

The Scottish Play

Prologue

There is a tree that grows by a lonely road. It is a dying tree, stooping wearily beside three smooth boulders. None pass that way, except by chance, and none find the spot again afterwards. Not that anyone ever tries; it is a dreary and quiet place, empty and completely unremarkable.

It is raining. The steady drizzle fills the air, blurring the world like a dense fog. The rain rustles on the dry grass and the rocks and sparse bushes. Other than that, the dusk is still. The sun may have set already, or it may still be in the sky, somewhere above the dense layers of clouds. The world hovers between the fleeing day and the night lazily sneaking up behind it.

There is no one by the dying tree and the boulders lying in the unruly grass and crackling thistles. If there were someone there, they may have said that the dim light plays strange tricks on the surface of the rocks. The shadows and patches of moss on their uneven surfaces could seem, to a fanciful imagination, to look like the shapes of three old women, lying by the tree. They seem to be sleeping, although much like a cat sleeps, ready to stir at any minute.

Thunder rumbles up above, and the rain comes down more heavily, filling the air with a steady patter. If there were someone there, they may have looked over their shoulder and said that it sounded much like a quiet whisper.

When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?

And then a soft sigh of a breeze stirs the nettles, seeming to bring with it a reply.

When the hurlyburly's done, when the battle's lost and won.

The whispers go back and forth, rustling, hissing, blending together, barely audible.

That will be ere the set of sun.

Where the place?

Upon the heath.

There to meet Macbeth...

The rain dies out, and a sluggish calm settles over the lonely road and dying tree. If there were someone there, they may have told themselves that the rocks look simply like rocks, and that there is no one here who could be whispering in the rain. And the rain and the wind of course have no voices. They may have walked on, pulling their coats closer about them, never looking back or remembering the place.

But there is no one there as dusk fills the air. There is almost never anyone there. It has always been a lonely place.

Act I

Radford Dunn glanced out the window of the Rolls-Royce at the landscape of the Scottish Highlands rolling past outside, and attempted to disguise his boredom just enough to make it even more noticeable. He could do it all, and do it well; the slightly raised eyebrow, crossed legs, languid slouch of the shoulders resting on the expensive leather seat, the finger tapping absentmindedly against his well-defined jawbone... Perceptible, yet subtle. He went through the motions automatically, enjoying the

exercise much like an athlete enjoys exerting his body when performing a familiar routine, feeling the strength in his muscles and the satisfaction at being able to carry out the required motions. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass, and readjusted his expression slightly. A bit more arrogant, perhaps, a bit more cocky and nonchalant. Of course he could do an excellent depiction of the dark, brooding type, but there would be enough time for that when the job actually started. For now, he would enjoy being the dashing, cavalier celebrity for a bit, the sort people always ranted about and put forward as an example of the depravity that came with fame and wealth while envying desperately. Radford smiled his vaguely ironic, off-center smile, the smile that worked ever so well on screen, especially where the female viewers were concerned. He hoped there would be at least one self-righteous social activist among their team. Those were always so fun to annoy. And some actors went through such strange, pseudo-moralizing phases...

"Looking forward to this job, then?"

Radford turned his head slowly to look at the man who had spoken. He had introduced himself earlier as John Bancroft, although that had been an empty formality as Radford had known perfectly well who he was anyway. He was larger than Radford and heavily built, with slightly tussled brown hair, a short beard, and a plain, blue suit that somehow did not fit quite right. It was too tight in the shoulders, Radford noted abstractedly, and yet still managed to seem baggy. Radford himself wore clothes well, and had long ago noted that effortless elegance generally worked best. Today, he had opted not to wear a suit, deciding instead to wear chinos and a blazer, thrown on

casually on top of an unbuttoned shirt. The man's slovenly hair jarred him. His own black hair was sleek and groomed, with just enough gel in it to keep it in place without being noticeable.

Radford shrugged easily.

"But of course. I wouldn't be here, were I not looking forward to it."

"To be perfectly honest, I was surprised to learn you were going to be playing the lead part. I wouldn't have thought this was your thing. Why *are* you interested in this, if you don't mind me asking?"

"My dear man, I am a method actor. How could I turn down an offer like this?"

"Still, not exactly the sort of thing I would have associated you with. A bit too...eccentric, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, the idea's utterly insane. A project dreamed up by a daft old man with too much money and time on his hands. But the insanity is what makes it unique, and the pay is not unappealing. Why not, at the end of the day."

John grunted in reply, and Radford sighed inwardly. Such a wasted sound; no drama, no subtle nuance...

The interior of the car slipped once more into silence, with the only sound being the hum of the engine and whirring of the wheels. Radford glanced out the window once more, wondering when they would finally arrive.

And then the road turned around another bend and there it was, standing on the top of a hill, a grey silhouette outlined against the bright blue of the autumn sky. Even Radford caught himself feeling impressed. Time seemed to go backwards. Or rather, the

castle looming over the expanse of dry grass and scattered rocks seemed to be a snapshot from another age, an image preserved outside of time. It was a touch melodramatic, Radford decided, but he was not above a sense of poetry from time to time. And after all, wasn't the whole point of the endeavor to go back in time and indulge his imagination for a bit? If he was going to play Macbeth in a castle, he was certainly going to enjoy it.

