

"Plague Of Red"

Written By

C Reader Collins

Email: collins.reader@btinternet.com

Tel: 07771 874511 (UK: +44 7771 874511)

FADE IN:

INT. STARCROSS CASTLE - NIGHT

A great Medieval Hall. The moonlight through the stained glass casts shadows on a vast tapestry. A candle is lit and an unseen hand lights each of four tableaux in turn.

The first: Bats exploding in a multitude from a cave, a fox and fox cub make their escape.

The candle flickers on the second: A blue-eyed rabbit in a field of red roses. Villagers, horses and cattle lie dead.

The third: The Beast Of The River lurching from blue waters.

The fourth: Starcross Castle. A river of red roses cascades from the city gates to the moat.

As the candle is held up - a glimpse of a long sleeve. The dress is stitched with hundreds of red plague flags.

The windows rattle, a gust of wind and the candle is extinguished.

INT. WISE JEN'S COTTAGE - DAY

WISE JEN taps her chalk on a blackboard. A flame-haired woman in her 30s. Whip-smart, under-tall and overlooked.

WISE JEN

Which can navigate the maze, rescue
the amulet and save the realm?

Her niece, SWEET JENNY (20s), bangs her head on the table. The answer is in there somewhere if she can knock it loose.

SWEET JENNY

The Bear? The Dragon?

WISE JEN

Is this puzzle best solved with
fire and claw? Or with a strong
stomach and sharp wits? Choose your
weapon wisely.

Sweet Jenny stares at the animals on the blackboard. She bangs her head again on the kitchen table.

SWEET JENNY

Of course -- the Fox. You laid a
false trail of breadcrumbs for me.

WISE JEN

I can't teach you how to navigate a
perilous world with straight lines.

Wise Jen chalks up another puzzle.

WISE JEN (CONT'D)

The realm's dangers are a fire and
wisdom douses flames.

A loud knock at the door and Sweet Jenny answers: BARREL-MAN
waits outside. Tall, muscular - he takes two paces backwards.

Sweet Jenny is an intimidating sight: Clear large eyes, rose-
red lips, but she is not named for her sweetness - she is
named for the irony. He rests his hand on his knife-belt.

BARREL-MAN

The Innkeeper sends his
compliments. Some grockles have
blown in, they're drunk as lords
and ripe for the plucking. Will you
send Little Jen over?

SWEET JENNY

My Aunt is wise and not so little.
She has grown an inch. Some say
two. Why don't you come in?

Barrel-man keeps his distance. A starling flies into the
cottage, Wise Jen removes its message clip and reads.

WISE JEN

A new star in the night sky.

SWEET JENNY

Which constellation? A good omen or
a bad one?

WISE JEN

Unclear, it's to the left of The
Spider. The diamond is in The Web.

EXT. HUNTING LODGE ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Wise Jen and Barrel-man walk the dirt track towards a hunting
lodge and stop by the village stocks. Two men are shackled,
heads bowed. She mops their brows and gives them water.

Wise Jen rummages in her bag, pushing aside potion bottles,
finds her silver fox brooch and fixes it to her cloak.

BARREL-MAN

Can I have another?

WISE JEN

If you like. A darner has 23 socks in a basket - 11 red and 12 green. With eyes closed, what's the least amount of socks he must take out before he surely has a pair?

Barrel-man sucks air through his teeth, he counts on his fingers.

WISE JEN (CONT'D)

Put them away, this is a problem for common sense, not mathematics.

Barrel-man hangs his head and looks at his boots.

WISE JEN (CONT'D)

The answer is three, my friend.

BARREL-MAN

I wish I had your wisdom.

WISE JEN

I don't have wisdom -- I have knowledge. There's a difference.

EXT. STARCROSS CASTLE - GRAVEYARDS - DAY

PRINCE JOHN bows his head at a gravestone, prettily engraved. It is weathered and covered in flowers. He swallows hard. He turns away to face another grave, freshly dug, with a huge ornate headstone fit for a king. He kneels before it.

Prince John is soft-eyed and paunch bellied. In his 40s with grey in his beard and a huge hunting scar on his cheek.

His sister-in-law, QUEEN MATILDHA, rests her head on his shoulder - in her 30s, graceful and heavily pregnant.

QUEEN MATILDHA

Come look, my children are playing in the meadow flowers.

She points to a corner of the graveyard. No children play there - just flowers swaying in the breeze by four tiny gravestones. Prince John takes her hand in his.

