



A Poisoned Sword

Jack thrust the rapier forward. Angus jumped back, but this time he was not quick enough. The blade pierced his flesh, and an ominous red patch appeared on his white shirt. Angus glanced down at the wound and looked back at his opponent with an expression of rage on his face. A frisson of excitement rippled through the crowd. The contest was proving better than they could have possibly wished. Jack was exhilarated—a final blow and it would all be over.

But his confidence was short-lived. The strike had found its mark but had also unbalanced him momentarily, and Angus came back with a violent counterthrust. His blade flashed through the air and caught Jack in the ribs. There was a gasp from the crowd. The foil was so sharp that Jack scarcely felt it. But in only a few seconds his own blade felt much heavier in his hand, and his breathing quickened. Sensing his chance, Angus darted forward once more, his sword aimed at Jack's chest. This time Jack spotted the move and swayed to one side. Angus's forward momentum presented Jack with an opportunity. He grabbed his opponent by the arm and heaved him onward while simultaneously thrusting out his leg. Angus tripped over Jack's extended leg and spun through the air, landing with a crunching thud, his sword spinning from his hand. Jack pounced on him and they became locked in a deadly struggle. But he should have known better than to take on Angus in a wrestling match. Angus was much stronger and soon had Jack pinned on his back beneath him. Angus grasped Jack's sword hand and banged it hard on the ground until Jack relinquished his grip. Angus lowered his face toward Jack's and sneered.

"You will die."

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Jack was nailed to the ground. He was wounded, and he had no weapon. Angus's massive bulk was pressing down on him. But it wasn't over yet. He gritted his teeth and with a superhuman effort jerked his knee upward into Angus's crotch. Angus wailed in pain, and Jack seized the moment to wriggle free. He snatched up a sword and wheeled around. The sword felt different—heavier and unbalanced—but it didn't matter now. Angus jumped back to his feet and grabbed the other sword, and the two of them circled each other, panting like wounded animals. The crowd jeered. Jack's remaining energy was melting away—he knew he only had seconds left. There was blood all over the floor and Angus slipped. He was only distracted for a moment, but it was enough. Jack leaped forward to land a second, and this time fatal, blow. Angus screamed as blood from a second wound spurted from his chest. He dropped to one knee and looked up at Jack with an unexpected expression—almost apologetic.

"The poison . . . I have been killed by my own treachery," he stammered.

Jack glanced down at the sword that dangled loosely from his hand—and suddenly he understood. He had snatched up Angus's sword, which must have been dipped in poison before the contest. Jack had already been injured with the same sword, which meant that in less than a minute, both of them would be dead.

But there was still time to see to unfinished business. Jack knew what he had to do.

Clutching his chest to stem the bleeding, he staggered across to where his uncle sat cowering behind the long banqueting table. The food and drink was laid out—still untouched. Jack mounted the table and fixed his eyes menacingly on his uncle, who sank back into his chair, shaking. There was to be no mercy, and Jack did not hesitate. He thrust the sword into his uncle's heart.



Words, Words, Words

Miss Beattie scurried onto the stage. “Well done, everyone! Lights!”

There was a spontaneous round of applause from the cast and crew. Nothing was being left to chance. The week before, Miss Beattie had even arranged for a special fight choreographer to come in and help them with the sword fight between Hamlet and Laertes in the last scene. It was all perfectly safe, of course, and the flashing swords reassuringly blunt, but there was always tension in the air during the famous scene, and everyone stopped what they were doing to watch. And today, with Angus a reluctant and unrehearsed stand-in for Laertes (who was sick), who knows what might have happened.

“That’s all coming together quite well.” Miss Beattie was pleased with the progress. “Only two weeks to go now. . . .”

Jack looked down at Tommy McGough from his position still perched upon the table. Tommy was playing Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle, and he nervously opened one eye.

“Did I survive?”

“Looks like it,” Jack said. “Don’t know how you get away with it. Every rehearsal I somehow manage to miss.”

“Dangerous business, this Shakespeare stuff . . .”

