

**Apprentice to  
Murder**  
or  
**The Tale of Robin the Rascal  
in the Wizard's Own Words**

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My given name is Robert Andrew Arnold, but you know me as Prince Robin or, more likely, as Prince Robin the Rascal. You've also probably heard that I'm a murderer. For the record, I didn't do it.

I should also clarify that I am no longer a prince. "Prince" is a title reserved for a male in line to the throne or a ruler of a region somewhat larger than a dukedom. In certain situations, a man who cannot himself be king but who married a queen will also assume the title. I am none of those things. Not anymore.

I suppose an explanation of how I lost my title is as good a place as any to begin my story.

I was born into the royal House of Arnold. I am the only child of Duke Richard Andrew Arnold, himself the younger brother of King Edward Bartholomew Arnold, better known as King Edward the Eager. I never knew my father. He died at the Battle of Duke Richard's Charge before I was old enough to walk. That's a nobleman's reward for dying in war; they name the battle after you. Let me tell you, it's a poor consolation prize for growing up without a father.

I don't remember his real face. I only know his likeness from the portrait hanging in the gallery of Windwick Castle. Father looks quite dashing in his gleaming armor, his strong chin held high with a shock of unruly brown hair outlining his noble brow. My mother, Lady Elaine Beaumont Arnold, tells me that father was more handsome in real life. She's never once said the same about me. I'm sorry to say that while I inherited my father's unruly hair, he took his chin with him to the grave. My cousin, John, used to say that although I had been born a prince, I could never be king because kings were handsome. "You look like a frog in a wig," he'd say. That was probably about the nicest thing John ever said to anyone.

Like any boy, I was eager to follow in my father's footsteps. I had been born with a love of puzzles and strategic thinking, another trait I must have inherited from my father. (My mother never seemed interested in anything that required concentration, including children.) From a young age, I was naturally very good at checkers, chess, and cards. I yearned to apply my gifts where my father would have most appreciated them: on the battlefield, where an entire war could be won with the timely application of force against weakness. I loved attending the semi-annual jousts and archery competitions, and I dreamed of apprenticing as a knight's squire. I would have too, if not for my mother.

“I’ve lost my husband to war, and I will not lose my little Robin,” she would say whenever I brought it up. To ensure that I didn’t die like my father, she wouldn’t even let me have my own horse. John didn’t care what my mother had to say. “When I grow up, you can saddle *my* horse,” he’d say. I’d take what I could get.

I don’t mean to give the impression that my mother was entirely heartless or unkind. She didn’t want me to be unhappy, only to keep me safe. Therefore, on my tenth birthday, she finally allowed that I could join the king’s army in one specific role. “You can train to be a falconer,” she said. “The birdmen never get near the front lines.” To get me started, she gave me a parrot.

Unlike falcons, parrots are not birds of prey. The only thing you’ll learn about birds from having a parrot is how to be patient with them when they learn the words for food and say them over and over and over again. Mine had brilliantly green feathers, yellow eyes, red beak, and a matching red ring around the back of his neck. Because it was such a handsome animal, I named it Richard after my father. John insisted on calling it Dick, so everyone else did too.

John could get away with that, and not because he was four years older than me. He was the first born son (and only child) of King Edward. One day he would be king. Kings got whatever they wanted.

Though no one ever seems to believe this, I was perfectly comfortable with being a perpetual prince. None of us cousins were ever closer than second in line to the throne. All of us accepted that—all of us save Zelda. She’s the elder child and only daughter of King Edward’s sister, Duchess Beatrix Regina Arnold Albert, and Lord Adam Rutherford Albert. (As siblings to the king, my father was a duke and my aunt a duchess. Their spouses are granted the honorary titles “Lady” and “Lord” respectively.)

Zelda was a princess by every definition of the term. She was beautiful, intelligent, graceful, and more than a little bit bossy. I was very fond of her. Duchess Beatrix had died while giving birth to Zelda's younger brother, Christopher, leaving a void in the family that Zelda did her best to fill without complaint. Yet, she had one obstacle she could never overcome. She was a princess, and princesses grow up to be queens.

Zelda had been born weeks before John but, because she was a girl, had never been in the line of succession. By law, the kingdom cannot be ruled by a queen. That quirk of fate had galled her all her life, and she raised a fuss about society's unfair treatment of her sex every chance she got. Even the day John died.