The car pulled up in front of the entrance, and Radford waited for the chauffeur to open the door before leisurely uncurling from his seat and getting out, his movements lithe and graceful. Another car seemed to have just arrived, and a young woman was also standing in the gravel driveway, looking about her. Radford decided virtuously not to notice that she was more than averagely good-looking. She had thick, chocolate-colored hair hanging down her back in a braid, with a shorter strand that had come loose and was curling naturally around her jawline. Her face was open and girlish, with a light scatter of freckles across her nose, and seemed familiar; was she that actress who showed up in costume dramas from time to time? He couldn't quite place her.

"Impressive place," he remarked, walking up to her and glancing up at the castle. Impressive it certainly was; grey, looming, suitably imposing and atmospheric.

"I was just thinking about how often the physical reality of a place doesn't quite live up to what you picture in your imagination, actually." She smiled dryly and Radford briefly wondered if she was wearing lipstick or not. Her hand was toying absentmindedly with the scarf around her neck. "My name's Nicky, by the way. Nicky Lewis."

"Radford Dunn."

"Oh, I think everyone here knows who you are. You getting cast as Macbeth created quite a stir in the press."

Radford smiled, wishing he could remember who on earth she was playing. Failing, he decided changing the direction of the conversation might be wise.

"So, what made you decide to come here?"

Nicky shrugged.

"I figured I didn't want to play random secondary characters for the rest of my career. Getting cast as Lady Macbeth seemed like an extraordinary piece of good luck. Not the sort of offer you refuse, really." She gave him an amused look. "And you needn't try to hide your surprise all that much, you know. I know I don't exactly look like a typical Lady Macbeth. But believe me, I can act."

"Ah, but you slander me," Radford protested disingenuously. "The thought never even crossed my mind."

"What an awful place," drawled a voice behind them. Radford turned around to see a pair of large, expensive-looking sunglasses, and fingers with blood-red nails clasping a cigarette. The lower half of the face under the sunglasses was chiseled, with copious amounts of masterfully applied makeup. She was tall and blonde, with a golden mass of hair flowing down almost to her waist. If asked to describe an actress, this would be the image most people might conjure. Radford sighed inwardly. He had had the pleasure of working with Melanie on a previous occasion. The memories he had of her were less than delightful. He smiled.

"Why hello, Melanie. It *has* been a while. What brought you here at all? I didn't think you would be one for the ancient ambience and pagan superstitions."

Melanie gave him a flat look.

"Money, of course. I'll put up with any amount of idiocy if the pay's decent enough. And I suppose you were bought by all the method-acting rubbish, were you?"

Radford spread out his hands.

"Melanie, darling, someone offers to pay me to pretend to be Macbeth for a few days in a castle in front of a camera. How can I refuse?"

Melanie snorted, muttering something under her breath that was not quite polite.

"It's just a filmed performance of the play. It just also happens that the producer and director is completely mad, and has come up with this brilliant idea of staging it in the middle of absolute nowhere, and acting the whole thing in order to recreate a certain atmosphere or whatever he thinks he's doing. I suppose he would've broadcasted it live, if this place were actually civilized enough to have any sort of contact at all with the outside world. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to my room."

Nicky watched Melanie sweep away, trailing a scent of perfume behind her. Her mouth twitched slightly.

"Now isn't she charming."

"She makes Lady Macbeth seem lovely by comparison."

"Who is she playing?"

"Lady Macduff."

"Seems ironic, somehow. Why don't we head in?"

They headed into the castle, leaving the light breeze and blue skies behind them. But looking back on the moment later on, Radford could not say he had felt any convenient sense of foreboding or any mysterious chills. The day was bright, his mood was good, and all in all, he was very much looking forward to this week.

Radford peered into the mirror as his reflection straightened its bowtie. He wasn't really convinced that a formal dinner was necessary, but he wouldn't complain. Black tie suited him. He smoothed out his shirt, humming a song he couldn't remember the half of, ran his hand through his hair, and smiled.

His room was spacious and agreeable, with beautiful wood paneling and a four-poster bed. The castle had generally made a surprisingly good impression on him; the parts that would be used for filming were properly ancient-looking and austere, while the living area was as comfortable as anyone could want. The idea of living in an old castle for a week with no way of communicating with the outside world had originally somewhat worried him, especially since it meant that it would be impossible to call a car and leave before the week was up if the whole thing turned out to be a pathetic waste of time. But he had taken a gamble, and had been proven right, it seemed. Radford looked in the mirror one last time, checked his watch, and headed downstairs.

Downstairs the candles in the dinning hall were lit, and the room was submerged in a pleasant, flickering half-gloom, with well-dressed men and women standing around and talking over bubbling glasses of champagne. Radford strolled in, lazily sweeping a glass off one of the side tables, and headed towards the table at the end of the room where all the main actors seemed to have assembled. He weaved past two old women wearing clothes that were too heavy and makeup that was too noticeable (he assumed they were two of the three witches, although he couldn't spot the third) and dodged around a group of self-conscious looking young men (they were definitely part of the camera crew), smiling easily and nodding offhandedly until he inexorably somehow ended up in the best seat. That was one thing you learned, as an actor. Everyone thought that you got anywhere you wanted because you had the money and resources to arrange everything beforehand and book special places and VIP access. The truth was, half of the time you could get the same thing just by acting absolutely certain that this was what you deserved.