Angus bounded over from center stage, flushed with excitement from the sword fight with Jack.

“That was awesome.”

“Told you.”

Miss Beattie removed the pouch of stage blood from under Angus’s shirt, which was almost completely red.

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“What a mess,” the English teacher fussed.

Angus grinned. “I thought I would go for Hamlet-meets-Terminator. . . . Everyone likes a bit of blood, don’t they?”

Without looking up, she replied, “Actually, you’re right. When they did these plays in the old days they wouldn’t have skimped on the blood . . . used goat’s blood, probably. The audiences loved gore. There’s even a story of actors using a real musket in one production. It went off, and someone in the audience got his head blown off by mistake.”

Miss Beattie was always saying stuff like this. It was one reason why drama was popular at their school—and successful. The whole town of Soonhope would likely turn up for the end-of-term performances of *Hamlet*.

“Is that true, Miss Beattie?”

“Apparently. They just dragged the body out. The next day, they were on again. They weren’t too concerned about gun control in the sixteenth century, but I doubt they used the musket.”

“I could get into that,” Angus said.

Jack elbowed him. “See—I told you it was worth coming.”

“Well—the fighting was good fun, but I couldn’t stand Shakespeare for too long—you know, all those . . . words.”

Miss Beattie looked up at Angus with a steely eye. Her good humor evaporated and a shadow passed over her face. Although at nearly six feet Angus towered over her, it was as if he physically shrank by a good six inches when he saw her expression.

“You’ve done it now . . .” Jack murmured and glanced sidelong at Tommy, who returned the look, grimacing.

“Words!” Miss Beattie rolled the *r* in her strong Scottish brogue. “WORRRDS!” She yelled again louder—and it came from her lips like a dart from a blowpipe. “Is that all you have to say on the matter—WORRRDS?”

Everyone around the stage stopped what they were doing and turned toward them. Miss Beattie, for all her boundless enthusiasm, was also prone to dramatic changes in mood. As a result, Angus was about to receive what was popularly termed by the pupils of Soonhope High School as a Beattie Beating. It was never pleasant.

Words, Words, Words

“But, Miss . . .” Angus bravely tried to stand his ground, but it was too late. It was if he had inadvertently triggered a small thermo-nuclear device.

“I’ll tell you this—laddie—not any old words . . . nearly one million words in forty plays and more than one hundred and fifty four sonnets and poems . . . and not just any old plays and sonnets, but the most sublime writing the world has ever read—even after four hundred years. Words? Shakespeare invented them. Lots of them: *critical, frugal, dwindle, extract, zany, leapfrog, vast, hereditary, excellent, eventful, lonely* . . . and phrases, new phrases like: *vanish into thin air, brave new world, fool’s paradise, sea change, sorry sight, in a pickle, budge an inch, cold comfort, flesh and blood, foul play, bated breath, cruel to be kind, fair play, green-eyed monster* . . .” She paused only to take a deep breath. Then she was off again. “These are WORDS and phrases that have been used so much, they have become clichés. . . . They are words and phrases that I use—God help us—even *you* use—Shakespeare was the world’s greatest writer and helped define the world’s richest language—the English language—*your* language—and so gave us the very tools to think and feel. He gave us the *essence of humanity*. Do you get it? Do you understand? So please don’t talk to me about WORRRDS!”

There was stunned silence around the stage as everyone wondered if there might be more—whether this was to be a tactical nuclear strike—or the full-blown strategic version that would take out the whole of Soonhope. Thankfully, the color in Miss Beattie’s cheeks normalized from a deep purple to its more usual pink hue. Nevertheless, Angus continued to stare at a spot on the end of one of his shoes for a full ten seconds before he finally mumbled, “Yes, Miss. Sorry, Miss.”

Miss Beattie gave a final sigh of indignation and said, “That’s all right, Mr. Jud.” She looked around and clapped her hands. “Now everyone—let’s get this cleaned up—it’s almost four o’clock.”

