching at a lock of her hair. “Where are your children, Mrs Blakescroft?”

“Children?” the woman stammered.

“You have daughters, probably a son or two,” Sophia told her. “No home is this clean or well-appointed without additional hands to keep it so. And you’ve spent the last five minutes trying to draw us away from the door. You’re stalling for time.”

The woman’s hand stopped shaking and her eyes thinned to slits. She bellowed up at the ceiling, “RUN!”

Outside came the clap of the stable doors slamming open, and then horses panting, screaming, and galloping. Sedgwin dashed out the door, hand falling to his flintlock, and Sophia let him go without taking her eyes off of the other woman. He shouted, and the pistol cracked through the night. A breath later, the destrier's hooves pounded into the distance.

“Well, now that they're out of the way,” Sophia said, pulling out one of the chairs and taking a seat, “you and I can talk.”



Sedgwin pounded after the two horses fleeing into the darkness ahead of them. The cart-horses were no match for the destrier surging beneath him, and given time, he would draw even with them. They were headed north, though, up into the hills above the village; if they got that far, they would be lost to him. The one thing

he didn't have was time, and the youths no doubt knew the land better than he.

As the horses raced between autumn-gaunt trees, Sedgwin considered his options. They had fled an arrest by a knight of the baronial court, and he had shouted at them to halt in the name of the Baron. That made them fugitives by law, but by a harsher interpretation of that law than Sedgwin preferred. He could not be sure, but they appeared to be teens at best, and he had no desire to maim or kill children. He could hobble their horses, but that seemed a senseless waste. Perhaps, he thought grimly, they'd do something stupid, or be carrying contraband, and the question would be taken out of his hands.

"Halt in the Baron's name!" he shouted after them again, urging every ounce of speed from the destrier. The slower of the two horses drew closer, and Sedgwin could see the rider's hair, a swirl of red in the hollow light of the moon, as it spun after her. A young boy, perhaps thirteen, clung to

her waist. They dashed left into a covered bridge, and Sedgwin followed. The echo of their hooves on the old wood seemed like an old man's hacking cough.

The land was rising, a slow slope leading up to the ridgeline that loomed above them against the starry and cloud-smearred sky. Then, with a cry from the lead rider, the two horses bolted in opposite directions. Sedgwin cursed and went after the copper-haired rider on the slower mount; her stride seemed to be faltering.

Grasping branches and thorny bushes scratched at them as they tore through the rough terrain. Sedgwin kept the redhead in front of him and tried to follow the other set of hoofbeats by ear as it made its own path through the woods. To the left and up the slope? To the right and across the gully? No, both — there was another horse in the chase, now two. Who were they?

The girl abruptly doubled back, heading down into the gully that the bridge had

crossed, aiming to ride down the stream's path. Sedgwin wheeled his horse and pelted back towards the mouth of the bridge. He patted the horse's neck as they ran, and he gently guided it, not into the bridge, but just to the right of it, where the land broke and fell down into the gully. The warhorse was trained to trust him, and it threw itself into the empty air at his urging.

The destrier crashed through underbrush and then onto the rocky ground of the gully's bottom, no more than an arm's reach in front of their quarry. The girl's horse bucked and reared, kicking its legs into the air, and the two riders spilled off its back and onto the ground below.

Sedgwin slid out of his saddle, grabbing the rope coiled behind the saddlebags, and leapt at the two on the ground. One brief, grunting, screaming, scratching struggle later, and both the girl and the boy were pinned to the ground. Sedgwin advised them not to struggle any further to no ef-

fect, and quickly and efficiently bound them hand and foot, back to back.

The swordsman hoisted himself back onto the warhorse and scrambled up the gully, towards the trailing sound of hoofbeats, fading even as he followed. Three horses? Some shouting echoed through the trees; everything was confused. The sounds seemed to come and go, dashing into the distance and then tramping closer. Horses screamed at each other. Sedgwin followed, wondering if the Blakescroft children had friends laying a false trail for them. An ambush?

And then the faster cart-horse skittered out of a break of bushes, the boy with the reins looking over his shoulder, terrified. The horse saw Sedgwin before the rider did and wheeled away. The boy shouted in surprise, then made eye contact with the swordsman and frantically goaded the horse to run faster in whatever direction it had chosen.

