

episode one:

The Hanged Man

I can't smell it, but I know that I am drenched in gasoline. My nose... I think it is broken. With my hands tied behind me I can't touch it to find out. I don't think I want to know. I'm sure I heard something break when he drove the steel toe of his boot into my face. My nasal passages are two solid blood clots. I'm breathing through my mouth and with each breath I can taste the gas fumes. Every breath is torture. He's broken ribs. Two, maybe three. He counted while he did it. They might have punctured my lungs. I can't know for sure but every breath feels like my lungs are ripping apart. Blood drools out of my open mouth. It could be from my nose, from broken teeth, from punctured lungs...

I try to stop taking inventory of my injuries. They aren't important. Got to focus. Got to think. Got to escape. If I could just calm down, focus, I could overcome the pain, but he won't let me. I hear the sound of water splashing onto concrete and realizing it isn't water at all. It is blood. My blood.

Doesn't matter. Can't let it distract me.

Then that fucking idiot lights a cigarette!

Is he trying to kill us both? Even gasoline *fumes* are explosive! The spark doesn't have to touch the fuel to ignite it. I almost shout, but my desire for his death overcomes my instinct for self-preservation.

I picture him blowing smoke at me. It is just the cliché gesture of contempt he'd think of. Of course I can't see that he's actually doing this. He's standing to my right. He'd long ago put that eye out. I don't know if it's gouged out or if my eye is just swollen shut.

As if reading my mind, he struts over to my left so I can see him. He crouches down to get his face next to mine.

"I don't want to do this, kid," he lies. "I don't want to hurt you. I can make it stop. Just give me a name. Two little words and the pain is over." His voice is almost pleading, as if I am forcing him to do this.

This is stupid. It can't end like this. I'm letting anger and pain control me. I'm letting him win. I'm forgetting all my training. I...oh fuck I don't want to die. Not this way. I don't want to die!

Trading cliché for cliché, I spit it at his face. I have an instant's satisfaction seeing him recoil as my blood and saliva trickle down his cheek.

"Ugh! You fucking sack of shit!" he screams. He follows up with a roundhouse kick to my chest. "There's four and five!" he shouts. "You are running out of ribs, you stupid fuck! Next it's fingers!"

The pain is too much. I stop hearing him and the world goes red, then black. I cry out, *Grampa, help me! Don't leave me here to die like this!* But the words are only in my mind and nobody else hears them. And then I don't think anything anymore.

Grampa's first visit came early in the semester. I knew someone was in my dorm room before I opened the door. The door was still locked, but I could hear music coming from my stereo. At first I thought my roommate had finally shown. I'd lucked out during the first two weeks of my college career. They'd overenrolled and had more students than there was space for. Most freshmen were packed three to a room too small for two. And here I was, all alone in a double. In theory I had a roommate

but he hadn't shown up yet. They said he was sick, or had an accident or something, and he'd be starting the semester late, but his parents still had to for the room in order to keep it for him.

I fumbled for my keys and was annoyed. He'd just moved in, and already he's using my stuff without asking. I would have been fine with it, but, you know, at least ask first. And I was really wanting to be alone. Fencing practice had gone badly. Again. My body was a mass of aches and pain. My last opponent had scored two points on me with cowardly and artless whip-overs. I lost my temper and retaliated with an aggressive attack that only left me wide open. To make matters worse, the coach's criticism from the week before had stuck, and now all my team mates were calling me by the nickname Milo the Barbarian. That is about the ultimate insult in the civilized sport of fencing. I was not in the mood for company, especially not company I'd be stuck with for the rest of the year.

I opened the door and it wasn't the roommate at all. It was my grandfather. He was sitting cross-legged on the bottom bunk, leafing through my Psych100 text, while Robert Smith sang:

“...staring at the sky
staring at the sun/whichever I choose
it amounts to the same
absolutely nothing
I'm alive/I'm dead
am the stranger
killing an Arab...”