It's been years—I was only thirteen at the time—but I still remember that day so well. For more than one reason, that was the worst day of my life.

You probably think you've heard all the details of Prince John's murder by now. I assure you, you haven't. Let me say again: I didn't do it.

I've heard many retellings of what happened that morning. The one thing everyone forgets is what a beautiful early spring day it was.

The previous winter was memorable for being particularly bitter. The permeating cold had sapped the color out of the world and left our spirits frozen. The latest in our series of wars with the heathen Gaiseric, on hold for the winter months, had not been going well. I'd heard more than once that some influential people were beginning to wonder whether the fight was worth the cost. Tensions had arisen between King Edward and his advisers over future strategies, and the atmosphere inside the castle was growing increasingly sour. Despite what adults think, children notice.

I followed the war developments rather closely, or at least as closely as I was able. (Adults don't like to talk

about such things to their children.) It was my favorite pastime, but I was alone in this pursuit. Few of my cousins shared my affinity for strategy. Zelda was the exception, but she was actively discouraged from participating on account of her sex. Her younger brother, Christopher, cared for nothing but music. And while John loved stories about war's bloodiest details, he had a strong aversion to anything resembling studying.

You can imagine our relief when spring finally arrived, bringing with it fields of poppies and primroses to drive away our blues. Unfortunately for us, winter wasn't quite so eager to relax its grip.

A continuous downfall of unseasonably cold rain had kept us indoors for the previous week with no one to entertain us. King Edward was already away with his army. He had returned to the battlefield as soon as the first frosts cleared in hopes of catching the Gaiseries unprepared. Most of the kingdom had been pressed into service with him. This included Zelda's father, the head of the king's order of knights. Also gone were the royal wizard, two-thirds of the castle guard, and any male staff between the ages of twenty and fifty. As a result, the castle was considerably undermanned. (I'd like to say this was an aberration, but King Edward was rarely home in Windwick. He seemed to live for war.) Our mothers and the servants whose responsibilities would normally include watching us children were more often than not tending to other, more important tasks. That day in particular, my mother was away in the next county nursing my sick aunt. John's mother, Queen Mary, was busy supervising an inventory of the kitchen stores. When the sun finally emerged from behind the clouds that morning, there was no one to stop us from jumping at the opportunity to take our mischief outdoors again.

As is usual for the carefree children of nobility, we had no specific plans for the day. Therefore, I saw no

reason to leave Richard alone inside. I had long since given up trying to train him in any traditional falconry skills, but I still brought him with me whenever possible, even when going to play in the castle courtyard. I kept him tied to a blue ribbon that I wore across my shoulder, though that was mostly for show. I wasn't worried about him flying away. He was far too fond of the leftover bits of bread and meat on my dinner plate to stray too far. On the rare occasions he did take off, I always found him raiding the castle vegetable gardens. (The gardeners nicknamed him "Dick the Destroyer.")

John, Zelda, and Christopher were already in the courtyard when I arrived with my bird. John was the spitting image of his father, the king, with long black hair and a devilish glint in his eye. Zelda, on the other hand, had a much fairer complexion. The sunlight lightened her brown hair and accentuated the green in her hazel eyes. Young Christopher took after his older sister. All in all, they were a very attractive group of people. At least on the outside.

"Hey, everyone," John shouted. "Robin has brought his Dick out again!" He laughed heartily despite having made the same joke at every opportunity over the previous three years.

It was imprudent to encourage John's behavior, but the sunshine had me in too good a mood to resist teasing him back. "I assure you, you'd take your Dick with you everywhere you went. If you had one."

Annoyance flashed across John's features. Before he could answer, Richard chimed in. "Nice Dick, nice Dick," he chirped.

John's irritation was immediately forgotten. He laughed, deeper than before. Christopher and I joined him. Zelda rolled her eyes.

"Boys. *Really*," she chastised. "Especially you, John. I know you taught Richard to say that. Kings don't make

such immature jokes.”

“They will when I’m king,” John insisted. I believed him.

I gave Zelda a sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

Zelda’s expression softened as she took pity on me.

Richard bowed and presented the crown of his head to her for a quick rub. “Your Highness,” he said, exactly as I had coached him.

She obligingly gave him a quick scratch. “I forgive you, Richard,” she said. “I’ll reserve my ire for the uncouth Crown Prince.”

“*Un-couth* is the best couth,” said John.

Zelda stuck her tongue out at him, and we all had another good laugh.