The chase was truncated, however, by another destrier pounding through the trees and rearing before the cart-horse, which startled and nearly ran itself into a tree. The boy pulled on the reins to quiet the horse, looking all around him for an avenue of escape. Between the trees, Sedgwin, and this new destrier, he was trapped. He dropped the reins and raised his hands in surrender.

The rider on the second destrier put a hand on his pommel and looked from the boy to his much larger pursuer. A bright smile split his face. "Hunting children isn't really like you, Sedgwin."



Sophia fished half a silver piece from her purse and pressed it into Phillip's hands. "You've been very helpful, dear, but it's getting late. Run along home." His eyes went from Sophia, sitting comfortably and to

all appearances perfectly at ease, to Blakescroft, radiating animosity, indignation, and fear. The boy nodded mutely and backed out of the house.

“Your children will be safe unless they do something stupid and make Sir Sedgwin kill them,” Sophia informed the woman, and observed her eyes flinch and then smooth just slightly.

“Your husband, on the other hand, has already made that blunder and lies dead in the mud in the middle of town.” She tipped her head at the other woman’s lack of reaction. “Forgive me, Mrs Blakescroft, but you don’t seem very upset about that.”

“Would you rather I cried?”

“Evidently, you knew we were coming to your door, which means you knew what had happened,” Sophia pressed. “One might expect you cried yourself out before we arrived... but your eyes don’t have the faintest touch of red around them.”

“I knew what would happen when he left,” Blakescroft hissed. “You’ve made me a widow just like your Baroness.”

Sophia’s eyebrow lifted, and Blakescroft realized she had said too much. The woman in raven livery leaned forward just slightly. “The Baron was assassinated less than two days ago, Mrs Blakescroft. The rest of this village is still ignorant that their liege is now a Baroness, not a Baron.” She let the silence stretch out between them, until Blakescroft looked angrily away. “Who told you?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” Sophia returned hotly. “Tell me, then, does Camwright still like to pull your hair when he fucks you?”

Blakescroft blanched and stared at the other woman.

“He takes a lover in every town he rules, Mrs Blakescroft,” Sophia explained blithely.

“Long, auburn hair, green eyes, light complexion, thin. Like you. Like me.”

Blakescroft snorted. “You mean that to imply that you’re one of Eduard’s spies? You’re really on my side, and have the... the salacious details to back it up?”

“Oh, no, Mrs Blakescroft,” the woman smiled. “I’m not on your side.” She caught her eyes, held them, said nothing more.

Finally, the fire popped, and Blakescroft looked away. Sophia pressed. “You were Eduard Camwright’s lover, perhaps his strongest supporter in Guilford. He relied on you even more than the rector, didn’t he?” The corner of Sophia’s lips smirked as Blakescroft’s spine straightened with pride at the suggestion.

“When the assassin came through town, heading east, he stopped here, because he knew it was a safe house. He shared the good news with you, gloated, even. He knew that winning your respect

might win him some of Camwright's." Again, the woman's shoulders straightened at the reminder of her status.

"And then tonight someone saw us on the road into town, and they came here first, didn't they?" Sophia tipped her head to the side, seeking out Blakescroft's eyes. "You told your husband to gather up as many men as he could find. And you sent him to his death."

"That's a lie."

"The thing I can't figure out is if you thought they'd pull it off, or if you were just trying to get him out of the way." Sophia regarded the other woman appraisingly. "I can't tell yet how much of a monster you are."

"Monster?" Blakescroft exploded. "Me, a monster? You rode into the village and killed half our men. Your war already destroyed the county. Your Archduke killed all the knights, so Eduard hired soldiers.

You killed the soldiers, so he raised militias. You slaughtered the militias. And then you came back. Why? To kill more? And you call me the monster?"

"You're the one that worked the mews," Sophia spat. "How many spirits did you shackle to a leash? Did you go the step further, did you raise the dead and leash them? Because Camwright was doing that near the end, too." Blakescroft looked away as if struck. "Ran out of militia, I suppose."

Sophia stood, surprised to find her chest heaving and pulse racing. She took a moment to slow her breath and cool her temper. She looked out the door, still half-open from Sedgwin's flight. "If you were Camwright's lover, he probably hid some of the leashes here. I certainly hope you didn't hide them in your children's pockets."