QUEEN MATILDHA (CONT'D)

I wonder if Jaimes will see them. He's very busy and so cannot visit.

Counsellor THEO joins them, a striking black man in his 60s, he stands tall and dignified.

THEO

Your Grace, the new girl has arrived.

QUEEN MATILDHA

Jaimes is filling the birthing room with so many attendants I shall have to labour in the corridor.

PRINCE JOHN

My brother is just being cautious.

All three look over to the city well in the mid-distance.

EXT. STARCROSS CASTLE - CITY WELL - CONTINUOUS

Chancellor CEDRYC (40s) waves back at them. He wears his chains of office and a smile upon his gentle face.

A young lady, ELSPETH, stands beside him, a large luggage bag at her feet. Her blonde hair is tied back to frame her face.

CEDRYC

The Queen prefers 'Your Grace' in public but in private she prefers 'Matildha'. Especially so at the birthing bed, it is a comfort.

ELSPETH

And afterwards, I will join my Aunt. I do love her tapestries.

CEDRYC

And after many years you too could become Mistress of Needles.

She takes in the view of the ancient moat and turrets.

ELSPETH

In private, how should I address Prince John?

CEDRYC

You will never have an occasion to be alone with Prince John...

KING JAIMES strides in their direction. He is unlike his identical twin brother, John: King Jaimes is sober, clean-shaven and trim.

CEDRYC (CONT'D)
 ... Nor the King. Lower your eyes
 and curtsy low. Lower still.

King Jaimes glances over his shoulder towards his brother. He hesitates and his face hardens. He walks past Cedryc and Elspeth as if they don't exist.

CEDRYC (CONT'D)
 I'll introduce you to Prince John
 and Theo. I'm going to have Theo
 arrested -- he is a thief.

Chancellor Cedryc beckons to Prince John and Theo. They leave Queen Matildha by her children's gravestones and join Cedryc and Elspeth by the city well.

PRINCE JOHN
 Today is a joyous day, my friend.
 Today I buried my father. After
 twenty years apart my father will
 be in my mother's arms again.

CEDRYC
 When are you off for the hunt?

PRINCE JOHN
 Later today but I'll be back in
 time for the crowning ceremony --
 Jaimes doesn't want me underfoot
 for his preparations. I am going to
 hunt bear.

Cedryc and Theo roll their eyes.

PRINCE JOHN (CONT'D)
 Do not pay them any mind, my Lady.
 I'm an excellent hunter of bear. Or
 perhaps an arthritic deer or a
 three-legged rabbit. I can
 definitely catch a cup of ale.

Cedryc taps the pockets of Theo's coat.

CEDRYC
 Where are my star charts, thief?

PRINCE JOHN
 I lent Theo my hunting knife twenty
 years ago, I've not seen it since.

THEO
 It is true. I am a thief.

Counsellor Theo opens up his coat to reveal star charts.

CEDRYC

I shall have you baked in a pie.

THEO

You shall buy me an ale and tell me tall tales like you always do. I've kept the charts because there is a new star. A troubling one.

CEDRYC

The last new star was over Vectis -- before it set itself on fire.

PRINCE JOHN

This lady doesn't want to hear about troubling stars. Let us leave her in peace.

Theo embraces Cedryc goodbye, who makes a show of patting down his own robes.

CEDRYC

I should check I still have my kidneys.

EXT. FIELDS NEAR ROSE'S COTTAGE - DAY

THOM, a scrawny peasant boy, walks with his father, ARTHUR, on a dirt track between a forest and open fields. Each carries a quiver of arrows. Thunder in the distance.

ARTHUR

When you've missed the deer here, we'll go over to the fields by the caves. There's good hunting there. You can miss all them lot too.

THOM

There's too much wind.

ARTHUR

You don't hear me moan about it.

THOM

I just hear you moan about everything else.

ARTHUR

Bloody cheek. Come here.

Arthur wraps Thom's scarf properly about his neck.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

If you catch a cold, I'll catch a clip from your mother.

THOM

Mum says not to go near the caves.

ARTHUR

Your mother says a lot of things.

THOM

There might be bears. Mum says we're forbidden.

Arthur stops walking and gives his son an exasperated look.

ARTHUR

Do you always do as your mum says?

THOM

Like father, like son!

ARTHUR

I should take my belt off and whip you.

THOM

You'll not catch much deer with your trousers round your ankles.