Once we had recovered our composure, Christopher suggested, “Let’s play a game.”

“Not yet,” said Zelda. “I promised Lady Elaine that we would gather some mushrooms first.”

“Aw. If you’d told me we were going to work, I would have stayed inside,” said Christopher. He wasn’t kidding. Zelda’s nine-year-old brother hated anything that resembled responsibility. The previous year, he had accidentally overturned a cauldron of boiling soup and burned his right foot so badly that he’d fused two of his toes together. He’d been confined to his bed for months of convalescence. We joked that he’d done it on purpose just so that he wouldn’t have to clean his room. (To his credit, Christopher had spent the time playing his fiddle and had gotten quite good.)

Zelda wagged a finger at her brother. “Mushrooms are a delicacy. We will hunt them up and eat like proper nobility.”

“Kings don’t gather their own mushrooms,” John said. He imperiously stroked the wispy mustache he was cultivating on his upper lip. He thought it made him look kingly. I wasn’t so sure. None of the kings in the

portraits in the main gallery had fuzz on their lips. “That sounds like a job fit for a queen.”

Zelda’s own lips grew tight. This was another of John’s frequent jibes. He was well aware of her long-simmering resentment of gender roles, and he enjoyed needling her where she was most sensitive. For her part, Zelda was too smart to sink to his level. She swallowed her irritation. “No, of course not,” she said at last. “That’s what family is for.”

“We’re not kings *or* queens. We’re just princes,” said Christopher. A sharp look from Zelda reminded him to quickly add, “And a princess! Maybe we should leave the mushrooms to the adults. Besides, Ida says hunting can be dangerous.”

Zelda would not be denied. “Ida is a chambermaid, not a game warden. You will do as I say and gather mushrooms.”

I took Christopher’s side. “Do we have to? It would be a very good day for some bowling.” I didn’t really want to bowl. What I really wanted to play was hide and seek. It was my favorite outdoor game. Despite the expansive size of the castle courtyard, I could often win by deducing any spot my cousins might choose to hide. However, my wins were Zelda’s losses, so naturally, she detested hide and seek. She much preferred lawn bowling, which she could win seven tries out of ten.

“Not today. It’s still too damp,” she decided. “It’s mushrooms for everyone. Everyone except John.”

“And Robin,” John added. “He’s coming with me.”

Zelda gritted her teeth and curtsied with over-exaggerated politeness. “As you wish.”

I was John’s favorite, and, as a result, I was regularly excused from whatever Zelda was making the others do so that I may indulge John’s whims instead. I like to believe that John preferred to spend time with me alone, though I know Zelda thought he always chose my

company just to annoy her. Even before the murders, Zelda could be quite paranoid.

John chuckled. To me he said, "Grab some of those bricks in the stable and meet me on the wall."

I knew what he had in mind. Like Christopher, I didn't really want to get my hands dirty digging up toadstools. But neither was I eager to participate in John's cruel pastime. I tried to beg off. "I don't want to—"

My reluctance irritated John. He snapped, "What would you rather do? Play in the mud like a little piggy?"

Christopher barely stifled a laugh. I could feel embarrassment color my face. I looked to Zelda for help. She gave none. She crossed her arms and said nothing. I swallowed to restore my courage. To John I said, "That's not it. I just don't think—"

"No," John interrupted. "You *don't* think. That's the problem with you. You're just like any other dumb sheep."

Again, Christopher giggled. I was starting to get angry. "I am not an animal!"

"Is that so? Prove it. Get the bricks," John said. He didn't wait for a reply before walking away. "And don't forget to bring your Dick."

I suddenly realized I was clenching my fists. I took a deep breath and forced myself to calm down.

Zelda sighed the sort of sigh that someone makes when they want it to be known that they disapprove of something you've done. She said, "You're not his friend. You're his slave."

The truth stung. "What do you want me to do about it? He's going to be king."

"God help us all," she mumbled. She was careful to keep her voice down, though her eyes darted after John to make sure he didn't hear her.

“Don’t be like that,” I said. I felt compelled to defend him. After all, he was my best friend. “He’s not so bad.”

“Tell that to whoever he hits with one of those bricks.”

“It’s not like he’s hurt anyone.”

“Not yet. Certainly not for lack of trying. And certainly not because you’ve done anything to stop him.” Her tone of voice left no doubt that she blamed me for John’s bad behavior.