“We heard you hollering all the way up the hill,” the man on the destrier told Sedgwin as they rode downhill. “In the Baron’s name! In the Baron’s name! Over and over,” he laughed. The two Blakescroft children, hands bound, were atop the cart-horse following behind. The man wore the livery of a golden lion on a red field, and carried himself with an easy confidence. Two more horsemen followed after, bearing the same colors. He pointed at one of them. “I told Henry, ‘That sounds like Sedgwin.’ So what could we do but lend a hand?”

“And I thank you, Sir Norchester,” Sedgwin replied gravely. “If you hadn’t—” He stopped when the two trailing men abruptly stopped smiling. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing that need bother anyone who isn’t an overprotective ass,” Norchester answered hotly. The men following dipped their heads deferentially, and the man continued, “Sir Sedgwin doesn’t know any better, and besides, I am not going to stand on protocol.”

Sedgwin looked from Norchester to the men and back, brow furrowed. “What’s this?”

Norchester looked somewhat embarrassed, stroking his close-cropped goatee. “I’ve been made Baron,” he confessed. “Field elevation after the battle at Rudwell.”

Sedgwin blinked. “Truth? By the bells, Norchester, that’s fantastic. Or rather, my lord, that’s fantastic.”

The new baron waved a hand, smiling. “It’s nothing. No lands yet, just a court title. But a nice thought on the Archduke’s part, nonetheless.”

“My lord will gain lands in the campaign next spring,” Henry, following behind, put in. “There are heretics still in the western marches, and the Archduke has pledged to drive them out. We already march to the western fortresses in preparation.”

“We shall see,” Norchester moderated, and then looked sidelong at Sedgwin with a conspiratorial grin. “I’m sure others will be climbing higher and sooner than me.”

Sedgwin looked away.

“Oh come now, Baron Bramwood has been granted more than half of Count Camwright’s lands,” Norchester laughed. “He won’t stay a Baron for long, and when he’s elevated, he’ll need lords to manage all this territory. You’ve been his right hand for how long, Sedgwin?”

“I’ve served the Baron for sixteen years.”

Norchester punched him in the shoulder playfully. “You’re a shoe-in.” Sedgwin gave him a wan smile, but could not muster anything more. “What? No trouble between you and Bramwood, is there?”

“No, no,” Sedgwin answered, and forced a broader smile on his face, but it didn’t last

long. “The... this night has been trying, is all.”

The others looked at the trussed-up children riding in their midst, and things grew quiet. Norchester studied his old friend for a long while. “Taming this county will be difficult work,” he said finally, “and will take its toll. Bells, winning it has already taken its toll.”

“That it has,” Sedgwin agreed. The soldiers behind nodded, muttering.

“Look, Sir Sedgwin,” the baron said, sitting up in his saddle a little straighter. “You’re a good man, and if there was trouble between you and your liege, you wouldn’t say a word of it to me, least not without a barrel of drink first.” He put up his hands before Sedgwin could protest. “Hear me out. If things ever become uncomfortable with the ravens, you know there will always be a place for you in my court. Such as it is.”

“That is very kind, my lord, but—”

“Oh, do not ‘my lord’ me, Sedgwin,” Norchester interrupted, and then laughed. “Look, it’s just an offer, alright? Things can’t be so bad that Bramwood wouldn’t let you go if you asked, and like Henry says, there’s more war where all this came from. Where there’s war, there’s spoils. If I again have the luck — or rather, if I play the Archduke’s sympathies this spring as well as I did this summer, ha — then I’ll be granted lands, and perhaps greater title, and I would count myself honored to have you as a vassal baron.”

Sedgwin was quiet for a moment. “I appreciate it.”

Norchester clapped him on the back. “You’re a good man, Sedgwin, and I like to see good men treated well. Look, you could even bring that woman of yours. I promise you, in my court her blood would be no barrier to her. What’s her name, again?”

“Lydia.”

“Right, Lydia,” the baron nodded. “I’m sure Bramwood would let you take her from his wife. Ladies in waiting are all interchangeable, anyway.” He suddenly guffawed. “Not to you, of course! To the ladies they wait on.”

The other men laughed, and even Sedgwin had to smile. Then all hell broke loose.