“I gave you that stereo hoping you'd discover a little culture,” Grandfather said as I entered the room, “And this is what you subject it to? At least it has a Camus reference, I guess...”

“Oh come on Gramps,” I replied, “This is good music! It's The Cure”

“Well, if that is the cure,” he chortled, “I'd hate to hear what the sickness sounds like!” With that he jumped off the bed. His speed and agility still surprised me even though I'd seen it many times before. “Come here, dear boy!” he shouts, his arms held wide. Hugging him was like hugging a skeleton. A strong skeleton, to be true, because he crushed the air from my lungs as he lifted me off the floor, just as he's done every time he's seen me for as long as I can remember. I can't help but wonder how just skin and bones can hold that much strength.

He set me down on the floor, and I caught my breath. I laughed, the irritations of the day forgotten. I could smell his familiar scent. It was like a drawer where a master chef has stored his rarest spices for years and their scent has saturated the wood so that even decades later you still smell them, every time you open the it, that old spiceyness. Maybe that's what Old Spice after shave is supposed to smell like, only Old Spice is to the way Grandfather smells as the color of a yellow crayon is to the color of rare gold coin.

I turned to the stereo and lifted the needle from the turntable. “If you don't like it, why are you listening to it?” I asked.

“Just trying to get to know my grandson a little better,” he replied. I returned *Boys Don't Cry* to its sleeve, then pulled out one of my grandfather's albums: John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. I knew he'd like that. I didn't. Well, I didn't really dislike it. It was pleasant enough background music, but jazz in general doesn't really speak to me the way other music does. It always sounds to me like they're just making it up as they go along, or something, and there's no lyrics, so it doesn't even mean anything.

“Now that is real music!” Grandfather exclaimed, eyes closed, an expression on his face as though he's just tasted the best chocolate in the world.

He sat back on the bed. "So tell me all about college!"

I sighed heavily, and sat down on my desk chair. At that moment the bunk beds and that chair were the only places to sit in the room. I notice a large package on the desk that hadn't been there before. Another present from Grampa, I was sure. "Well," I began. "You've already seen my room."

"Yes, about as cozy as a German U-Boat, only a little more claustrophobic. And two people are supposed to fit comfortably in here?"

"Three this semester. Most freshmen get to share a room this size with two others. I'll be getting a roommate soon."

"No," he said with a sly smile. "I don't think you will be."

"What makes you say that?"

"We couldn't very well have you distracted from your studies now, could we? I made some... arrangements."

Suddenly, I felt angry. The "studies" Grandpa spoke of had nothing to do with college. He was always doing this, manipulating the events in my life without asking first. The fact that he was right, and he really was helping me get what I wanted only made it more frustrating. He didn't know. He hadn't spoken to me since the semester began. Maybe I wanted a room mate? I wanted to shout at him, but... he meant well. I took a deep breath and resolved to let it slide one more time.

"Maybe it is too early to be passing judgment," I deliberately changed the subject. "But I have to admit, I'm really kind of disappointed by college. I mean, I was really looking forward to something more challenging than high school. But so far, the classes are easier. There's like 300 people in some of my classes, and the instructors just paraphrase what is in the books. It's like I could skip the classes and just go when there is a test and get as good a grade just reading the book. But I keep going just in case there is something that isn't in the book."

"Yes, that sounds about right for a first semester freshman," Grandfather said, nodding. "Surely that isn't the case with all your classes?"

"Well, Brit Lit is *almost* interesting. I mean, "The Miller's Tale" is always good for a laugh. But do you know they don't read Kipling anymore? He's not even in the anthologies! And Wells? Just a token nod with "The Country of the Blind." A fine story, but certainly not his best."

"Wells as British Literature? Science fiction couldn't possibly be considered literature! Next you'll be saying that comic books should be considered literature, too! And poor Kipling. A few years back British Imperialism became unfashionable, so Kipling got the boot. I am surprised you mind that, though. I'd have thought you'd be happy at yet another sign of the waning power of the Freemasons?"