The food was excellent, the wine was superb, and Radford let his smile creep on and off, present but fleeting. To his right, he had John, to his left, Charles Blake, the producer himself. Blake was a character; he was an ugly man, tall but awkwardly disproportionate, as if his body were stuck in some transitional teenage phase. His head was balding but unnaturally jet-black, and he wore perfectly round, red-tinted glasses. Nevertheless, he radiated charisma, and that undefinable something that comes with a great deal of money. Across from him, Radford had Melanie and two other men. One of them was none other than Sir Jacob Morwood himself. The old actor was far past his

prime and had a head of brilliant, silver hair to show for it. Yet even still, his legendary reputation enveloped him like an expensive perfume. He smiled often, but spoke little. Radford was still trying to get the measure of him. The second man was Joe Scarlett. Apparently, he was considered to be attractive, although Radford couldn't quite see why. His nose was too long and slightly crooked, and he was by no means tall. His hair was brown and fairly nondescript. His eyes were an unusually light blue, that was true, but that was hardly enough. Radford shrugged inwardly. These things were difficult to judge.

"It's all about the mood, you see," Blake was saying to Melanie, who was doing little to hide her indifference. "The correct tone, the correct setting... The importance of these things cannot be underestimated."

"Ah, and hence having the filming coincide with Halloween." Radford remarked, mixing just enough irony and indulgence into his tone to get under the pompous man's skin.

"Samhain, actually. A pagan, Celtic festival, halfway between the autumn equinox and winter solstice..."

"A time when the walls between the worlds grow thin, and doors can be opened to allow spirits to pass from their realm into ours," Radford pronounced dramatically, his voice deep and somber. He grinned, finishing the wine in his glass.

Melanie inspected her manicured nails. "A bit melodramatic, don't you think?"

"Crossing the line between drama and melodrama usually depends on the quality of the acting," Blake replied coolly.

Radford grinned, enjoying himself thoroughly. "Well, precisely. A performance of *Macbeth*..."

"You shouldn't say it."

Radford turned to John, for once genuinely surprised. He expected the man to be joking, but the bulky actor's face was stubbornly serious.

"You shouldn't say it. Shouldn't say the name of the play. It's bad luck."

Radford burst out laughing.

"Oh come on. You can't really be serious."

Melanie made a derisive sound, almost coming close to smiling. John frowned, his jaw setting in an obstinate line. Radford pressed on relentlessly.

"And I suppose you want me to, what, jump around on one leg muttering obscenities? Quote some Hamlet at you? Leave the room and wait to be asked back in? What would you prefer me to call it? The Scottish Play?"

"Look, this isn't technically a stage or playhouse anyway, right?" Joe interrupted, his voice conciliatory. "So the superstition wouldn't apply in any case."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong. This whole castle is a stage, and we are but players." Joe sighed, giving Radford a weary, pointed stare. Radford grinned. "So as I was saying, a performance of *Macbeth* will be good because of the actors and the setting. *Macbeth* is a dark, powerful tragedy in and of itself, and so you don't need to feed people stupid superstitions to make *Macbeth* suitably atmospheric. In fact..."

"You've made your point, I think," Sir James interjected mildly, his voice equally soothing and forceful. "Why don't we just move on?"

Radford raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "Why certainly. I haven't upset anyone, have I?"

Radford lumbered up to his room hours later, humming tunelessly again. That had been fun. He pulled off his jacket, tossing it across a chair, and loosened his bowtie. That old fool Blake was right; all this talk about ghosts and curses and ancient pagan traditions certainly added a deliciously sinister ambience. The fact that so much of his teasing was complete hypocrisy only amused him even more.

Radford settled down in the chair by his mirror, untying his shoes, his movements slightly drowsy and fumbling. He straightened up, catching a glimpse of his reflection out of the corner of his eye. He paused, frowning, peering more closely at the mirror. His own face stared back at him, slightly puzzled. For a second there, he could've sworn... Radford smiled, shaking his head. That wine really had been quite good. Maybe he had had a bit too much. He undressed and crawled into his bed, content and at ease. Today, he had been Radford Dunn, the dashing, cavalier actor. Tomorrow, he could become Macbeth, the bloodthirsty, ambitious murderer. His thoughts teetered on the brink, before plunging into oblivion. He didn't dream that night.

Act II

The morning air was crisp, and the sun shone brightly on the hills of grass, ruffled slightly by the breeze. The wind brought with it the promise of rain, but the sky for the moment was clear, with only a few ragged, white clouds strewn across its surface.

Radford stood in the shadow of the battlements, behind the camera, watching appreciatively as Sir James squared his shoulders, his voice carrying across the open space, crisp and commanding.

"No more," he proclaimed "that thane of Cawdor shall deceive our bosom interest! Go pronounce his present death, and with his former title greet Macbeth."

He's good, Radford decided inwardly, very good. He's James Morwood, after all. But I daresay I'm even better. Just wait until I enter.

The filming was going smoothly. Radford was lulled back into the familiar pattern; entrances, exits, emphasizing some lines, going for something subtler on others... Some things were planned, some were the result of a sudden spark of brilliance and improvisation. Radford closed his eyes, feeling the usual excitement mounting, trembling expectantly deep in his gut. He was like a hunting dog, whining, tugging at the leash, shivering with pent-up anticipation. He breathed in deeply, and cleared his mind of any sort of self-identity, letting his imagination take complete control.