There was a flash of flame, and the horses behind Sedgwin screamed. The Blakescroft boy was shouting even as his own horse bucked, and in his hand he waved a whip made of fire. His younger sister clutched his middle, her eyes squeezed shut and face buried in his shirt. The orange light dazzled the eyes, and the boy flung the whip forward, flailing at the cart-horse’s reins tied to Sedgwin’s saddle.

“He has a leash!” Henry shouted, fighting his horse’s terror as he drew a sword.

Sedgwin flicked his hand to his powder horn, deftly untying the knot and flinging it away. Reversing the motion, he brought forward a blade. "Put it down!" he shouted at the boy. "Drop it now! Drop it!"

The flaming whip flashed through the reins, and the cart-horse staggered backwards, trying to escape the light and heat. The boy waved the flames over his head, snapping it clumsily at the four men around him.

Sedgwin tried to reason with him. "You can't escape alive, son. Just drop the leash, we'll take you back to your mother, everything will—" And then the powder horn on Henry's belt sparked, spewed fire, and exploded. Henry screamed in pain, and his horse staggered and fell.

Sedgwin cursed, kicked his horse forward, and brought his sword flashing down. The flame winked out, leaving after-images on the eyes. The boy's shouts turned into a wail, and the horses stamped and snorted.

No one missed, however, the dull thump of the boy's hand landing on the fallen leaves.

Norchester dropped off his horse to see to Henry, who was struggling out from under his thrashing horse. Sedgwin watched for a moment, then nudged his horse two steps over to the wailing boy on the cart-horse. With quick, practiced movement, he cut a length of leather from the still-smoking reins, wrapped it around the boy's spurting wrist, and tied it down hard. The flow of blood choked off.

With a rough search, he found a small pouch inside the boy's belt, and inside half a dozen strips of leather. Each was carefully cut, one end bound up in a little handle, the other wrapped around a pebble, a piece of glass, a seed. Their lengths were tooled with embossed sigils. Leashes.

He grabbed the boy by the throat. "Is this all of them?" he demanded, "Or does your sister..." The boy was barely able to give

him a devil's grin through the pain. Sedgwin pushed him away. "Norchester, I—"

"Go," the baron waved at him, nodding. "We'll see to these two."

Sedgwin wheeled his warhorse around and pounded downhill, away from the ghastly scene. The trees flew by, and he hardly noticed their branches raking at him. Finally, the covered bridge swam out of the moonlit murk, and he urged the horse down into the ravine below. He flung himself off the saddle and staggered forward, then dropped to his knees.

At the bottom of the gully sat two figures, hands tied together behind their backs, charred black and smoking. The stench of burnt hair lingered in the air.



Over the past few hours, the row of bodies lying on the village road had quietly dwindled. Grieving family had come and dragged their men away, wrapped up in blankets or arranged as delicately as possible in the bottoms of wheelbarrows. Only five bodies remained gaping upwards in the thin yellow lantern light, but Sophia barely saw them. Sliding off of Norchester's horse and into the squelching mud of the village road, she cursed and threw her hands in the air. Sedgwin's destrier stood ten feet away. The reins were looped around the rectory gate, which swung wide open.

"Dame Sophia," the baron began, voice tight and full of warning. "That's church land, you have no authority once you pass those gates. If Sedgwin does something rash—"

"My lord, I'm sure Sir Sedgwin is fully aware of his legal responsibilities and where they end," the woman replied, turning and squaring her shoulders. "If I may be so bold as to offer you some advice on yours..."

Norchester looked dubious. "By all means."

"Turn around, gather your men, and continue on to the western front."

The baron considered her for a long, silent moment. "Good luck," he said, turned his horse, and galloped away.

The woman strode forward to the gate, patted the horse absently, and reached a careful hand to the haphazard stone wall that ringed the rectory. She felt for the life of the stone, the *genus loci*, the spirit within. She found nothing but silence, a numb, shivering absence that left her feeling hollow. "Leashed," she whispered, as if to the horse. "They leashed the whole rectory." With another curse, she slipped inside.

It was not a large rectory, with only a small garden between the gate and the building's front door. Around the building to the right she could see the village's modest graveyard; to the left there appeared

to be rows of vegetables. She stole up the steps to the door, hanging open an inch, and paused to listen. Nothing. With hasty fingers, she dug the pendant out from her shirt and studied it in the distant lamplight. It glimmered, seemed to pulse softly, and this seemed to be enough for her. She dropped it back under her collar. One hand resting on her sword pommel, she leaned into the door and stepped inside.