Arthur gently cuffs Thom about the ear. An oak tree is behind them in the field, the Nature Gods' face carved on the trunk.

Thom steps from the path to a web spun between an oak stump and linden tree. He pokes the web with a martlet feather.

THOM (CONT'D)

I don't think the Gods watch over poor folk.

ARTHUR

Maybe the Gods are busy enough watching all the Kings and Lords.

THOM

I don't think they're doing much of a job of that either. Why would the Gods let a good Starling King die for an unkind Prince?

ARTHUR

A Wessex King and no concern to us.

THOM

I don't think the Gods care what
poor people do. We don't count.

ARTHUR

I don't know the web's patterns. I
just know there is a pattern.
Besides, you must be careful
Thom.... The Gods might not be
watching us, but they're not deaf.

EXT. FIELDS NEAR THE BAT CAVES - LATER

An arrow smacks into the ground a dozen paces short of a herd
of running deer. Thom despondently throws down his bow.
Arthur quickly fires an arrow just ahead of the leading deer
and it runs straight into it - the arrow slams into its neck.

A murmuration of martlets swoop overhead, black-winged and
white-bellied, these mythical swallows have no legs or feet.

THOM

A good omen?

ARTHUR

Martlets are neither a good or bad
omen. The Nature Gods took away
their feet and gifted them ever-
lasting flight.

THOM

The Gods' curse is the Gods' gift.

ARTHUR

Good to see you're not always as
dumb as a rock.

Thom grins and shoves his father.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Martlets remind us to keep going. I
might not like my path -- I'm not
sitting in a castle counting money,
but I keep going on my path.

THOM

You could choose a different path.

ARTHUR

You may think you've chosen your
own path but the chances are the
Gods have put you there.

They gaze up in wonder at the shifting shapes of the murmuration. Some shapes are familiar - fox - rabbit - pig - wolf. Others are mythical, like the Beast Of The River.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Ever seen me shoot a martlet?

Arthur wets his finger and then an arrowhead in turn.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
For the Gods' luck.

The martlets swoop and fly in the shape of a giant black-winged bat. Arthur takes aim and fires. A martlet drops to his feet like a stone.

A crashing thunder clap and rain lashes down - the only shelter is in the caves or beneath a single oak tree. They race to the oak.

THOM
Mum says we can't stand underneath
a tree in a storm.

ARTHUR
If we stay in the field and catch a
cold your mother will kill us. If
we get hit by lightning your mother
will kill us. If we shelter in the
caves your mother will kill us.

More thunder claps and lightning. They race to the caves.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
At least when she's killing us,
we'll be good and dry.

INT. THE BAT CAVES - CONTINUOUS

They wait, breathing hard, in the semi-darkness looking out at the lashing rain. Sounds of scurrying and the flapping of many, many wings. They look up. The cave ceiling writhes.

THOM
Bats. I'd prefer bears.

ARTHUR
No good man on this good earth has
ever been killed by a bat.

A loud thunder clap and a wave of bats floods out of the cave. Wings and feet scratch at their face and arms. Thom looks up and one of the bats defecates into his open mouth.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Don't swallow!

Thom is visibly shaking, face pale. Arthur examines him.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
No harm done. None at all.

Thom gulps from a water-skin and spits it out, blood-flecked.

INT. WISE JEN'S COTTAGE - DAY

Wise Jen returns from the hunting lodge. She unclasps her fox brooch, empties her cloak pockets and dozens of gold coins scatter over the kitchen table.

She puts on gloves and paints each coin with a potion.

She stuffs a purse with the coins and hides it behind a glass jar containing a preserved bat in fluid. She taps on the glass - the bat's face looms large.

EXT. STARCROSS CASTLE - MARKET SQUARE - DAY

Prince John gazes up at the statue of his late wife Constance. The statue's name plaque is surrounded by flowers. Constance has one arm cradling their baby, the other arm is outstretched as if pleading. Queen Matildha takes his hand.

PRINCE JOHN
Jaimes has never come here, not once. Nor her grave. I have never understood that -- she was his love before she was ever mine.

QUEEN MATILDHA
People say he is hard-hearted but he is just a little broken.

Prince John gently pats her swollen belly, her dress of embroidered white roses is fit for bursting.

QUEEN MATILDHA (CONT'D)
I am scared of the birthing bed. If anything should happen to me you must choose another sister.

PRINCE JOHN
You're stronger than sweet Constance. Nothing will happen to you. You'll outlive the Beast in the River. You'll outlive us all.

