

The Indomitable Human Spirit

by

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“Papa! What news?”

Peter spoke as he looked up from spooning soup into the waiting mouth of Gramps, turning in his seat to catch the haunted eyes of his father, slouched in their hovel’s doorway.

“The armies, they’ve finally met. Down at Bosun’s Creek.”

A sharp *clang* comes from beside the bubbling hearth as Peter’s mother drops her ladle into the bubbling pot, pulling up her trailing apron as she hurries to the door.

“Who...who won then? Is the Baron finally free?”

“No. The Duke’s men slew them all, the devils.”

Her face goes pale as Peter gives a pained cry, rising from his seat and hurrying over to the door next to them. Gramps for his part emits an unhappy grunt as the soup spoon falls onto the table below.

“Oh Papa no, no! What will happen now?”

“Can’t say for sure son, but they’ll be coming here now. They have to if they want to reach the capital.”

“So what will we do?”

“My boy, I think that is exactly what he has come to tell us.”

Peter’s father turns and points down the dirt road behind him, to the large man in labourer’s clothes marching steadily toward them from the village as the waning sun shines dimly at his back.

They watch his progress, none of them saying a word except for Gramps moaning blindly from his chair, calling ceaselessly for his soup. When the man finally reaches the house, it is Peter’s father who recognises him first and speaks.

“Phil. What’re you coming all the way out here for?”

“It’s about the battle. Headsman’s organizing the whole village. Gave me orders to deliver to every household. Very important orders.”

There’s silent anticipation for several moments, Peter and his parents waiting for the man to continue while he chews lazily on something in his mouth, staring dully back at them before his throat releases a short growl and he spits down a dirty glob of phlegm at the mud below before continuing in a low voice.

“Headsman’s said the village is going to resist against the Duke. Says we’re to gather the head of every household and get them equipped for a defence at the bridge.”

The whole family’s frozen stiff after he finishes, and then Father takes a decisive step forward just as Mother’s arms shoot out to hold him, stopping him before he can take another step.

“Isabella!”

She does not respond, only shaking her head back and forth as he pulls at her clenched hands.

“Isabella...don’t start...come now. I have to...”

“You can’t.”

Her whisper is incredibly soft, but desperate all the same.

“You can’t, you can’t. We need you, without you we’ll barely have enough hands to keep-, you can’t abandon us just to-”

“Damnitt that’s exactly why I have to go! Don’t you see?” He tears both her hands off sharply, surprising her with his strength as he holds her arms firmly, glaring right down into her large brown eyes. “I have to go, to protect you and Peter and Gramps, the house, everything! That’s why! We know what the Duke’s men are like, those damned devils, we know all too well what they’ll do if we sit by and let them! They’re killers and beasts who’ll rob all they can get their hands on, not just our lives but everything we’ve ever loved, everything in the whole village, and, and that’s why we-,

that's why I have to fight. I must fight, to protect what we love." He turns to look at Peter, who stares back at him with trembling, teary eyes. "For our boy Isabella."

"Papa!"

"Shh, chin up now Peter, it...it might be up to you to be the man of the house from now on. Alright? So chin up now."

Without waiting for a response he pulls Peter in close to him, wrapping his arms around both him and his Mother, the three of them embracing quietly as Phil waits behind them. They hold together for several moments until Gramps's voice comes calling from inside the cottage.

"Souuuuuup!"

Their embrace breaks apart and, despite himself, Father gives a small smile as he looks back toward the cottage.

"You...you'd better go back in and help Gramps with his dinner Peter."

Peter nods quietly, but then suddenly bursts into fresh tears.

"Papa no! Please don't-!"

"Oh Christ, stop with all the bloody waterworks already!" Phil steps up next to Father, placing a strong hand on his shoulder. "We got to get you moving to the smithy's to get armed and-"

“Hold it” A new voice yells out. “You’re not going anywhere you bellend!”

All eyes turn to find another labourer, in appearance practically identical to Phil, standing in the dirt road before them.