I am Macbeth. Thane of Glamis, thane of Cawdor, that shall be king hereafter.

He knew all the emotions of his character, but now he let them become his own, letting his consciousness fill up with all the violence, pride, ambition... That was the secret to his acting; he never acted at all. He let himself genuinely feel all the emotions.

Expressing them afterwards, that was the easy part. When he walked on stage, he would be Macbeth.

Greed. Greed he was half-heartedly trying to crush, while secretly nursing it. Ambition. An obsessive thirst for power that was permeating every fiber of his being. And that one thought, that one horrifying, simple thought that kept persistently creeping into his mind. Duncan was old. Duncan would die soon anyway. But could he be made to die sooner...? Guilt would rise up at the idea, trying to blot it out, pleading with him, screaming at him to remember his loyalty, his moral obligations... Yet the thought was also thrilling... And as the thought grew bolder, the moral obligations seemed increasingly pale and unconvincing.

"Stars, hide your fires... Let light not see my black and deep desires: the eye wink at the hand, yet let that be, which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. "

Damn, I'm good. Radford pushed away the glimmer of his own personality that had slipped through, but not before agreeing with it. He could imagine the brooding, dark look on his face right now, the cruel smile, the pitiless glint in his eye... Not many actors could've done it half as well.

I am Macbeth. Thane of Glamis, thane of Cawdor, that shall be king hereafter.

Lady Macbeth's room was sunken into an uneasy half-gloom, the flames of the candles trembling pitifully. Lady Macbeth, his wife, stood by the window, her pale

fingers slowly crushing the letter in her hand. She turned around, a smile playing on her lips that never reached her hard eyes.

"The raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements."

She laughed, then, a cold, quiet laugh that had nothing in common with joy. And then her voice dropped to a whisper, any trace of a smile vanishing from her face in a heartbeat.

"Come, you spirits, that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty..."

Radford felt a chill run down his spine, impressed. The shadows in the room seemed to thicken as she spoke; a cloud must've covered the sun.

"Make thick my blood, stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between the effect and it."

Radford was not the impressionable kind, but he could've sworn, then, that there was something in the room that was breathing. Something large. Perhaps even the room itself. The air around him seemed to grow thick.

"Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief."

Lady Macbeth went on, her lips parting in something that may have vaguely resembled a smile, inasmuch as a crocodile smiles as it slowly opens its jaws.

"Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, to cry 'Hold, hold!' "

The candles flared just for an instant, and then suddenly blew out. For a second, the room was completely silent. Then Blake's voice cut through the pause,

"Cut!"

The trance was broken as different members of the crew started bustling around. Blake nodded, his face unreadable, as always.

"Not bad. We'll continue after lunch, shall we?"

Nicky walked up to Radford, shaking out her hair and massaging her shoulders.

"So, what did you think? Can I act?"

Radford grinned, breaking out of character.

"Oh yes. I would say you're definitely not half-bad."

It was time. Radford inhaled deeply, submerging himself once more into the character of Macbeth. The night was dark, with clouds scuttling frequently across the surface of the moon. The wind was getting stronger, bringing a persistent chilly dampness with it. In his mind, he made himself forget the camera and the crew, Blake watching him through red-tinted spectacles, and the other actors, observing his performance. He fingered the daggers he was holding, allowing his imagination to

transform them from molds of painted, hardened rubber into deadly instruments of sharpened steel. The man lying on the other side of that door was not Sir James, but Duncan.

And I am Macbeth.

There was guilt and shame, which had to be fought back. But they struggled weakly, at best. Most of all, there was fear, seeping through every layer of his consciousness, thick and viscous. What if he were caught? What if someone guessed? What if the guards found him? What if he Duncan woke up?

But then there were the memories; his wife staring up at him, her eyes eager and relentless. His superficially innocent comment;

"My dearest love, Duncan comes here tonight."

And then the moment of silence, of perfect understanding. Nothing more had to be said. Her whisper, warm against his ear,

"What cannot you and I perform upon unguarded Duncan?"

The haughty brashness, the thrill, the lust for power... And then the racking uncertainty, the fears, the doubts. And the shame, remembering the kind old king, his wisdom, his naive trust... *I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is none...*

But then there were her taunts, her sneers, her scorn... And the crown, calling to him, teasing him, tantalizingly close. All that stood between him and it was the frail body of one man, a man close to death anyway. Pity evaporated in the searing blaze of that all-consuming ambition. Fear could be suppressed.

I am settled, and bend up each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

Radford called up the image of Duncan in his mind, conjuring up a wave of hate directed at him. The desire to stab Duncan, to take what he had and what he, Macbeth, so dearly wanted.

A bell began to toll somewhere, the sound haunting and sepulchral. This was it. The point of no return. Slowly, Radford drew the daggers.

"I go, and it is done. The bell invites me. Hear it not, Duncan; for it is the knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell."

He crossed the courtyard, his boots falling heavily on the rough paving stones. He placed his hand on the wooden door, pushing it open, and ducking into the dark bedroom. By the light of the moon, he could vaguely see the shape of a slight body under the sheets on the bed. Quietly, he crept over, controlling his breathing, moving his feet slowly, careful not to make the slightest sound. He brought back the hand holding the dagger, the muscles in his arm taught, and stabbed. He stabbed again and again, wanting to hurt, wanting to kill. Warm blood splattered his face.