But something that Miss Beattie had said stuck in Jack’s mind and as he and Tommy put away the props, his curiosity overcame his fear.

“Sorry, Miss—did you say a *million* words? I mean, written by one man—Shakespeare?”



*The auburn-haired Queen Elizabeth I
in "The Armada Portrait"*

"Yes, Jack, I think that's about right."

"But it just sounds like an awful lot for one man to do . . ."

"It is. There are lots of theories—generally rubbish—that he did not actually write his material, but that others did. Shakespeare lived during the English Renaissance—it was a boom time for plays and playwrights and art and artists generally. More than fifty candidates have been suggested as the 'real' Shakespeare—people like Christopher Marlowe."

"Who?"

Miss Beattie was overseeing the flow of props back into the cupboard, "No, Tommy, put the swords *properly* into the sword cart, or they'll get damaged." She looked back at Jack. "Sorry, Jack—what was that?"

"Marlowe—was he like Shakespeare, then?"

"He influenced Shakespeare, but he died before Shakespeare really got going, in 1593, I think, when he was only twenty-nine. He was murdered. He was a spy."

"A writer and a spy?"

"Yes, maybe even a double agent. I know it sounds odd, but there were quite a few writers that were, at the time. They often studied at Oxford or Cambridge—although actually Shakespeare didn't—and the universities were hotbeds of radicalism."

"What do you mean?"

She sighed. "You're insatiable, Jack." She turned to lock the cupboard and then looked at him sympathetically. "Look—we don't really have time to go into the whole of sixteenth-century politics right now . . . but for our next lesson—maybe we'll do it in more detail." She thought for a minute. "Tell you what, come over here . . ." She scurried over to her things at the side of the stage and pulled out a large book.

"There you go, that should get you started." She handed the tome over to Jack. It was entitled, simply, *Elizabeth I*. On the front there was the famous Armada portrait of the auburn-haired queen in an elaborately decorated dress covered in jewels, with one hand draped over a globe and pointing to Virginia, England's first colony in the New

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World. Behind the queen, the Spanish Armada could be seen—sailing to its doom.

“Knowing you, Jack, you should be able to finish that off in a couple of hours. It’s all there. And it’s not just about Shakespeare and Marlowe, you know. It was a period of deep religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants—a struggle for the very soul of man. And this religious conflict was intertwined with the political struggles between countries. Spain was the global superpower but when England defeated the Spanish Armada, that all started to change. If it hadn’t been for that, we might be living in a Catholic country today and speaking Spanish—and so might most of the world. We would probably be having tapas for school dinners.” Miss Beattie stopped. “There I go again . . . prattling away . . .” She tapped the book. “Anyway, I’ll leave it with you.”

Jack leafed through the book.

“Who’s that?” He pointed to a picture of a confident young man in flashy Elizabethan clothes.

“That’s the man—Marlowe—only portrait of him—only twenty-one and dressed up to the nines.”

“What does that mean?” Jack pointed to some Latin words on top of the picture.

Miss Beattie laughed. “‘What feeds me destroys me’—apparently. Just about sums Marlowe up—he was, how shall I put it, on the edge.”

Jack didn’t really understand what the words meant, but was already leafing through the rest of the book. There were pictures of ships: great Spanish galleons stuffed with treasure from the New World, terrifying fire ships let loose by the English on the anchored Spanish fleet off Calais, the de-masted *Revenge* in the Azores, where, in a fit of macho bravado, Sir Richard Grenville took on twelve great Spanish galleons alone—only to die. There were extraordinarily beautiful buildings, soaring edifices of glass and stone—a far cry from the brutal castles of the Middle Ages. Then there were the people: kings and queens, princes, players, and poets. As Jack leafed through the volume, he noticed a small illustration on the bottom of one of the pages. The caption read: *Elizabethan Troupe*. It was a color plate of a



Christopher Marlowe
"What feeds me destroys me."

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group of actors in various costumes. There was one dressed as a court jester and next to him, in stark contrast, another dressed as a priest, or more like a monk. There was a third who looked slightly more important—a country gentleman with a fine cloak and a neat, pointed beard.