It was a gentle jab. Grampa knew the obsession I had with conspiracy theories back in junior high. "Oh yeah, that's right. Kipling was a Freemason wasn't he? Doesn't mean I can't like his writing, though, does it? But wait, you said people stopped reading him because he was unfashionable? Is that true?"

"Would I lie to you? Well, probably, but this time I'm not."

I felt indignant about this. "You mean to tell me that "great literature" is determined by fashion? That a timeless classic is only as timeless as people say it is? That the people deciding what the 'literature' is are as shallow and vapid as... as... a fashion reviewer in Cosmo?"

Grampa shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

"I feel so disillusioned!" I exclaimed.

"You were born disillusioned, my grandson!" Grampa laughed. "Surely this comes as no surprise?"

"Is it the same at all colleges? It isn't just because you made me go to this crappy-assed backwoods state college?"

"Well, I can't speak for all colleges, but the ones I know of, well, yes. It is the same everywhere."

"And speaking of crappy colleges, why is it I'm here again? MIT, Evergreen, Berkeley, they all accepted me, and without you making any 'arrangements.' They even offered me scholarships! I could have gone anywhere, and you talked me into coming here. Remind me. Why did I let you do that?"

"You know the answer to that. You are here because it is where you need to be right now. More importantly, it's where you are needed. Remember what I told you: nothing of importance ever happened where people were watching. "History" is only historical because somebody happened to be there to take a picture of it or write it down."

Yes, we had gone over it all before. I really didn't feel like arguing about it again. I'd already let him talk me into coming here, so it was a moot point. Still, I had a hard time believing that anything of importance could ever happen at this shitty little college in this shitty little town.

"I'll tell you what," he continued. "If you still feel the same way after the semester ends, you can transfer to one of your 'good' schools."

Maybe his words were meant to comfort me. I was just annoyed even further. He knew! He knew something would happen here to change my mind. Why couldn't he just tell me? If I pressed him on it he's get all cryptic and say, "You'll understand in the fullness of time," or something just as stupid. My anger rose, and then did a 180, and I was angry with myself instead. He'd always done this. He'd always been right. He'd always, *always* been acting in my best interest. Why couldn't I trust him by now?

I guess I just didn't like being manipulated, even if it was for my own good.

"So, you're disillusioned by your classes," he said, as if trying to interrupt my thoughts. "But that's nothing new. Besides, college isn't about classroom education anyway. The classroom is just an excuse to spend four years of your life trying to find out who you really are and have it be socially acceptable. What about outside the classroom?"

I thought of the problems I'd been having in fencing. "Well, I am now officially Milo the Barbarian."

"What?" Grandfather laughed. "Do tell!"

"Well, fencing, the way they do it here, isn't anything like the way you taught me. You don't disarm your opponent and go for the heart. You score points by tapping the body of your opponent, and the first person to fifteen wins. Well, the first practice I was fighting with this dick named MacAfee. He's a great with a sword, but he's a real asshole. Pain is his strategy. But he's really good at it, so unless you are fencing with him, you don't really notice. He likes to whip unprotected body parts with his foil to piss you off and get you to do something stupid."

"So, I take it he succeeded."

I sighed. "He succeeded. I got so pissed off! I shouted, 'ENOUGH!' and sent his foil flying across the room. And I followed that with a thrust to his heart that would have killed him if it hadn't been for the safety tip on the foil. My broke off at the hilt. I knocked him to the ground. Then I just stood there what was left of my foil still pointing at his heart. He was embarrassed and angry and scared. My team mates were shocked. I'd beaten him badly, but not in any way that would have won me points in fencing. He and I both knew it, but nobody else did. They hadn't seen what he was doing. All they saw was me freak out and lose the match stupidly. Then MacAfee realized this and he just sat up and laughed at me.

"The coach shouted, 'Back off, barbarian!' and pulled me away from him. I threw my foil at

the floor and stormed out of the room. I didn't take my mask off until I got to the locker room. I didn't want anyone to see my face."