Radford directed the rubber knife so that it just missed Sir James, aiming the blows so that they hit the surface of the bed right next to the actor's body, in typical theatrical fashion. In the darkness, it would look convincing enough. He stabbed with his right hand, holding on to the other man's shoulder with his left. Finally, he stopped, panting slightly.

It was only then that he noticed that something was wrong. Radford froze, his heart hammering, convinced that he was wrong.

But he wasn't wrong. Sir James was not breathing.

Radford stumbled into his room, his mind numb, feeling slightly sick. Sir James was dead. A heart attack probably, the doctor had said. An unfortunate accident.

It had been awful. The realization, followed by disbelief, shock, endless attempts to avoid the inevitable fact. It could've happened to anyone, of course, but why had it had to happen here?

Radford sat down heavily on the chair. What a night. He never, ever wanted to go through anything as unpleasant as that again. And such a damned coincidence, too, happening like that during the murder scene...

He looked up at his reflection in the mirror, and almost choked on a scream.

His face was splattered with blood.

Except it wasn't his face.

The face in the mirror smiled slowly at Radford.

Something in Radford stomach lurched, and he felt sweat running down his spine. He thought his mouth was open, but no sounds were coming out. His mind was frozen, although something muffled deep inside him was screaming. He blinked.

And when he opened his eyes, he found his own face staring back at him, wide eyes full of terror. Radford struggled to his feet, movements sluggish, and lurched towards the bathroom. He crumpled over the sink as waves of nausea washed over him, retching, gagging, his hands shaking.

He drank water, his head bent right under the running tap, for once not even bothering with a glass, hoping that it would wash away the sickly sour taste in his mouth. It didn't really help.

Sleep did not come easily that night. And when he did fall asleep, his dreams were feverish and disturbed. He kept seeing the same face, a face that was scarred and unspeakably cruel.

Act III

Breakfast the next morning was subdued. Conversation came fitfully and ended abruptly, and the moaning gusts of wind and spasmodic showers of rain were not improving the general mood. The weather was continuing to deteriorate; there would be a storm coming later. Radford sipped his coffee listlessly, somehow feeling that his usual cocky attitude would be inappropriate. Which was annoying, because seriousness didn't particularly suit him.

The odd incident with the mirror somehow failed to be terrifying now that the night was over, he decided, like a frightening mask that looks garish and unconvincing when seen up close in broad daylight. It was just the shock of Sir James' death, along with fatigue and an overworked imagination. His mind was just playing tricks on him. It was embarrassing, really, that he'd let himself get so carried away and so shaken. Thank goodness he hadn't gone rambling about it to anyone like a complete fool. He'd just take it easy today, it would be fine. Or perhaps he'd dreamed the whole thing? Come to think of it, he had had so many nightmarish dreams last night... Yes, it must've been just

another dream, just realistic enough that he had convinced himself it was real. What else could it have been?

Melanie set her teacup down with a clatter, and everyone looked up as she pushed her chair back.

"This is ridiculous!" She snapped. "As if being stuck in this miserable castle wasn't awful enough already."

"It wasn't exactly Sir James' fault," Joe noted quietly, his face completely calm, but fingers tightening around his glass.

"Well I'm done. I'm done with this whole stupid mess, and I want to leave. I should've known better than to come in the first place."

"You can't leave until the end of the week anyway," Nicky objected reasonably. "As long as you're here, you may as well carry on acting."

Melanie snorted, flouncing away from the table without a response. Blake watched her leave, the dark eyes behind his glasses completely impassive.

"Nerves," he commented flatly.

"I knew we'd have bad luck," John muttered, staring down at his plate.

Nicky frowned. "What?"

"I told you. Saying the name of the play, it's bad luck."

The bulky man shot an accusing glance at Radford, who felt the blood rising to his face.

"Look here!" Radford snapped, "don't you come to me with more idiotic nonsense about curses and superstitious rubbish! You're really going to accuse me of being responsible for his heart attack now or something?"

"I told you, you shouldn't do it! What, you think it's a coincidence that the actor playing Duncan died like that, huh? Really?"

"Shut up, John," Radford started to get up, "Why don't you just..."

"Radford," Nicky warned. Joe sighed, rubbing his hand over his face.

"That's enough," Blake barked.

The two men stared at each other balefully. Blake got up, throwing his napkin down on the table.

"Tragic accidents happen. We'll just have to go on regardless. Filming starts in one hour."

And so Banquo must die, Radford thought, picturing John Bancroft in his mind. Even now, as he sat in the middle of the opulence of his regal feast, smiling, laughing, celebrating, the assassins he had hired were tracking down his old friend in the dark, sneaking up behind him in the night. It was a shame, of course, but that was life. Banquo was a menace, and one easily removed. One had to be realistic.

It felt good to lose himself in his character once more, to let his imagination eclipse reality for a little while.

He was satisfied. Satisfied and content. Killing Duncan had been so easy in the end, and all his fears had proved unfounded. His sense of guilt was slowly being strangled, the life being crushed out of it by ambition and...

...and fear. A fear of a different sort. Not of being punished for murder; there was no chance of *that*. But fear of losing this beautiful power. *To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus...* Had he gone to such pains to clear the way for Banquo's children? Oh, no. Most certainly not.

Radford smiled, taking a deep drink from his golden goblet. This was no problem at all. It would soon be remedied.