QUEEN MATILDHA

I am scared for Jaimes if I place another baby born still in his arms.

PRINCE JOHN

When your son is born, Jaimes will have his heir at last. I'll be kicked further down the line - a good thing too I think. And we'll go hunting once more as brothers.

QUEEN MATILDHA

He was tender once.

PRINCE JOHN

He'll be tender again. Good things lie ahead for all of us. I'm a good judge of these things.

EXT. STARCROSS CASTLE - MARKET SQUARE EDGE - CONTINUOUS

Chancellor Cedryc and Elspeth stand on the market square edge watching them, out of earshot.

ELSPETH

They are close?

CEDRYC

Like two stitches in a tapestry. His sister-by-law but also a sister of his choosing. He has a brother of his choosing too -- Theo.

ELSPETH

How so?

CEDRYC

Theo was a treasure from Queen Lilybet. On her deathbed, Jaimes asked for gold. John instead asked for her wisdom, so she sent for Theo. That was twenty years ago.

Prince John spots them and waves to them both before turning back to Queen Matildha and continuing his conversation.

ELSPETH

My aunt says it's strange how the Realm turns on which twin's ankles the midwife pulled out first. She says their mother baked two pies -- one sweet and the other one sour.

CEDRYC

Your aunt is lucky I take a forgiving stance on treason.

ELSPETH

Oh, she means nothing by it. She gossips -- she chats about which brother is the more handsome.

CEDRYC

It is wise never to consider a man outside your rank.

ELSPETH

Of course. Of course. But my aunt says sometimes a Prince marries outside his rank.

CEDRYC

Only a foolish Prince.

Prince John's guardsmen ride up, dressed in hunting clothes. Prince John bids Queen Matildha goodbye and mounts his horse.

CEDRYC (CONT'D)

So who do you consider to be the more handsome?

Elsbeth tilts her head at Prince John as he rides away.

ELSPETH

I do not consider men outside my rank.

CEDRYC

You are a quick learner, Elspeth. You will go far in this realm.

King Jaimes strides past them, surrounded by guards.

ELSPETH

He wears no crown.

CEDRYC

Some Kings put the crown upon their head as soon as their father dies. Others prefer show and ceremony. There'll be plenty of that at month end -- dancing, feasting. All expensive and unnecessary, but he requires it none the less.

ELSPETH

If King Jaimes deems it necessary,
then it is entirely necessary.

CEDRYC

Well spoken, Elspeth. Well spoken.

ELSPETH

Was that a test, Chancellor Cedryc?

Cedryc pats his chain of office and laughs.

CEDRYC

I see it shall be you teaching me
the ways of this castle. I trust
you'll enjoy making Starcross your
home.

A cat brushes up against her and she feeds it a tidbit.

CEDRYC (CONT'D)

It's best not to feed a cat. He may
grow lazy and careless and fail to
catch a mouse. We'll fetch him to
the grain-stores.

Elspeth gives the cat a little kick away with her shoe.

ELSPETH

How did you rise to become
Chancellor?

CEDRYC

My background is well known. Son of
a blacksmith. But my father told me
many words of wisdom and they have
helped me on my climb.

ELSPETH

And his words?

Cedryc looks Elspeth straight in the eye.

CEDRYC

'Trust no one'.

EXT. PIG FARMER'S PIG PEN - DAY

Arthur and Thom approach home and stop by a neighbour's pig
pen - a small saddleback pig forages in the mud. Arthur
points to a dead green bird on the side of the track.

ARTHUR
So what's that then?

THOM
A greenfinch?

ARTHUR
No. It's a mouldy sparrow. Do you
pay any attention to your mother?
She's the smartest person I know.

THOM
You need to get out more.

Thom coughs repeatedly and shares a half-eaten apple with the pig. A little blood drips from his nose onto his sleeve.

EXT. ROSE'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

MYELUVVE skips outside, a girl of four, blue-eyed, flame-haired and a dwarf - the spitting image of her mother, Rose.

ARTHUR
My Little Treasure.

Arthur hugs Myeluvve tightly and gives her a big kiss on the middle of her left cheek.

INT. ROSE'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

ROSE ladles stew into bowls. ELENI(12) sits at the kitchen table. Myeluvve's sister looks like Arthur and Thom - tall and scrawny. Only Myeluvve and Rose are dwarfs.

THOM
That smells delicious, Mother.