“Wh-, what’re you calling me a bellend for Philby?”

“Because the plan’s changed. He won’t be doing any fighting any time soon.”

“Oh thank Christ.” Father’s shoulders slump immediately, relief washing over his face. “I wasn’t going to say it but I was nearly pissing myself, the whole thing struck me as a complete-”

“That’s exactly what the Headsman himself has just concluded.” Philby cuts Father off as he arches his back, pushing his chest out while he relays his message. “He says, the Headsman I mean, he says that in truth the battle at Bosun’s Creek was lost due to all the fat lazy farmers the Baron drafted before the fight, so from now on each household is only to provide menfolk in their prime. So you’ll be staying put, while your lad there will be manning the bridge.”

Phil gives an appreciative nod, obviously in favour of this change of plan, while the family stare at Philby open-mouthed until Father turns slowly toward Mother.

“Well now that Peter’s going, I think we should discuss-”

“NO!”

Mother's arms leap out exactly as they had before, this time locking in place around Peter as he stares at her with a mix of terror and confusion.

"M-m-mother, w-w-what-"

"Damnitt Isabella! What're you-"

"They can't-, not my boy, not-"

"Souuuuuuuuuup!"

Phil rolls his eyes as Philby cocks his head at the mounting commotion before them, watching as it escalates further, Father wrenching at Mother's hooked hands.

"For the love of God Isabella, control yourself! You heard what the Headsman's said, we have to-"

"No, no! He's my boy! Our boy! You said-, you said he's the most important thing we've-"

"Damn you woman, I know what I said!" He lets go of her hands, grabbing her by her shoulders, his eyes digging into her almost as hard as his fingers. "But have you no bloody sense? He's our boy, of course, but what good is it coddling him while the world burns? What kind of love is that? What kind of stupid love holds him to his mother's breast while his home, his people are butchered, eh? It's our damned duty to the village, to Peter himself to see him standing on that bridge, shoulder to shoulder with the best of us, fighting bravely to keep us free and safe, free to fight with everything

he's got, to make sure we never suffer under the Duke's iron thumb Isabella! Stopping a fate worse than death for us all, like a hero, that's what this is all about! Don't you see?"

She doesn't answer, staring back up at him with a blank look and then turning sharply out of his grip, squeezing Peter even tighter.

"I don't care what you say, he's my boy! Without him we'll never have enough hands for our work, Gramps will starve, the crops will fail and-"

"M-m-mother, please, I don't-"

"Damnitt Peter, enough excuses! Let go of your mother and prove yourself a man by-"

"No! Don't you let them take my boy! They can't take-"

"Papa, I'm trying! But Mama won't-"

"Soup! Soup! Souuuuuu-!"

"The soup is coming Gramps, just-"

"No! You're not going anywhere my poor sweet boy, you have to stay right here and-"

"Isabella!"

“Papa!”

The three of them devolve into a tight, bickering mass as the two labourers continue to look on bewildered, Gramps calling for his soup constantly in the background until...

“God be good you madmen, stop! There’s been enough fighting already today! Stop!”

The struggling ceases, all present captivated as a third labourer reaches the end of the road shaking his head as he closes the distance between them.

“And let that be the last of it alright? Headsman’s orders, there’s to be no more fighting today!”

Both labourers stares at the newcomer, blinking.

“No more fighting Philo?”

“Why’s that?”

“Cos we’ve surrendered lads. Headsman says there’s been enough pointless death already.”

Without missing a beat both Phil and Philby start nodding their heads.

“He’s a smart man the Headsman. We’d barely have lasted a minute against the Duke and his soldiers on that rickety old bridge. They’re fierce an’ all.”

“Aye, they’re devils alright, and I’ve got to help with sowing the fields tomorrow. Wouldn’t have been much use with all my guts hanging out.”

Father’s arms fall away from Mother , his own head nodding in approval now as well as he approaches the three men, reaching a hand up to stroke his chin thoughtfully.