His wife sat next to him, so composed, so regal... The crown looked good on her. She was already perfect for the part, seeming welcoming and charming to all, and yet holding herself aloof. Strong and ruthless... His perfect queen.

Radford twirled his cup dispassionately in his hand, seeing his own reflection in the polished surface, dark hair circled with his own crown. Suddenly, he froze, hand faltering. The face beneath the crown had a scar running down it. He looked up sharply, and dropped the cup, wine staining the white tablecloth.

It was certainly Banquo; his broad, honest face, square shoulders... But his shirt was a mess of ripped skin and clotted blood, his throat sliced open, and his eyes stared wide and lifeless.

It can't be him! He's dead! They told me, Banquo is dead...

No, no, that's not really Banquo. That's John. John isn't dead. He's...

HE'S DEAD. I KILLED HIM. HE CAN'T BE HERE.

Radford opened his mouth. He wanted to scream, to sob, to ask if he was going mad. His voice came out hoarse and distant, seeming almost to belong to someone else.

"Which of you have done this?"

Lady Macbeth glared at him, shocked and embarrassed, willing him to control himself. She turned to the assembled nobles, smiling sweetly, with a gesture that seemed to ask for amused indulgence.

"Sit, worthy friends: my lord is often thus, and hath been from his youth. The fit is momentary: upon a thought, he will again be well. "

She leaned towards him, her face pleasant and composed. Her whisper was pure poison.

"Are you a man? This is the very painting of your fear..."

Radford fought back a hysterical laugh. *Banquo's there, love. Can't you see him? He's dripping blood all over the floor.*

Lady Macbeth took his face firmly between her hands, digging her fingertips into the soft flesh on his cheeks, forcing him to look at her.

"Shame itself! Why do you make such faces? When all's done, you look but on a stool."

No, no, it's John. I'm not really Macbeth. I'm Radford. It's just John in makeup, you moron. Of course it is. Get yourself under control.

He looked back up, and John was gone. Radford exhaled inwardly, feeling stupid.

"I do forget!" He laughed blithely, glad he had managed not to interrupt the play, "do not muse at me, my most worthy friends; I have a strange infirmity."

A serving boy brought him another cup full of wine, and he put it to his mouth, throwing his head back, letting the rich drink flow down his throat. He still had a mouthful of wine when he brought his head back forward, and he choked on it. Banquo was standing right in front of his table, about an armlength away.

"Quit my sight!" He roared, coughing and spitting, "Thy blood is cold! Unreal mockery, hence!"

"Good night: stand not upon the order of your going, but go at once," his wife snapped at the gaping nobles, all semblance of composure vanishing. The guests were only too happy to obey.

Radford leaned against the table, face buried in his hands, breathing heavily.

"Alright, cut!"

Blake took off his glasses, for once seeming almost impressed. Nicky put her hand on Radford's shoulder, grinning.

"Hey, that was amazing! I've never seen anyone look so genuinely terrified."

Radford smiled, glad he had managed to hide the fact that for a second there, he had actually thought that he was Macbeth, seeing a ghost. Heavens, that would have been awkward... Maybe all this method acting was messing with him after all.

"Mr. Blake! Mr. Blake..."

One of the younger helpers ran in, his face a convulsing mask of shock, horror, and disgust. Blake frowned,

"What is it now?"

"It's...it's John."

The boy suddenly doubled over, throwing up over the floor, his shoulders shaking. Radford felt a chilling terror creeping up his spine. He knew that John was dead before the boy even said it. Found stabbed, his shirt a mess of ripped skin and clotted blood, his throat sliced open.

Afterwards, just to make sure, he quietly asked the others when they had last seen the man. No one had seen him since hours before the filming of the banquet scene.

Radford closed the door to his room, his hand shaking.

I'm safe from Banquo here.

No, that's not Banquo! That's John. John Bancroft.

But who else could steal my crown? How many other people might be plotting behind my back?

No, I'm not Macbeth, I'm Radford. I am not going mad.

From where he stood, he could see the room reflected in the mirror. A tall man stood, leaning casually by the door. A tall man, in his clothes, but not with his face. A tall man wearing a crown.

Radford walked slowly towards the mirror, and the other man did as well, his movements sure and almost lazy. He sat down on his chair at the same time as Radford did on his. Radford closed his eyes, willing himself to breathe.

This is not real. None of this is real. I am not going mad.

He opened his eyes, and found the reflection of him that was not him gazing back, bored.

Radford fought back a surge of panic, closing his eyes again.

Please, go away. Please, please... This is not real. This can't be real...

He opened his eyes again, and with a resigned sense of horror found a stranger's face meeting his eye. As Radford stared at him, he slowly raised up his hand, and tapped gently on his side of the glass.

Radford got up, his feet unsteady, his mind thick and blurred. *I can't do this on my own... I need help... I need someone... I need...*

I need to protect my crown.

"So, let me get this straight," Nicky frowned, eyeing Radford with disbelief, "you think that you're, what, turning into Macbeth?"

"I don't know," Radford moaned. Put like that, it sounded ridiculous. Insane. "It's just that...I keep seeing things. And it's like what I do when I'm acting, except I can't control it."

"Radford," Nicky was obviously struggling to keep her patience, and to not tell him that he was losing his mind. "You are making no sense. What does that have to do with the deaths?"