The door opened into a short entry hall, modestly decorated. To the right brooded the rector's study, dimly lit by moonlight through the windows; to the left, a bare dining room. Sophia crept across the floorboards on light feet, glancing into both rooms to ensure they were as empty as they appeared, and proceeded to the last door in the opposite wall, the one which presumably led further into the rectory. She listened here, as well, and when she heard nothing, she gingerly pushed it open, tipping her head to see what was beyond.

Her hand was snatched from where it lay on the door, yanked into the next room, and another hand clapped across her mouth before she had a chance to gasp. Thick arms wound around her arms and shoulders, crushing the life out of her, and then just as suddenly eased.

Sedgwin cursed, and released her. “What are you doing in here?” he growled.

“What am I doing in here?” she hissed back, taking a step backwards and flexing her arms to make the blood move again. “Sedgwin, this is church land.”

He barely grunted in acknowledgement. “The rest of this floor is empty,” he whispered, going back through the door she came through. “I think there’s a cellar through the kitchen.”

“And if you find the mews, or the rector, what then?” she asked, voice low, following after him. He didn’t answer. “Norchester told me what happened in the hills.” They

stepped through the dining room, into the kitchen beyond. The scent of turnips assaulted them, but nothing else. Sedgwin slid to the far corner of the room and knelt by a broad trap door.

“Sedgwin, they probably had the village’s entire cache of leashes,” she reasoned. “There’s probably nothing here any more, and we can get the church to clean up whatever is left.”

The man finally stopped, squatting, with his hand on the trap door’s ring, and looked up at Sophia. “Norchester told you what happened? All of it?”

Sophia nodded, biting her lip. All she could think to say was, “It’s a tragedy about the children.”

“No,” Sedgwin said, with a slow shake of his head. “No one is to blame for a tragedy. And someone’s to blame for that. Either it’s the fault of someone in this building, or it’s

mine.” They watched each other, quiet, in the half-light. “You understand?”

Sophia closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath, then nodded. “Open it.”



What had once been the root cellar had been expanded considerably. The first few feet of shelves held bags of flour, bins of potatoes, and jars of pickled vegetables, but then the contents took on a decided change. Field stones pocked with chisel marks, vials of clear and still rippling water, animal teeth strung together on a line. A walnut, bound shut with wire to choke the single green tendril that tried to reach for the sun. Sophia walked directly down the center of the aisle, her hands folded before her, not touching anything. She imagined she could feel the pain radiating around her.

The air was crowded, stuffy, and hot; it only grew more so as they stepped deeper into the mews. Finally, the room widened and the rows of shelves fell away. A narrow walkway continued into the red-lit room, lined on each side by neat rows of ashy pits drilled into the bedrock. In a handful of these holes flickered a lingering flame, clinging to the end of some half-burnt scrap of wood. Against the far wall stood three squat furnaces, red flames licking at their grills.

Sedgwin slowed to a halt in the center of the room. “I don’t understand.”

Sophia knelt to inspect the nearest flame. “They’re breeding salamanders,” she whispered, voice breaking. She frowned and cleared her throat. “The spirits of flame have the most fleeting lifespans. Most of them, anyway, besides volcanoes. Their fires die, so do they. Which makes salamanders fickle; hard to control. Rare that they ever speak.”

“And here?”

“They’ve been feeding these fires for... who knows how long.” Sophia stood, slapping imaginary dust from her knees. “They’ve burned a long time, and always, always under their control.”

“These are smart fires?”

“Old fires,” she corrected him.

“Wise fires,” came a third voice. “Powerful fires.” Sedgwin and Sophia’s hands dropped to their hilts. “Are you going to draw steel here?” A shadow stepped out from behind a furnace, the craggy face lit red and menacing. In the dim light, his collar and robes were barely recognizable. “The church will never forgive you.”

“I don’t think they’d be happy to hear one of their rectors has gone rogue,” Sophia answered. “Leashing salamanders and everything else he can get his hands on.”

“The leash is our birthright,” the rector told her. “And the burden of the spirit worlds. It is only by the leash that we will ever build paradise.” He smiled knowingly, folding his hands before him. “But I don’t think you’ve come here for a theological debate.”