Rose looks at Thom with suspicion. Arthur remains motionless, his spoon an inch above his bowl.

ROSE
Did you just call me 'Mother'?

THOM
Yes, Mum.

Rose drags a chair across the flagstones. She sits close and leans in - her face just inches from his. Thom breaks.

THOM (CONT'D)
A bat shat in my mouth!

ROSE
A what did what?

ARTHUR
In Thom's defence he was good and dry at the time.

ROSE
And where were you?!

ARTHUR
I was also good and dry.

ROSE
Was this in the caves? I'm going to kill you both! I won't need a knife. I'm going to use my hands.

Myeluvve watches on - eyes wide.

ROSE (CONT'D)
Do you have any idea of the filth and miasmas upon you? Don't touch anything. You'll need to quarantine in the barn for seven days. Go now.

ARTHUR
Again? You're too cautious, Woman.

ROSE
Did you just call me 'Woman'?

ARTHUR
Of course not.

Rose shoos Arthur and Thom out of the front door. Myeluvve watches Rose dip a cloth in vinegar and carefully wipe down the table, chair and door handle.

ROSE
Do you know why we do this?

MYELUVVE
Because a bat shit in Thom's mouth.

ROSE
'Shat'. We don't use the other word. Bats have miasmas like Feather Pox and blights can pass from animal to person.

MYELUVVE
That's why Daddy and Thom are in the barn.

ROSE

Yes, you are a clever girl.
Sometimes people will think you're
not clever because you're a dwarf.
But the very littlest of folk can
cast the longest shadow.

Myeluvve drags a chair to a shelf with three toy fur rabbits. They all have buttons for eyes except for the smallest which is 'blind' - Myeluvve chooses this one. Rose grabs a basket, fills it with provisions and takes Myeluvve by the hand.

EXT. ROSE'S BARN - CONTINUOUS

Myeluvve skips in the courtyard with her toy rabbit. Arthur opens the barn door but Rose keeps her distance. She places a small rock by the door and holds out her basket.

ROSE

I've brought your favourite stew.
There are honey cakes for Thom and
blankets in case you get cold.

ARTHUR

I know what would keep me warm.
Five nights is too long for a man
to be apart from his wife.

ROSE

I said a week and don't you flirt
with me, Arthur. You're in trouble.

ARTHUR

And when I am back in our bed in
four nights time you can punish me!

ROSE

(laughing)

You're a bad man. A very bad man.
If the rock stays small you can
come home in four days.

Arthur hold up three fingers. Rose shakes her head and holds up four, blowing him a kiss she slams the barn door. A robin lands on Myeluvve's shoulder.

ROSE (CONT'D)

What's he still doing here? This is
Little Jen's robin. She lent him
when I was pregnant.

MYELUVVE

Who's Little Jen?

ROSE

When I was pregnant with you I fell very sick -- she saved our lives.

MYELUVVE

How did you get sick?

ROSE

I was near the caves when a storm blew up. You mustn't tell your father, but I took shelter there and a bat bit me. Bastard.

Myeluvve's eyes widen.

ROSE (CONT'D)

We won't tell your father about that bit either.

MYELUVVE

How did Little Jen cure you?

ROSE

She came with a bag of diseased bats, all dressed up like a plague doctor. Oh the taste. The crunch of the scabs and the taste of the pus.

MYELUVVE

That's disgusting. I love it!

ROSE

Well, you can't keep a robin you don't need. I'll send him back.

Rose picks up the robin, whispers to it and gently throws him upwards. The robin flies a circuit of the yard and lands once more on Myeluvve's shoulder.

ROSE (CONT'D)

Silly robin. He doesn't know his duty is done.

Rose scoops up Myeluvve and hugs her tightly.

ROSE (CONT'D)

My Little Treasure. All is right with the world and I have everything under control.

Rose gives Myeluvve a kiss on the middle of her left cheek.

EXT. WISE JEN'S PIG PEN - DAY

Wise Jen tips her apple basket over the pig-pen fence and clicks open the gate. An huge Old-Spot pig ambles out - of mythical proportions - as large as a wagon cart.

WISE JEN

Now, Betsy. Don't eat them all.

Wise Jen leans down and collects some men's belt buckles that are strewn about. She pops them into her bag and reaches down once more - a human tooth - and adds it to her collection.

WISE JEN (CONT'D)

Leave some room for afters.