Ah, always so sensible. So rational. This is why I married you.

SHUT UP. Radford groaned, trying to expel the foreign thoughts flocking into his brain.

"Don't you see? The play is acting itself out. The story is repeating itself..." For the second time that day, Radford fought back a laugh. "This whole castle is a stage, and we are but players."

The witches do not lie. All they have said will come to pass...

"Well, that's easily stopped. The play won't go on after this. That'll stop all of this, right?"

You can't control everything, my dear. We can't control everything. Much as we would like to.

She was humoring him. And she clearly thought he was mad. He couldn't exactly blame her.

"We should all leave," he muttered to himself.

Leave? Hah! Let cowards flee. I'll be damned if I'm the first to cry 'hold, enough!'

"You know we can't leave. Not in this weather. Going out in that storm on foot would be suicidal, and the cars won't be here until the end of the week."

"Yeah. I know."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a scarred face grinning at him from Nicky's mirror.

Radford lay on his bed, hearing the rain drumming persistently against his window. Breathing. In and out. In and out. Nicky was right. The play was over, they'd all leave in a few days.

Beware Macduff.

Radford gritted his teeth, remembering a disembodied head, rising out of a cauldron. He tried to force the image back, stifle it, push it away.

You're not remembering this. You can't remember something you never saw.

Beware the thane of Fife.

Now Macduff... Yes, Macduff could be dangerous. He could picture his face; the too-blue eyes, the long nose... He hated him. And then there was the warning of the witches, and the witches never lied. Radford lay on his bed, tears streaking down his cheeks, as he felt a menacing smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

From this moment, the firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand.

He had no pity. He had no mercy. He wanted none.

"Give to the edge of the sword," he found himself whispering, "his wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls that trace him in his line."

Radford managed to force out a sob, and he thought he could hear Melanie's voice in his head, shouting "murder!"

They found Melanie in her room the next day. She'd locked herself in, so they'd had to break the door down. The door and all the windows had been closed from the inside. There was no sign of a struggle, or of the weapon used.

Radford was just glad that the death looked clean and quick. She was in her nightdress, with no makeup on, and looked oddly childlike and peaceful. If it weren't for the deep, red gash in her chest, she could've been sleeping. Her blond hair was pooled under her head. She was young, and beautiful, and so fragile.

Radford sunk down, leaning on the back of his chair, silently shaking with voiceless howls. Young, beautiful, insufferable Melanie.

He looked up at his mirror, feeling a surge of rage and loathing boiling up inside him. The scarred man stared back at him, as usual. Blindly, Radford groped around, grabbing the first thing he could lay his hand on. It was a heavy paperweight. He roared, an animalistic sound of fury, smashing the paperweight into the mirror again and again and again. The glass shattered, shards flying everywhere, cracks slicing through the smooth surface. Radford stopped, his hands trembling, staring at what he had done. In the broken mirror, split into a thousand pieces, he could vaguely make out the outline of a man in a crown.

Act IV

Radford stood in the hallway, shivering. What time was it? He couldn't tell. Well after midnight. Here, alone, in the night, his hair should have been crawling, and he should've wanted to run back to the comfort of his well-lit room, like he had so many

times as a child when he had been scared of the dark. But oddly enough, he found the dark far preferable to the prospect of spending the night in the room with the mutilated mirror.

And he had to know. He couldn't lie there, feeling the seconds slipping away, wondering, waiting... He had to know. And so he stood there, shivering, bare feet growing numb on the cold floor, until finally, he saw Nicky's door swing open.

She stumbled out, her footing unsure, and he fought back an urge to catch her. She was wrapped in a white dressing gown, her hair loose and slightly tousled. Lady Macbeth stared at her hands, murmuring frantically to herself;

"What, will these hands never be clean? Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? Here's the smell of blood still..."

She moaned, tripping and falling to her knees. Radford thought she'd wake up, but instead she curled up with her back to one of the walls, hugging her knees. She seemed very small. She half giggled, half sobbed,

"The thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now? Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave..."

And then she started crying; quiet, fearful, pitiful gasps, her head cradled in her arms.

"Hell is murky. What's done cannot be undone. What's done cannot be undone..."

Radford sat down next to her, then, putting her arms around her shaking frame, holding her to him as she gasped and struggled for air. Somehow, he knew then what would happen. His wife -- no, not his wife, *Nicky* -- put an arm around him, clawing

feebly at his back, her breath growing shallower. He sat there with her, he didn't know how long, hearing her painful, wheezing breath growing fainter. He continued to sit there for quite some time, even after the only breathing he could hear was his own.

"She should've died hereafter," he breathed, "there would have been a time for such a word. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time..."

I loved her.

And with that thought, suddenly something inside him broke, and he cradled her head, rocking back and forth.

"Out," he spat, "out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying *nothing*."

All he felt was pain. Pain and grief. Grief for his wife, grief for Nicky, both and neither. They blended together, and he didn't care enough to distinguish between the two.

Radford carried Nicky's body back into her room, eyes raw and face swollen. He laid her down gentle on her bed, reaching over to close her eyes. His jaw clenched, as he turned towards her mirror, glaring at the figure standing on the other side.

I will kill you.

He closed his eyes, focusing on his heartbeat, trying to focus his anger.

I will not let you take over. I am in control. This is my mind, my body. You cannot come in.