“You’re Camright’s man in this village,” Sedgwin said, not asking a question. “You’ve supervised the mews here, under your house, and you’ve taught the other villagers to work it.”

“And you’re the Baron’s man in this village,” the rector answered. “You tore through here six months ago in conquest, and now you’ve come back to crush whatever dissent is left.” He tipped his head to the side, sympathetically. “Just tonight, ten men are dead, and three children. Alex Blakescroft has lost a hand.”

“You’re putting those deaths at my feet?” Sedgwin challenged.

The rector smiled thinly. "I am putting those crimes at your feet." He then placed a hand on his collarbone. "As the village's spiritual guide, I advise you to repent and submit to penance. Begin by turning around and vacating this consecrated ground."

Sedgwin's eyes narrowed in disgust, and he considered the man before him. He could cut him down in the space of a breath. Then his eyes fell on the rector's hand pressed to his breast in mock compassion. The hand was cupped, as if palming something; just at the join of his thumb jutted out the tell-tale wrapped leather end of a leash. He drew his swords.

"If you kill me, if..." the rector warned, still smirking, "the church will have you excommunicated, banned, tortured even. Your children, if any, will lose their names, and I dare say you will lose the ability to father any children in the process. Your baron will lose his title, his lands, everything. And that's if you win."

The swordsman paid him no mind, and silently bent one sword tip to touch his shoulder, the other his hip. Slowly, carefully, he slid the blade under his tunic, both across his shoulders and behind his belt. Then with one liquid motion, Sedgwin snapped the swords up and out, slicing the muddied, bloodied fabric of his tunic. The Bramwood colors fluttered to the ground at his feet.

“I think you misunderstand,” Sedgwin told the rector, stepping forward over the fallen colors. “I don’t come here in the name of the Baron, and this is not his justice that I am meting out.”

“Well, then,” the rector stammered, smile faltering. The swordsman didn’t let him continue.

The first cuts were aggressive, forceful, but not overcommitted. The rector stumbled backwards and then raised his leash. “Fool!” he shouted, and his robes billowed as a tempest exploded behind him. The gale

threw Sedgwin backwards, tripping over the fires, to land in a heap against the wall.

Sophia dashed forward, her toes gripping the edges of the fire pits like footholds up a cliff, her entire body leaning into the wind. Her blade flashed forward, cutting at the rector's robe. He cackled at her, twisting the leash in his hand, and the howling wind choked off, sending her crashing into the ground and the cupped flames.

The report of Sedgwin's pistol cracked through the air, the ball denting the furnace pipe behind the rector. The clergyman ducked backwards and thrust the leash at the other end of the room, but the swordsman was nowhere to be seen. "Abandoned your friend, have you?" he shouted, turning back to the woman rolling herself off the ground, smacking the edges of her smoldering cloak. The rector staggered to his feet to stand above Sophia and raised the leash high. "I'll beat her against the walls until they're painted red!"

Sedgwin's blade sang, snapping forward from around the furnace, running the rector's hand through. The leash dangled off the tip of the blade, a few inches from the man's fingers. He gave a strangled cry, desperately trying to grasp for the bit of leather just beyond his finger tips.

"Damn, I missed," the swordsman grumbled, his breath hot in the rector's ear. "I meant to sever the leash at the same time." He flicked the sword upwards; the rector screamed in pain as his arm was jerked after the sword. The leash sailed into the air. Sedgwin turned, slipping the blade back out of the rector's hand, pivoted, and slashed at the flying bit of leather with the other sword. It fell to the ground in two pieces.

With a boot on the rector's back, Sedgwin rifled through his pockets, his sleeves, pulled the thong from around his neck, producing half a dozen leashes. He kicked the scraps of leather across the stone floor and into the host of little fires in the floor. The

flames guttered for a moment, then licked along the edges of the things, then merrily turned them black, then white, and then to dust.

“The last feeding these fires will have,” Sophia observed, watching to make sure every scrap disappeared into smoke.

“Not... quite...” the rector croaked, and the two figures turned back to where they’d left him gasping. Clutching his bleeding hand and wincing with pain, the man teetered to his feet and kicked open the grill of the furnace behind him. “One more feeding.” With that, he tipped himself backwards into the flames.

“Sedgwin,” Sophia said, voice even and deliberate, watching the rector die.