“Head in a book again?” Angus leaned over Jack’s shoulder. It looked like everyone else had left. “Do you want to get something at Gino’s?”

Jack snapped the book shut.

“Why not?” He stuffed the book in his bag.

“Well, stop reading and let’s go!”



Gino's

Jack sat behind Angus on his motorbike. He was nervous. Usually trips on the back of Angus's bike did not go well. Angus was seventeen now and had his license. His old two-stroke Husqvarna had been left at his family's place up in Rachan, and he had taken to riding one of the farm's more powerful four-stroke Yamaha 250Fs. When he could afford the gas he took it to school—avoiding the one-hour bus journey that picked its way painfully through Soonhope Valley.

Angus turned back the throttle and the engine wailed; he dropped the clutch and they set off. Thankfully, Angus avoided the obligatory wheelie, which he usually performed just to frighten Jack. Soon they reached the bridge over the river, which was quite low from a dry spell. The big Presbyterian church at the head of High Street loomed ahead of them, and Jack remembered what Miss Beattie had been saying about the “struggle for men's souls.” Even in Soonhope, with less than two thousand inhabitants, he knew of at least five churches, all of different denominations. It occurred to Jack that he hadn't actually been inside any of them, and he wasn't sure how many of the local population had either.

High Street was busy but Angus managed to squeeze the bike right in front of Gino's, and as they went in, the welcoming smell of coffee and ice cream wafted over them. Gino was manning the espresso machine while Francesca, his daughter, polished glasses grumpily. Gino was as jolly as ever.

“What can I get you?”

“Hi, Gino.” Angus looked up at the endless menu of drinks and snacks above the counter. But he already knew what he wanted. “I'll have the double Gino-chino, extra shot, full fat, with caramel and extra whipped cream . . . and don't forget the cherry.” He looked over at

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Francesca and winked provocatively, adding in a deep voice, “Shaken . . . not stirred.” Francesca rolled her eyes and tutted loudly.

“You have no chance there. Turinelli family outta your league, son.”

Angus shrugged. “Oh well—just give me four grilled cheeses.”

“Cutting back?” Jack asked.

“Not exactly. We’re playing Melrose tomorrow—last game of the season. If we win—we win the league. Need to bulk up.”

“And Jack, my friend, what are you having?”

“Thanks, Gino; what the hell, I’ll go for a Gino-chino as well—but without the bells and whistles, and make it just one grilled cheese . . . but don’t tell Mom.”

“It’s coming. . . . Take a seat, boys.”

Gino had recently tried to convert his popular Italian bistro into a greasy spoon diner—he had even gotten himself a jukebox (which didn’t work). It had been a brave attempt, but somehow it all looked a bit out of place on High Street of traditional Soonhope. Jack and Angus settled into one of the booths and soon, in hushed tones, they were discussing their favorite subject.

“Do you think we did the right thing?”

It was Angus’s favorite question, and Jack replied with his usual answer.

“Yes—we did the right thing. I’m sure of it. The computer simulations that Dad and Pendelshape created to model the changes they wanted to make in history were good, sure, but you could never be certain that by going back in time you might not do something that would have unforeseen consequences for the future. That’s the risk. That’s the whole reason that VIGIL was set up. And that’s why we sided with them in the end.”

“I guess. It’s too bad, though.”

“Why?”

“Well, I know going back to 1914 . . . well, it was dangerous and stuff, and a lot of bad things happened . . .”

“Yes, Angus,” Jack said slowly, making sure the point sank in, “that’s why nobody wants to do it again. Time travel, and especially using the Taurus to make changes to history . . . It’s a bad idea.

Remember your Great-Grandfather Ludwig in the trenches? If that bayonet had been a few inches to the right, he may have died, and you wouldn't be here."

"I know, but"—Angus grinned—"you've got to admit, it was pretty exciting."