“It’s clearly the most sensible tack for the village to take. Save lives instead of wasting them in a pointless gesture of resistance, save the whole village’s livelihood too. A wise man that Headsman, very wise.” The labourers all give a murmur of agreement as he continues. “I don’t know about your fields my friends, but we never could’ve spared Peter for a day let alone the rest of our-”

“Oh you’re spineless, the lot of you!” One of Mother’s hands, now relaxed from the vice she’d formed around Peter, stabs a finger out toward Father and the labourers. “One minute you’re yelling at me about war and glory, the next you’re celebrating a surrender!”

“Woman, come now...” Father sighs as he gives the men a knowing look and steps back over to his family. “You may not understand the ways of war as we do, but be reasonable. This is all clearly for the best. I told you before, the most important thing is looking after our boy, and what better way than-”

“Don’t! Don’t speak another word of whatever fresh nonsense you’ve cooked up in that thick skull of yours, you-”

“Papa, Mama, please don’t start all the fighting again, Gramps needs-”

“The only one with a thick skull here, Isabella, is the woman who can’t seem to understand-”

“Souuuuuuuuuup!”

They’re set to go return tight back to their squabbling until Philo steps forward, hands raised up either side of his head

“For the love of God people, shut up! I still need to finish telling my-”

“Oh what are you still hanging about here for then?!”

Mother’s eyes turn to glare at him and the other labourers.

“The Headsman’s said there’ll be no fighting from now on didn’t he? You’ve no business here, you’re not taking my boy to any bridge today!”

“Well we’ll be taking him all the same. He’s to hang in the village square come morning.”

Peter’s eyes bulge wide.

“M-me? F-f-for wh-, w-why?”

“For your wanton sedition and treasonous activity against the rightful lord of our village, the Duke.”

An all too familiar silence descends on the clearing before the cottage, lasting several seconds before Father turns furiously on Peter.

“Peter, you hotheaded fool!”

Beside him Mother finally releases her hold on him only to throw herself down to the hard mud, wailing.

“My son, my son! To hang like a common thief, a murderer! How could it come to this?!”

“Mama I-”

“How could you do this to your mother you brazen bastard?! You’ve broken her bloody heart!”

“Father, I-, I didn’t do any-, we only just heard of-”

“He’s just a boy, my sweet boy, he’s only a-, why oh why-”

“Of course you knew Peter, don’t play dumb, of course you knew! We stood by and watched as you threw your life away, watched as you-”

Peter dodges past his Father, darting up toward the three labourers with begging eyes.

“Please, I don’t understand how-, but, but this is all your fault in the first place! If I’m to hang for resisting the Duke then what about the rest of you?”

Both Phil and Philby blink, faces going slack with a steady realization of Peter's logic, but the new arrival appears unfazed as he answers for them.

"Because the Headsman's cut a deal with the Duke to get pardons for all those who volunteer to enforce the new measures of the peace." He turns to Phil and Philby. "Which I made sure you idiots got included into, so you can pick your jaws back up already."

"Ah, that's alright then. Good on the Headsman."

"Yeah, he's a wise old man that-"

"But why don't I get a pardon as well, I never even did any-"

"Souuuuuuuuuup!"

"Gramps, please! I can't right now I'm-, damn it, why don't I get off as well?!"

"Your absence at the surrender assembly was noted along with your prior recruitment into the rebellion. Not to mention of course, your father's early presence in the insurrection before he was replaced. On the basis of this evidence, the Headsman declared you an irredeemable radical."

"A r-r-radica-, w-what assembly?! When?!"

“Oh for God’s sake Peter, enough of this whimpering!” From behind him Father’s hands grip his shoulders tight, spinning him around to face fresh invective. “There’s no worming your way out of this one, not with all the talk in the world! You chose a violent life and now you meet your violent end! Live by the sword and die by the sword, my poor foolish boy!”