“I’m sure he’ll grow out of it one day, maybe sooner than you expect.” I gave her my most apologetic smile. I knew it wouldn’t do much good, but I couldn’t help it. I’ve never liked it when people were mad at me, especially Zelda. “You’re older than he is,” I pointed out. “Maybe you could say something to him.”

Zelda winced as though I had poked her with a stick. “I’ve done what I can. No one cares for the advice of a girl.” In a softer voice, she added, “If he’s going to listen to anyone, it will be you.”

“He has never listened to me before.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. We stared at one another for a moment, then we went our separate ways. She turned her attention to telling Christopher where to look for mushrooms, and I got busy fulfilling John’s command.

I didn’t like the stable. Even when clean, it was a mess. It was also full of rats, which meant that it was also full of cats, and that made me nervous for Richard’s sake. I’m sure I must have told that to John at least a dozen times, but he always seemed to forget. I think Richard could sense my anxiety; he stepped from side to side on my shoulder in his own nervous dance. I tightened my grip on his ribbon and hustled inside.

I found the stonemason’s pile of bricks in the usual place, an unused stall near the back of the stable. I

gathered all I could carry. It wasn't very many. I'm not a big man, and I was an even smaller child. I was proud to manage four bricks by myself.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I reemerged into the sunlight. Richard was relieved too. "*Veni, vidi, vici,*" he chirped happily. It was another of the many phrases Richard had learned without intentional training. It's amazing what he could pick up just from sitting around and listening.

Zelda had been leading Christopher into the damp castle gardens when Richard's squawk got her attention. She paused by the garden wall and frowned at my armload of bricks. I ignored her as best I could and made haste to the stairs ascending Corner Tower.

Anyone remotely familiar with Windwick Castle must be aware of its many towers. There are eight in all. That's because Windwick Castle was built in the old style with an emphasis on defense. The castle grounds occupy the highest hill in the region, and the towers provide both an unparalleled view of the surrounding area and a natural edge against potential enemies. The largest and most impressive is King's Tower, which rises over the castle keep's Old Wing. As the name implies, it's where the king's immediate family lives. (The extended family—including myself—and ranking guests live in the keep's New Wing.) The freestanding Castle Tower is the abode of key castle staff, specifically Sir Lyman the castellan, Father Enoch the priest, and Royal Wizard Septimus. (Other servants and soldiers live in various wooden buildings on the castle grounds when they're not away at war.) The remaining six towers stand at the corners of the curtain wall, which is shaped into an irregular hexagon. Four of the wall towers are named for compass points: the North, West, South, and East Towers. (East Tower is also sometimes called City Tower because it can be easily seen from the village of

Godwind in the valley below.) Welcome Tower, in the northeast corner, is named for its role as the castle gatehouse. Corner Tower is on the opposite side of the courtyard from Welcome Tower and is also the farthest from the main keep. It was rarely visited by anyone who wasn't on sentinel duty. For that reason alone, it was John's favorite place.

When I arrived, he was leaning over one of the gargoyles, affectionately drumming his hands on its weathered head. After the towers, Windwick Castle's most notable features are the gargoyles decorating the outer wall. Like many castle walls of its era, the curtain wall of Windwick Castle has a series of gaps, called crenels, between taller sections of wall, called merlons. The stone gargoyles sit at the base of each crenel. Popular accounts say there are a thousand of them. Don't believe it. I've counted; there are barely more than three hundred. Just because someone tells you something doesn't mean it's true.

More than simple ornamentation, the gargoyles are functional weapons. Holes in the back of their heads allow boiling oil to be poured out of their mouths onto invaders below. I've never seen them at work, which is fine by me. It sounds gruesome. Naturally, they were some of John's favorite things.

He didn't seem to hear me approach until I dropped the bricks behind him. He heard that.

He spun to face me. "About time you got here. I thought they might get away." He frowned at the bricks at his feet. "Four? That's all?"

"I thought you'd be impressed. That's two more than I have hands."

"No one likes a braggart." He stooped, picked up a brick, and returned his attention to something outside the wall.

I moved to peek through the next crenel over. John

was tall enough that the top of the gargoyle's head came up to his waist, but I had to jump up and lean over my gargoyle to see the hillside below. The field outside the castle wall was used for grazing by the local farmers. On most days, flocks of sheep wandered aimlessly about the hillside. Today was no exception. I would have hoped they should know better by now.