"You broke a foil?" Grampa chuckled. "That must have been quite a jab! Those things don't break easily. So, you're off the team now?" Grandfather asked.

"No! That's the part I can't believe! The coach found me and told me that he was putting me on probation, but that it was really just to make a point to my team mates. He knew what MacAfee'd been doing all along, but didn't do anything about it. He said that is what I'd have to deal with in real competition, so I should learn to deal with it. He thought I could be one of the best on the team. IF I learned to control my anger. He said it would be hard to go back because my team mates were now afraid of me, and those who weren't afraid just thought I was a stupid jerk. I'd have to work hard to regain their trust, but that he'd like me to try. It *has* been really, really uncomfortable, but I've stuck with it."

"Good for you!" Grandfather said, proudly. "So, have you learned to control your anger any better?"

"Well, kind of... at least I haven't tried to kill anybody lately. But now I let it distract me, like I have so much anger bottled up inside me, and I loose focus, and then I get sloppy. I let my guard down and my opponents score easy points."

Grandfather looked grim. "It is nice to see you remembering your lessons so well." I started to protest, but he held up his hand to silence me. "No, it's not your fault. There's just so much to teach you and so little time. And I forget you are just a boy, and need time to be a boy, too. We'll just have to practice using your anger better. That's all."

Grandfather checked his watch, nodded, and was silent. I stood up. The record had stopped playing, so I flipped it over and placed the needle into the groove.

"So..." Grandfather started. My stomach muscles clenched. I knew his next question before he asked it. I didn't want to answer. "Have you made any friends at the new school?"

I shook my head. "No, I've been too busy. And I just haven't met anyone worth the effort. You know, I think I just don't like people all that much."

"Spoken like a well-seasoned introvert," he retorted. "You might be able to lie to yourself, but you know you can't lie to me."

"I'm not..."

"Zip it. I know you've heard this from me before, but I will repeat it until you get it through your thick skull. In the end all that matters is that we love, and are loved. You won't make it through what lies ahead without friends. You're here in a new place where nobody knows you. It's up to you to decide who you'll be. You're shy. These people don't know that. You don't have to tell them. There are people here who need your friendship as much as you need theirs. If that doesn't matter to you, consider this: You're young, reasonably good looking, athletic, half-way intelligent, no visible defects, going to school on a trust fund set up by your grandfather. You are privileged in so many ways. You can wallow in self-pity all you like. All people are going to see is a stuck up brat who thinks he is too good to talk to."

I started to protest, but he waved his hand. "No more talk. It is time for your lesson. He stood up from the bed and walked toward the desk. "Help me with this," he said, pointing at the box on the desk. It was heavy. I couldn't imagine how he got it up to the room all by himself. We lowered it gently onto the floor. He pulled out his pocket knife and slit the packing tape along the top and sides, then pulled the cardboard away to reveal a wooden box covered in Plexiglas. He knocked on the Plexiglas. "I had this specially made just for you, so that when your drunken friends (which you will have by my

next visit, OR ELSE!) are over they won't be spilling their beer or putting their feet on the wood."

He pulled the Plexiglas off and I caught my breath. It was beautiful. I couldn't imagine letting any harm come to it. I felt insulted by the Plexiglas. What I thought was a box was actually a table cut from a solid piece of wood about a foot thick and two feet square. It had four short legs carved seamlessly from the bottom. On its surface was a grid of black lines. It looked very old. The wood had a faintly luminous glow. I ran my fingers across the top of it. It was smooth as silk.