Jack shook his head. "Sometimes I wonder about you. We can say that sitting here now. But it didn't feel like that to me at the time. We were lucky to get away with our lives. Meddling in time should be avoided. VIGIL and their leaders—the Rector, Counselor Inchquin, all of them—they're trying to do the right thing. Dad and Pendelshape, the Revisionists, for all their brains and good intentions, are just plain wrong. We're on the side of VIGIL now."

Angus shrugged.

Gino ambled over to their booth. "Two Gino-chinos, one grilled cheese for you and . . . four for you."

"Great, Gino. Thanks a lot."

Jack looked at Angus's plate. "You're not seriously going to eat all that, are you?"

"I don't really want to. I'm doing it more out of a sense of duty to the team," Angus replied regretfully—as if he were making some terrible sacrifice. He opened one of the sandwiches and poured salt, vinegar, and ketchup onto the cheese inside before quickly resealing the bread. He then took a large bite, and the contents leaked out from each side.

"Gross."

"Actually, very tasty," Angus replied, his mouth full. It didn't stop him from continuing their conversation.

"But what about your dad? Don't you feel bad about him? If VIGIL ever gets hold of him, they'll kill him for sure."

Angus was never one for subtlety, and Jack grimaced. "Thanks for reminding me." There was an awkward silence, and then Jack shrugged. "I try not to think about it." He swallowed. "And I don't know, maybe one day there will be a way . . . a way that VIGIL and Dad can be reconciled." He looked down at his plate. "Maybe then Mom and Dad could even get back together."

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Angus swallowed and took a swig of his Gino-chino. “Sorry, Jackster—didn’t mean to”—he shrugged—“Well, you know.”

“It’s all right. Anyway, we’re fully signed-up members of VIGIL now. Don’t forget what that means.”

Angus wiped his mouth, and his eyes lit up. “How could I forget?”

Jack remembered the VIGIL inauguration ceremony that he and Angus had participated in after they had returned from Sarajevo. As things settled down, they learned that VIGIL’s role was not only to be ready to counteract any attempts by the Revisionists to meddle in history, but also to identify and train promising students and enroll them in VIGIL. This was one reason for secreting the Taurus complex and VIGIL headquarters in an ordinary school: it was easy to identify potential candidates. In this way, VIGIL would ensure the continuation of the VIGIL cause from one generation to the next and ensure the future safety of mankind. This was critical, particularly while the Revisionist threat was still alive. Jack’s and Angus’s experiences in 1914 had made them instant VIGIL veterans and obvious candidates for enrollment.

Jack’s cell phone went off and he pulled it from his pocket. “Text from Mom probably—wondering where I am . . .”

Angus returned to his second sandwich.

Jack peered at the screen. “Don’t recognize that number . . .” He read the message. “Funny.” Jack’s brow furrowed. “What do you think of this?”

“Of what?”

Jack read the text aloud: “‘Jack, meet at old lookout. Very urgent. Come now.’ What can that mean?”

“You’ve got an admirer—finally.”

“Funny.”

“The old lookout—that’s the fire tower, isn’t it; you know, top of Glentress? We used to go up there on the bike.”

“Yeah, but who’s this from? There’s no name . . .”

Angus grinned mischievously. “Only one way to find out.”

“But I can’t do that without alerting VIGIL. I’ve got this stupid

tracker on my ankle, remember?" Jack pulled up one leg of his pants a little to show Angus the discreet wireless tracker that ensured his whereabouts were always known to VIGIL. Jack was a valuable asset to VIGIL—and the tracker was just one of the ways they made sure he was properly protected. Most of the time he forgot about it, but sometimes it made him frustrated and even angry that he had been put in this position.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that." Angus thought for a moment, and then a twinkle came to his eye. "On the other hand, you could just say you temporarily forgot about it or something. Might be a laugh to see how quickly they send in air support when they know you've gone AWOL. It's good to keep them on their toes."

Jack was not sure. "I don't know, Angus . . ."

"Come on, Jack, who dares wins and all that . . ." He nodded at Jack's sandwich, "Finish that." He stood up. "And let's go find out who your mystery girlfriend is."