John cocked his arm and hurled a brick at an oblivious sheep that had the bad luck of being too close to the wall. I couldn't watch. I slid back behind the gargoyle and covered my eyes. I heard the brick thump to the ground, a sound quickly followed by the bleating of startled sheep. Richard sidled up my shoulder and hid his head behind in my neck.

"Damn it," John cursed. "I missed. Scared it good, though." He chuckled at his own mischief.

This was John's favorite thing to do. He'd spend hours up here waiting for the chance to hurl a rock as hard as possible at any unsuspecting creature. He wasn't picky; he'd throw at sheep, cattle, birds, deer, or squirrels. I think he would have thrown rocks at people if any were ever in range. A future king can get away with behavior that would send the rest of us to the dungeon.

Personally, I did not find this "game" nearly as enjoyable as he did. Not only was there no strategy involved in throwing rocks at defenseless targets of opportunity, it also very much bothered me to see animals in pain (even if I didn't actually see them). John had to know this. In fact, I was beginning to wonder why he always insisted I accompany him up here.

"Can't we do something else?" I pleaded.

"Like what? You didn't really want to play in the mud, did you?"

"Well, no," I admitted honestly.

"Then shut up and hand me another brick."

I did as I was told. John took the brick and again returned his attention to the hillside. He immediately jumped back to hide behind the merlon on his left. "Get back," he ordered in a hushed voice. I crouched as directed.

Pressed against the merlons, we were invisible to anyone outside the wall. We were probably invisible to anyone inside the wall too. Though there were no battlements on the inner side of the wall, the wall-walk itself was wide enough to hide us from the sight of anyone in the courtyard below. Only the few sentries patrolling elsewhere on the wall or someone looking out one of the tower windows might have spotted us.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The shepherd."

I chanced a glance over the wall. As he had said, the Godwind village shepherd was approaching in response to his bleating sheep.

"If he doesn't see us, he might come close enough for me to..." John waved the brick in his hand. His down-covered lip twisted up into a naughty smirk.

Throwing a brick at the shepherd? Zelda was right. A line had to be drawn somewhere. "You can't do that," I said.

"Oh, yeah? Who's going to stop me? You?"

"If I have to." I hope I sounded more confident than I felt. John was four years older, fifty pounds heavier, and at least a head taller than I was. If it came to a fight, I didn't like my chances.

"Is that so?" He called my bluff and held the brick out in front of him, mocking me. "Go ahead and try, big boy."

I could have backed down. I'd done it before, so many times. But this time, something was different. I knew that if I didn't take a stand now, there wouldn't be another opportunity. I grabbed at the brick in his

upraised hand with both of mine.

John appeared genuinely shocked by my sudden courage. So far as I knew, no one had ever stood up against his cruelty before. He struggled to pull the brick away from me. "Have you lost your mind?"

Maybe I had. Richard seemed to think so too. He flapped his wings vigorously against my head and, as was usual when he was distressed, mimicked the last words he had heard. "Lost your mind! Lost your mind!"

Despite my own expectations, I succeeded in jerking the brick out of John's hands. Unluckily for me, the force of the tug also sent me tumbling. Richard took off into the sky.

I fell on my back, smashing the brick onto my own nose and blinding myself with tears. Instinctively, I scrambled away from John to avoid the retaliation that I was sure was coming. Only as the haze in my eyes began to clear did I realize that I was headed for the inner edge of the wall. Without battlements, there was nothing stopping me from falling thirty feet to the courtyard below. I did what anyone in that situation would do: I panicked.

Without any regard for where it might go, I threw the brick away and spread my arms, slapping the wall-walk to stop my motion. I landed about a foot from the edge, much too close for my liking. The forgotten brick bounced away, finally falling away into the courtyard.

Contrary to my expectations, John hadn't pressed the attack. He had retreated back to his merlon where he slumped into a sitting position. He glared at me. "How dare you—!"

"I'm not going to let you throw a brick at that helpless shepherd," I said. Blood was now flowing freely from my nose. I wiped at it with the back of my wrist.

"I'll do whatever I like!"

Footsteps approached. One of the wall sentries, a

handsome young man I knew only as Potts, was running our way from the direction of the South Tower. Richard was on his shoulder. Once Potts was close enough, Richard left him and returned to me.

Potts asked, "Is everything all right, Prince John?"

John's face was contorted in fury. He spat, "Does everything look all right? Do we only assign blind children to sentry duty now?"

