

The Conquest of a Vagabond

By Samuel Bushra

Once upon a time, there were three friends, whose names were Bradford, Marshall, and William. These three lived in a small, rural city that attracted little attention in the scheme of the world, its wars, and its technological developments. In addition, it is geographically excluded from the rest of society. Brad, Marshall, and William had all found each other when roaming the streets in search of food. Not one of them remembered a time when they had parents—they were wandering the streets of the city for as long as they could remember.

This excluded city, though small, was not without its troubles. Its largest trouble was the king. This king was unjust, selfish, and loved the thought of exploiting his citizens for his pleasure or purposes. Whenever a dangerous and impossible problem arose, the king would always offer the person who solved the problem his daughter in marriage. Many strong brave men died trying to defeat armies, quench fires, and complete other impossible tasks usually formed by the king himself. The king set his own army to fight his citizens for the joy of bloodshed and lit structures on fire for the fun of watching flames and hearing screams from his palace balcony. Nearly a decade ago, the queen turned her back on her husband and started fighting for the rights of the people. Not to the surprise of anyone, the queen disappeared soon after.

But of course, no curious daughter would be oblivious of such tragedies. One day, she asked the king, “Father, why do you let loose your army and light fires?”

The king, who excluded his daughter from any outside contact, lied. “My dear,” he said, “you must understand that the region I rule is most rebellious and troublesome, and there is not one good man in the entire city.”

“Not one?” asked the princess sadly (for she had always dreamed of marrying one day).

“No...not one. But do not worry, I will keep you safe,” replied the king.

Thus the king had tricked his daughter into believing his lies, and he continued in his torturous and wicked schemes.

After decades of king-created problems, the little country had its first, real, problem arise. Nearly seven kilometers from the south border, there stands a thick forest, which is typically used for hunting. However, hunters started to disappear. The wicked king gleefully took this opportunity to cause more death, and as usual, made his oblivious yet beautiful daughter the reward. Bradford, Marshall, and William decided to attempt this dangerous mission, as they all agreed that their lives were uneventful and useless. As the trio had little, there was not much preparation. They left with little food, because they were counting on hunting

there for food as well. Bradford had a bow and arrow, Marshall had a knife, and William had an old axe. With these, they began to travel south.

Almost everything was as predicted: the great trees with their massive trunks, the thick vines, and a small hunting path through the center. But there was an eerie silence—no animals moving, no birds singing, not even the gnats that typically swarm at morning time. Scared and confused, the boys stopped short, a few meters in the woods. Bradford suggested that they should ration the little food they had and continue on, which they all agreed to.

The trio continued on for many, tired, and silent kilometers. It reached evening time, and Bradford set to lighting a fire while William and Marshall gathered poles to make some sort of shelter. It was nighttime before anyone entered the makeshift shelter. They slept peacefully, except for Brad, who decided that he would rather have a boring life than die in a trap. He quietly slipped away into the darkness, leaving his friends, and most importantly, the fire.

In the middle of the night Marshall and William woke up to a piercing shriek. The fire was almost extinguished, it was cold, and Bradford was gone. Both friends looked at each other with wide eyes in the dim light of the remaining coals. Neither could fall back asleep, so they both sat up with their weapons at hand. Other than the disappearance of Bradford, nothing else occurred that night. At dawn, William and Marshall began running to the heart of the wood. They might have thought they were going in circles as the trees all looked the same, with the same vines, except for the fact that the trail never turned. Hours of this running went on and finally, the two boys reached a clearing. In the center of the clearing was a ruined castle outpost, which seemed to be abandoned for years. As it was getting late, the boys decided this would be a good place to set up camp and have a little to eat before continuing on. William took the lead, and opened the creaking wooden door but stopped short. He looked back at Marshall and ran back to the trail. Marshall called his name, but William would not listen.

Then came the beast sprinting faster than a cheetah towards William. It's grey, almost wolverine features made it look intimidating, but it was deformed, and had a flat face—not a pointy nose like any normal wolf. Marshall quickly stepped inside the old outpost and saw what made William flee. There they were, thousands of bones of deer, birds, fish, and man alike. Then came the shriek. Marshall knew he had little time to escape the creature. He ran up to the stairway to peer down as to what happened next.

The monster took William dead, and now destroyed body, and began to devour it. Marshall had seen enough; he quietly moved his way up the stairs to the very top, where he entered another empty room where he waited for the creature

to come up. With his knife poised, Marshall stood against the inner wall of the empty room. He waited...and waited.

Hours seemed to have passed, Marshall's heartbeat getting faster every second, until he heard the sound of claws scraping against stone. Marshall stopped breathing—he knew that any noise would alert the monster. The beast, having just eaten a full human, slowly lumbered up the stairs, and entered into the room where Marshall stood waiting. Its twisted grey back entered into view. Marshall stood frozen at his hideous features for a second, then slashed its neck. He had done it. The beast lay dead. Marshall leaned back against the wall, exhausted and hungry. But he had done it.

Marshall went back dragging the dead thing behind him in old curtains he found in the outpost. The townspeople received him with great joy. When he reported to the king and showed him that he had indeed accomplished the task, the king was so terribly frightened that he died of a heart attack. Thus, Marshall married the princess and became the next king, and ruled the now happy, peaceful, little city.