The swordsman tore his eyes from the man twisting inside the furnace to look at her. “Run?”

“Run.”

Behind them, the furnace snapped and creaked, the light flaring out its open mouth. Metal tore and cracks appeared at the corners and the joins, spilling bright coals and smoke. The inferno inside roiled, punching tongues of fire through the cast iron. Finally the furnace yawned open, and the flames soared out. The fire leapt and surged forward, seeming to ignite the air.

Sedgwin stopped and turned at the bottom of the stairs, watching with awe and terror as something like limbs untangled themselves from the pyre, and then a raised head, eyes and maw white-hot. It opened its mouth and roared at him like thunder. It came at them.

Sedgwin looked up at Sophia, at the top of the steps. He shouted to her, “The fire dies, the salamander dies?”

“What?” Sophia asked, thrusting her hand down to him. “Yes?”

The swordsman took her hand with his left, and put his right to his hip. With practiced fingers, he undid the knot to his powder horn and flung it to the ground before the inferno. Then his feet pelted up the steps.

A moment later, the rectory exploded in flames behind the knights, sending the both of them through the dining room windows in a cascade of glass and moulding. They scrambled away from the fire and into the muddy road, looking back as the flames caught the thatch roof and raced across the entire building. Great arcs of fire swept above the burning rectory, the arms and then head of the salamander. The eyes fixed on the two figures in the road, and the mouth opened wide in mocking, howling laughter.

Then, almost as quickly as it had grown, the licking flames banked down, shrinking away. The white-hot eyes faded to yellow, then orange, going round in surprise and fear. The mouth flickered open, but all that

issued was a despondent hiss. Soon all that was left were a handful of candleflames scattered across the blackened thatch.

“You fanned the flame up until it tried to consume everything,” Sophia panted, resting back on her elbows in the muck. “But no amount of heat could dry out that thatch after so much rain.”

Sedgwin let his head fall back against the damp ground. “Actually, I thought it was still raining.”

She stared at him for a long moment, then tried to laugh but ended up choking and coughing. “There’s still little bits of him smoldering away,” she pointed out. “And who knows how much is still going downstairs. I think I’ll need to contact some storms I know, see if they can help out.”

“You do that,” he panted where he lay. “I’m going to stay right... here...” But he sat up, frowning, cocking his head to the west, then looking over to the brightening east-

ern horizon. “It’s already dawn. They’re almost here.”

Sophia could hear it, too, and both of them clambered to their feet, slapping mud off of their sleeves and legs. Hoofbeats, many of them, rumbled from the horizon, and soon the horses themselves came into view: twenty or more. The riders all wore black and silver ravens, all but three — a lady, a girl, and a boy, wrapped in black traveling cloaks lined with silver, riding in the midst of the procession.

The train came to a stop before them, and Sophia stepped forward. “Baroness Bramwood,” she dipped a curtsy, “welcome to your village of Guilford.”



Sophia was not surprised when Lydia’s green eyes opened the door to Sedgwin’s room above the tavern. “Yes, Dame So-

phia?" she asked, not opening it more than a hand's breadth.

"I'm sure Sir Sedgwin is exhausted," she told the woman, extending the brown paper package, "but could you give him this? I'm not sure if he has need for it, but he might find some comfort in it."

"Of course," the handmaiden nodded, and the package disappeared without any more of the room beyond her being revealed. "Good night, Dame Sophia."

"Good morning," the woman agreed with a wan smile. "Sleep well, you've had quite a ride."

Lydia closed the door and turned to consider Sedgwin where he lay, splayed across the cramped bed, spent in more ways than she had ever seen him. She held the package tight against her stomach, uncertain whether to disturb him. He turned his red-rimmed eyes to her, though, and asked what it was.

She untied the twine and unfolded the coarse paper. Within, neatly folded, was the front panel of his livery, the black raven crowing up into the silver sky.

*Read further for a preview of the next
Rooksbridge Chapbook,
Getting By*

“Can you do it?”

“It’s not a matter of can I do it. Of course I can do it.” The smaller man didn’t bother to look up at the larger man. “The question is if I can be arsed to do it.” The two of them stood in the shade of spreading oaks, an autumn meadow stretched out below them, and beyond that a wide blue-grey stretch of water. A rocky bank, low hills, and sun-bleached pasture sat on the other side. Lazy tendrils of smoke on the horizon marked the village of Guilford, just out of sight.