Potts was barely older than John and had only recently joined the castle guard. However, everyone in the castle, even the newest guardsmen, was aware of the heir to the throne's unpleasant temper. Potts avoided John's withering glare. "I thought that perhaps you could use some help, Your Highness. The bird said—"

John exploded, "What kind of idiot listens to birds? Just go! Get away from me!"

"Yes, Your Highness." With a quick nod, Potts obediently turned and hustled back the way he came.

While John was distracted with the guard, I had taken another look over the wall at the shepherd below. He must have heard John's shouting and was already in the process of leading his flock away from the castle.

"You think you accomplished something, Robin?" John asked. "You think you saved a stupid sheep? An insignificant shepherd? Do you think they would have done the same for you?"

I didn't know what to say. From experience, I had learned when John was angry, the best action was to say nothing. I kept quiet.

He sneered at my silence. "I'll show you. I'm not done yet. And now I'm going to need more bricks."

Again, I said nothing.

"Well, don't just sit there. You heard me. Go get me more bricks!"

John grabbed one of the two remaining bricks and threw it at me. It struck the wall-walk in front of my feet.

I didn't wait to see if his aim improved with a second throw. I jumped up and ran down the Corner Tower stairs, glad to be away from him.

My pace slowed as soon as I knew I was out of sight. If the Crown Prince wanted to be a jerk, that was his privilege. Although I couldn't refuse his command, he hadn't ordered me to be quick about it.

As I descended the stairs at a casual pace, I carefully tested my nose to see whether the bleeding had stopped. "Curse all this blood," I mumbled to myself. Richard heard me.

"Curse all this blood," he repeated. I got a chuckle out of that. Everything sounded funnier when said in his high-pitched voice.

I cleaned my bloody hand on my shirt and gave my feathered companion a scratch on the head. "You did a good job getting help. Thank you, Richard."

"You're welcome," he crowed happily in response to the cue. At least I had one friend who would never turn on me.

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, the courtyard was filling with people taking advantage of the fine weather. Dressed in his usual black and red vestments, Father Enoch was leading an outdoor prayer session for some of the older staff, including Sir Lyman. The Queen's handmaidens were picking fresh flowers from the beds along the garden wall. I couldn't see Zelda or her brother, but I could hear her lecturing him on mushroom-picking technique on the other side of the garden wall. I saw no evidence anyone had noticed my quarrel with John, and no one was near the lone brick laying by itself beside Corner Tower. I picked it up quickly before anyone could pay me any notice.

I reluctantly returned to the stable. Richard wasn't any happier about it than I was, but he didn't object too much. Inside, I picked up another brick so that I was

carrying one in each hand. John had said to get “bricks.” If he wanted more than two, he should have specified.

Back outside, I looked up at my cousin on the wall. He was right where I’d left him. His back was to me as he peered out through the battlements. I couldn’t make out whether he had a brick in his hand. I decided I didn’t really want to know.

Rather than head straight up the Corner Tower, I decided instead to return by way of the North Tower. It meant a longer path along the wall to reach John, but I wasn’t in any hurry. The route would keep the West Tower between us until I got close. Out of sight, out of mind, I hoped. Maybe by the time I rejoined him, John’s temper would have cooled. I walked as slowly as I dared.

I was on the wall, mere feet from West Tower when I heard the scream. (I can still point to the exact spot.) I froze in place, wondering if I’d heard what I thought. Richard’s instincts took a different course. He screeched and flew away as fast as his wings would carry him.

Shouts echoed from the courtyard below. I looked down and saw people running. They were headed the same direction I was: towards Corner Tower.

Again, for the record, let me reemphasize that at the moment I heard the scream, I had no idea what had happened—how could I?—but I had no doubt that John was the cause of the sudden alarm.

Forgetting my earlier reluctance, I broke into a run. My mind raced faster than my feet. What could he have done? Had the shepherd come into the castle to defend his flock? Had John thrown a rock at someone in the courtyard? When I rounded the West Tower turret, John was no longer on the castle wall. The gathering mob in the courtyard told me exactly where he had gone.

I redoubled my speed and bounded down the West Tower stairs. By the time I pushed my way through the

stunned crowd, I found Zelda and Father Enoch already by John's side. There were tears in Zelda's eyes. Enoch's lips moved as he mouthed a quiet prayer. I didn't need to ask why.

John was obviously dead.

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