"You remember I said that all human existence can be interpreted as one of three games?" He kneeled by the table and gestured to me to do the same on the opposite side. He was starting the lesson. From his shoulder bag he pulled two wooden bowls and passed one to me. The wood was the same hue as the table. It had a wooden lid held in place by strips of Velcro. "The first game is chess. This is the second game. Created around 4000 years ago by the Chinese, who call it Wei Qi. It is better known by its Japanese name of Go. Open up the bowl." I did, and found it full of black, polished, oval stones

"The board is made from kaya wood. This is the traditional wood for a Go board, though few Go players ever get to play on such boards. Kaya trees are endangered. They can't be cut down. Board makers watch the few remaining living trees and wait for them to die a natural death. Kaya trees live for hundreds of years, so they wait for a very long time. The lines in the board, nineteen by nineteen of them, are made with a sword dipped in ink and rocked across the surface. The stones are made from slate and clamshell." He pulled a white stone from his bowl and handed it to me. It was flawlessly smooth, glowing like sun on fresh snow, with faint lines running through it. In contrast, the dark stones were so dark that it was like holding a piece of night in my hand.

"According to legend, the game was invented at the request of a Chinese emperor to his chancellor. His only son and heir to the throne was lazy, arrogant, impatient. The emperor asked his chancellor to find a way to help his son learn the traits necessary to become a true emperor. The chancellor presented the game Wei Qi to his emperor and his son. The emperor immediately saw its brilliance, while the son just pushed the board off the table, saying, 'This game is stupid. Obviously whoever goes first wins.' So the emperor banished his son and made the chancellor heir to the throne."

Grandfather reached over and grabbed a handful of stones from my bowl. "The game is simple," he continued, placing a white stone at the intersection of two lines. "In many ways it is the opposite of Chess. We start with an empty board and place pieces onto it, instead of taking them off. The game becomes more complex with each turn. Once on the board, the pieces stay where it is unless captured and removed. You capture pieces by surrounding them instead of running them over, as in chess.

"Now, take nine of your stones and place them where you see these dots." He pointed at nine regularly placed dots on the board. "That is called a handicap. You get to start the game with pieces already in play, for now. Each of those is a critical spot on the board. This makes it a more even match between an experienced player, such as myself and one such as yourself. As your game improves, I'll give you fewer and fewer stones for your handicap. Until one day, many years from now, you just might start with no handicap."

Without another word, he began playing. Holding a white stone with his index, third and forefingers, he slapped it down at an intersection with a loud click. I tried holding the stone the way he did, but it was awkward, and when I tried to slap the piece down, I fumbled, sending it spinning on the table. I picked it up and moved it beside his.

We played for what seemed like hours. I was so focused I barely noticed when Grampa pulled cheese, crackers and apples from his backpack, sliced them, and put them on a plate between us on

the floor or when he got up to change the record to Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, and then again to *Birth of the Cool*.

The game seemed so simple, but the board changed with every piece added to it. New possibilities opened up, others closed. Like chess, it was a game of pure honesty. Nothing was concealed. Each player had access to the same information, which was all right there on the board. It seemed to be a game of creating structures. Structures to protect, structures to attack, structures to trick your opponent into thinking a strategy existed where there was none, so that they were distracted from where the real strategy was unfolding. It was this last type that my grandfather was best at. I could see his obvious plan, but I quickly learned that this was a ruse, and tried to see where else on the board he was setting things up. The catch was that he always had at least three underlying strategies going on at once, so I had to divide my attention and resources to countering all of them at once. He played a game that wasn't offensive or defensive. It was deceptive. This time I didn't get angry. I decided not to even try to win, just to pay attention, and learn. At last we both passed a turn, because neither of us could make a move that would change the game. He won every game, easily. And I was sure he'd win every game we played for a while. But not forever. I didn't feel that I could win against him, but I could understand why I lost. It was a start.

At last he stood and bowed. "Thank you, my grandson, for a most excellent match. The game is yours. A dorm warming present."

I stood and bowed back. "Thank you, Grandfather," I replied, not believing that the game was really mine to keep.

He looked at his watch again. "Get suited up," he said. "It is time."

"Time?!" I exclaimed. "Now?" I couldn't believe it. All the preparation. All the times I'd begged him, swore I was ready. Now it was time, and even though it was what I thought I wanted for years, I felt sick to my stomach. My legs had gone rubbery, and I couldn't breathe. "You mean all this time you've known it was tonight and you didn't say anything? We wasted all this time playing games when I should have been getting ready!"