The other man, broad across the shoulders, raised his own eyes to squint out over the river. “No one’s conquered the Fosse since the Imperials.”

“No one’s been arsed to,” the short man retorted, waving down at the rushing water, “since the bleeding Imperials.”

“You make it sound like any builder can do it,” the big man smiled slightly, teasing. “Does this mean we can escape your fee, Milton?”

The smaller man snorted. “Any builder can try, but this is a year’s construction at the least.” He waved his hands at the panorama before them, as if tracing lines of stonework and masonry. “It’s not the building itself, although that’s a chore and a half. It’s recruiting the workers, getting the materials, keeping everything going. Making sure the fuckers don’t drink themselves stupid. I can count on one hand the men who can pull that off.”

“And the castle?”

Milton waved a dismissive hand. “The castle’s an afterthought. I’ve built and destroyed more castles than you’ll see in a lifetime.” Here he finally looked up, side-long, at the other man. “Well, perhaps not in your lifetime, Sedgwin. I forget I’m not boasting to sessile nobility.”

“You’re doing a fine job nonetheless,” the big man responded with a wan smile. “I can’t tell how much of this has been bluster and how much honest appraisal.”

“Bluster, Sedgwin, after what we’ve been through together?” the builder put on a face as if to look affronted. It didn’t last, and he laughed. “Well, a little, maybe. Part of the gig.” Sedgwin merely maintained his small smile, although it gradually shifted from slightly pained to slightly amused. “In all honesty, friend,” Milton continued, “it is a big project, and it’s certainly not journeyman work. It’s a year at the least, during which your Baroness would put me up and

keep me fed, and at the end of it I'd take away more bragging rights than wealth."

"If it's a matter of payment, milady Bramwood is determined to—"

"No no no," the smaller man interrupted, impatiently waving his hands. "You misunderstand. You can only carry so much coin, and there's a point at which a project gets bigger than what you can carry away for building it. It sounds crazy, but it's true." Milton laughed, although there wasn't much amusement in it. "At the end of the day, the Baroness would pay me more in meat over the winter than in coin at the project's end. That's the way it works, y'see. The sacks of gold are nice and all, but we architects are just working for our supper, same as anybody else."



The guard's head spun through the air, silhouetted against the starry sky for one long moment, before landing next to its collapsing body. Blood spurted across the cobblestones, seeping along the grooves between them. Sedgwin heaved his body to the right, putting his shoulder into the second guard's solar plexus. The descending axe slipped from its threatening arc to dangle from numb fingers. Sedgwin shifted his weight back again, and his swords flashed across his opponent's stomach. The man did not get up, and never would.

Sedgwin turned to survey the ruined street behind him. What was left of the city of Roxley sat motionless, empty, broken. Some spare light was afforded by a few thatch roofs, quietly burning, halfway down the street. But aside from the crackle of the fire, the street was quiet — quieter, Sedgwin suspected, than it had been in a very long time. He sheathed his swords and grabbed the two dead men by their tabards, dragging them inside.

The interior was dark, the spare fire-light barely lighting the jumbled mess of furniture thrown into the center of the room: leather, fabric, wooden stands, and long plumes of feathers. Sedgwin dumped the two guards into the pile and picked up something else, holding it up into the light. A hat; a gentleman's hat. He was in the haberdashery.

“And who the fuck are you?” spat a wheezing voice from the shadows. Sedgwin's hands fell to the pommels of his swords, and whoever it was clucked his tongue. “I've got a crossbow cocked and ready, sunshine, that would be a bad idea. Identify yourself.”

“Sir Sedgwin,” he admitted, shifting his weight back towards the door, “fighting under the banner of milord Baron Bramwood, in the host of the Archduke.”

But Wait, There's More...

Find more Stories from Rooksbridge at



Each month there's a new chapbook and a new chapter
in the lives of the people of Rooksbridge.

Read the next chapbook on your computer or PDA.
Listen to the next chapbook read by the author.
Get your hands on the next chapbook in print.
...or do all three, I won't argue.

You can also visit my writing blog, chat with other
Rooksbridge fans on our forums, and see previews of
chapbooks yet to come.

Hope to see you there, and thanks for your support.

— Josh