“But Papa I’ve never even touched a-”

“God be good!” Mother shrieks from where she still kneels down in the dirt. “I’ve lost my boy twice in one day! Who will chop wood for the fire? Who will help his father in the fields? Who will help feed us? Who will take care of us in our old age? Who-”

“Christ calm down Isabella, we can always have another-”

“Souuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup!”

“Gramps please, I can’t-, I don’t know what’s going-”

“WHAT THE HELL IS ALL THIS FUCKING HANGING ABOUT FOR YOU MUPPETS?!”

All heads turn to see a small bearded man pacing rapidly toward them, the tail of his long coat raising a cloud of dirt in the rough path behind him as he marches to meet them.

On seeing him, the three labourers suddenly lurch forward to each grab a different part of Peter’s body.

“Sir!”

“We got him!”

“We came and got the boy just like you said we-”

“No! No you can’t take my poor boy, you can’t take Peter, you-”

“Damn it Isabella not in front of the Heads-”

“Papa! Mama! Please don’t let them take-”

“QUIET! QUIET THE FUCKING LOT OF YOU!”

All present are stunned into silence as the short man trembles with barely contained rage, eyes burning as he examines them.

**“ANOTHER FUCKING WORD, AND I’LL PERSONALLY TORCH THIS ENTIRE
FUCKING SHITHEAP TO FUCKING ASH, UNDERSTOOD?”**

Evidently they do; not a single sound is heard as the Headsman’s trembling calms, the fire in his eyes dimming slightly as he stares slowly round at each of them in turn, a hand agitatedly twisting the bushy moustache that hangs over his lip.

“Oh you’ve really done it now you clods, you’ve really...do you *idiots* realise how long all your delays here have held up proceedings, hmmm? You’ve almost scuppered my entire new administration, thrown all the village’s progress with the honourable Duke right down into the mud! It’s absolutely intolerable!” He stabs a finger out at Peter. “I’ll see to it that you’re not just getting hung you little shit, there’ll be at least coals and the wheel for you now!”

Peter goes white, Mother’ looking much the same as she slowly struggles back to her feet, and even Father seeming almost shocked into protest before a voice interrupts them:

“Souuuuuuuuuup!”

The Headsman freezes, rare bewilderment crossing his face. He stays quite still for a moment, and then gradually begins walking toward the cottage, pushing past them all to arrive at the doorway and leaning his head inside to squint towards the family table, right into the watery eyes of Gramps.

“My God...you’re still kicking you old villain?”

Gramps’ own eyes roll wildly as his head shifts in the direction of the Headsman’s voice, regrading the small man quietly for several long seconds before at last giving a definitive reply.

“Soup.”

Before the Headsman has any chance to make sense of this Mother is upon him, throwing herself at his feet and grabbing at his legs.

“Please, please sir, let my boy go, don’t let him die! If he dies I’ll die, we’ll all die without our boy to help us, please! We won’t last without him, we’re too many mouths and not enough hands, I’ll never be able to-”

The Headsman’s brows furrow as she begs, upper lip twitching more and more until finally he kicks her away from him roughly.

“You moronic dirt farmers, you have no idea what all your bloody delaying is costing me, costing the whole village! I’ve had it up to here with you all, right here! Not just your boy, every last man of this house is getting the damn axe, right bloody now!”

So saying he turns and gives a sharp nod to the labourers, Phil immediately detaching his grip on Peter to take a new one on Father, who for his part nods gravely at the wisdom of this last fatal twist, while Philby barrels inside the cottage to lift Gramps’ emaciated frame up off his chair.

All three labourers and their captives are soon kicking dust down the dirt road behind the Headsman as he leads them furiously back toward the village centre

Mother contemplates their quickly diminishing figures as she sits in the dirt and stares, a strangely content smile beginning to spread across her face.

“Well...I suppose that takes care of that. Won’t need to make nearly as much soup anymore.”

She looks after the figures for a while, watching as they gradually fade down the road and the sun dips below the horizon, then she gently rises to her feet, dusts off her clothes and steps back inside the cottage.