Slowly, he lifted his head, daring the creature to meet his eyes, and his heart almost stopped.

The mirror was empty.

It reflected the room, and Nicky's cold body lying on the bed, but neither Radford's reflection nor the scarred man were there.

He didn't know how to react. He was still trying to make sense of what had happened, when Joe burst into the room. The other actor paused, taking in Nicky's body, and then turned towards Radford, death in his eyes.

"This is your fault, Dunn. This is all your fault."

"No, wait, Joe, you don't understand..."

"Oh, I understand perfectly! She told me. She told me everything you told her. So that's your game, is it, you psychopath? To reenact Macbeth? You're insane! You're utterly insane!"

Joe tackled him, bringing him to the ground, smashing his fists into his face and chest at random. Radford felt his nose crack as his face exploded in pain. He kicked, desperately throwing his weight against Joe's, pushing him off, desperately punching. His fist made contact with Joe's throat and Joe made a garbled choking sound. He was only distracted for a second, but that was enough. Radford threw him off, and ran.

Radford thundered down the stairs, hearing Joe swearing and crashing along behind him. He ducked into the first room he saw, which happened to be the green room. Desperately, he tried to find somewhere to hide, but at that moment something crashed into him from behind. He fell down again, a sharp blast of pain jolting up from his knees and driving his breath out.

Radford struggled to get up, but he was down on his back, and Joe was sitting on his chest.

"Joe," he gasped, "Joe please..."

But Joe had his hands around his neck, and was squeezing, crushing his throat. Radford couldn't breathe. Tried to peel the fingers away but he couldn't. He couldn't breathe. He thought he could hear someone yelling in the background. His vision was going black, and he felt a moment of utter, all-consuming, mad panic.

I'm going to die.

His mind was a searing ball of agony. But he still felt a few little thoughts creep in, tickling his subconscious, scattered and chaotic.

None of woman born can harm Macbeth.

Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped...

But was Joe? Was Joe of woman born?

I don't want to die...

I DON'T WANT TO DIE.

Radford was never quite sure what happened then. It was all over in an instant. Joe's fingers seemed to slip, and if his skin were slippery with oil. Radford floundered

around, looking for something, anything. His fingers curled around one of the rubber swords, and he grabbed it, battering Joe with it, trying to get him off. Joe fell back with a strangled cry, blood seeping out of wide slashes in his shirt, slashes that seemed to be made with a long blade. Radford stared down at the blood pooling on the floor and the rubber sword in his hands, panting, shaking, his head still reeling. The sword was blunt and pliable. It shouldn't have been possible. But then again, Sir James' death shouldn't have been possible, either. Or John's. Or Melanie's. Or Nicky's. None of this should have been possible.

Blake ran up, his face an uncontrollable series of grimaces and scowls. He grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him.

"Radford! Radford, are you alright? I thought that lunatic was going to murder you!"

Radford nodded, not certain he could manage to speak quite yet.

"I'm fine," he croaked. "I'm going to be fine."

Thinking hurt. Quite frankly, he could do without it for now. But still, some part of his mind struggled on, half-wrecked but somehow staying afloat.

The play re-wrote itself. Joe was Macduff, but he couldn't kill Macbeth... No man of woman born shall harm Macbeth... And so Macbeth won that final battle.

Radford struggled to his feet, taking deep breaths, and looked into one of the mirrors, a smile spreading across his face. He saw a painfully familiar face staring back. Young, tired, with a bloody nose and quite a few bruises, and dark circles under his eyes, but with no scars. No crown.

It was finally over.

Epilogue

Radford rarely ever speaks of that week, nor of what followed. There were the few surreal days spent in the lonely castle, the living sharing one roof with the dead and attempting to forget. But one can't ever forget, not really. And then there were questions and investigations that were eventually dropped, the whole thing explained away as a series of bizarre accidents and unsolved murders. But Radford knows better, even if he tells no one. Who would believe him? So whenever anyone does mention that week, he prefers to smile nonchalantly, and change the subject. But that is not to say he does not remember.

He continues to live in his rather expensive flat in London. If anything, the cursed production of Macbeth served as an odd sort of publicity, and his career is going smoothly. His life has practically returned to normal.

Even when it comes to his reflections in mirrors, he almost never sees anything out of the ordinary.

Almost. Occasionally, on days when the walls between the worlds grow thin, and rocks and the wind seem to whisper in the fading twilight, he will look into a mirror and see a frightened, young actor staring back, knocking forlornly on the other side of the glass.

On those days, he smiles. A cruel smile, cruel because he knows. Knows just what it's like to be stuck on the other side, and remembers just how desperate he was to get back out.

Good thing Radford was kind enough to call him. And let him in at that last moment. Funny, what fear of death could do to a man. After that girl had died, it had looked like Radford might actually have had the strength to shut him out. But he had wondered if the temptation of taking advantage of his charmed life would be too much for Radford, in the end. He had hoped it would be. It had been.

After all, only Macbeth was immune to any man not born of woman.

He takes to heart the whispers of the rain and the storms. He pauses, sometimes, listening to their voices.

Be bloody, bold and resolute. Laugh to scorn the power of man. For none of woman born shall harm Macbeth.

He really is quite grateful to the boy. Of the things that live on the other side...well, not many are fortunate enough to slip through the cracks. He has no intention of going back there anytime soon.