"Easy, boy," he said. "If I'd told you earlier, you would have wasted all your energy stressing about it. Instead you are rested in body and alert in mind. You are ready. Go."

I pulled on my black turtleneck and black pants. I couldn't feel my fingers as I tied my boot-laces. I fumbled with the buttons on my trench coat and then gave up. "Weapons?" I asked.

"No weapons. We must remain invisible here for the present. Sword injuries will cause too much attention. Use what the area provides you, if you must. Rocks, sticks, you'll be in the woods so you shouldn't have any trouble finding something to use. Take the pepper spray, and strap the stiletto to your leg. But those are only for a last resort. A diplomatic solution is your first resort. Avoid violence at all cost."

Suddenly I felt sick to my stomach. It could come to violence. I might actually have to use a knife on somebody. The thought always seemed so exciting, but now it was just sickening and terrifying.

"Look here," Grampa said, beckoning me over to the desk. He had a map of the campus spread out there. "Right here," he tapped the map. "There is a grove of trees just past this dorm. There you'll find the damsel in distress. You will rescue her and make sure she returns home safely."

"What? But how will I know it is her?"

"Well, she's a damsel, and she's in distress. There aren't going to be too many girls who need rescuing at one a.m. in that area. One more thing. Try to avoid contact with her if at all possible. It is best that she doesn't know who you are at this point, but if that isn't possible, preserving her life is of

utmost importance. Once you know that she is home safe, stay nearby until morning to make sure she stays that way. Now go!”

I went, running down the hall, bounding down the stairs because the elevator would be too slow. I knew the woods Grampa was talking about. They were clear on the other side of campus. I ran the whole way, not sure how much time I had, but feeling so nervous that the tension had to go somewhere.

It was unseasonably cold for so early in the fall. I could see my breath coming out in great clouds by the light of the streetlamps. The campus was deserted that time of night, a cold, drizzling rain keeping even the most spirited college partiers indoors. That was good. People might have gotten a little suspicious of someone in a trench coat sprinting across campus.

I crossed the campus in minutes, sweating hard to spite the cold. I slowed to a walk as I reached the dorm, stepping off the sidewalk to walk on the grass to make as little noise as possible. I stilled my breath and listened. Nothing. The grove was still a hundred feet away. I walked toward it, sticking to the shadows, the long, black trench coat hiding me in the darkness. I moved silently, the way Grandfather taught me. To anyone nearby I would have been as insubstantial as a breeze rustling the leaves.

Into the woods, and still nothing. I stopped moving completely, breathing in through my nose, out through my mouth, slowly. One by one I found my distractions and dismissed them. My anxiety and fears. The sound of my heartbeat in my ears. The pain of my overworked lungs. Until finally I was nothing but sight and hearing and smell, pure awareness in the dark. And I watched and listened and waited.

There.

Under the sound of the rain hitting the leaves I heard it.

Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

I pinpointed a location and started running toward it. Stealth didn't matter anymore.

A gentle wind carried the smell of piss and shit.

A feeling like sulfuric acid has just been injected into my bloodstream.

It was too late. No matter how fast I ran, it would always be too late.

There she was, just off the path. My damsel in distress. Her eyes were wide open, her face upturned toward the rain. The rain trickling down her face might have been mistaken for tears. Her tongue stuck out as if she were trying to catch a raindrop. One of her shoes had fallen off. Her white stockinged foot pointed downwards toward it, inches below her, as if she were trying to reach it.

For just a moment I thought she was still alive. Then I realized it was just the wind rustling her hair and making her body turn ever so slightly at the end of the rope.

Be here in one week for the next thrilling installement of **Castles! Episode Two: The Priestess**. With Grampa gone, Milo makes the horrifying discovery that the “damsel in distress” was someone he knew. But was her death suicide? or murder?