INT. WEST COUNTRY HUNTING LODGE - NIGHT

The Prince and a dozen of his guardsmen sing hunting songs. Two men sit apart at a distant table, out of earshot: GREGOR and ROB; muscular, serious and sober.

BRYN (30s) leans over to Prince John, knocking over his ale.

BRYN

Why won't your brother's men sit with us? Do we stink?

Prince John sniffs at Bryn and then at himself.

PRINCE JOHN

We do stink. Which is good - if you don't stink after a good days hunt then you're not doing it right.

Prince John waves at Gregor and Rob to beckon them over. OSWYN (40s) chews at a chicken bone and shakes his head.

OSWYN

Don't invite them over, Your Grace. They're your brother's men and miserable shits.

Prince John and Bryn stifle their laughter - Oswyn is built like a brick out-house and is the most miserable shit of all. Oswyn glares at Bryn - all ginger beard and scrawny limbs.

PRINCE JOHN

Still, I should extend my hospitality. We are all strangers in the West Country.

Prince John beckons Gregor and Rob again.

GREGOR

We should go over or it'll look suspicious.

ROB

I agree. I can't take any more of his singing. There's been storms and many rivers have flooded.

GREGOR

He's a good swimmer.

ROB

Not drunk he's not. Or the original plan -- a boar hunt.

GREGOR

There's no boar for miles.

ROB

You don't need a live boar to leave a convincing mark.

They grab their ale and stride over to Prince John's table. A young barmaid serves more chicken. Prince John catches Bryn looking at her - the way a hungry dog looks at a juicy bone.

PRINCE JOHN

You're a married man, Bryn.

BRYN

I'm a long way from home, Your Grace.

PRINCE JOHN

We carry our vows with us when we travel.

GREGOR

I may see if I can find some sport with the village girls tomorrow.

PRINCE JOHN

You may drink and hunt. But they'll be no sport with the village girls.

He swigs down another ale and bangs on the table.

PRINCE JOHN (CONT'D)

Now -- more ale! More songs!

Gregor and Rob raise their tankards - a toast to the tusked boar head hanging on the wall above Prince John.

EXT. ROSE'S BARN - DAY

Rose and Myeluvve carry a breakfast basket to the barn. Arthur waits on the threshold - the small rock has been replaced with a medium sized one.

ROSE
How is Thom?

ARTHUR
Hot like a furnace. His skin is mottled.

ROSE
It could be Feather Pox or Bat Blight. I'll warn our neighbours.

Arthur blows Rose a kiss and shuts the door. Rose steps quickly to the cottage and returns with a triangle of yellow cloth fixed to a stick. She draws a single circle in the dirt and stands the plague flag in the centre.

Myeluvve plays in the courtyard and sings a nursery rhyme.

MYELUVVE
Ring a ring o'roses. A pocket full
of posies. Atishoo! Atishoo! We all
fall down.

INT. ROSE'S COTTAGE - DAY

Rose and Myeluvve handle brightly coloured plague flags.

ROSE
The yellow flag is for one circles,
the green is for deadly two circle
plagues like The Black Death.

Rose tries to wipe off a smudge on Eleni's face but it's permanent. She lifts up Myeluvve's sleeve - mottled arms.

MYELUVVE
I like the red plague flag best.
It's pretty.

ROSE
Yes, it has the most embroidery
because it's just for show. Lovely
red roses. But no one uses the red
one anymore. Not for centuries.

Rose pulls up her own sleeves - more mottling.

ROSE (CONT'D)
Eleni, take care of Myeluvve. I'm
going to check on the barn.

INT. ROSE'S BARN - CONTINUOUS

Loud banging at the door and Arthur lets Rose in - she steps over a very large rock by the threshold.

Arthur's finger-tips and lips are blackened, his eyes sunken, he is trembling in pain. Rose shows him her arm.

ROSE
What you have, I have. It has
spread to our daughters too.

ARTHUR
Thom didn't want to leave without
seeing you.

Rose walks slowly to the makeshift bed. Thom shivers in pain, the bones of his nose are exposed from black rot.

The damage to his face is not survivable. Tears roll down Rose's face and she smiles broadly at Thom and kisses him.

ROSE
My beautiful boy. My brave boy.

THOM
I'm sorry Mum. I am ready.

Rose holds her head in her hands as Thom nods to his father. Arthur takes a pillow and presses it tight over Thom's face.

A short struggle and it is done.

Arthur and Rose sit side by side shell-shocked.

ARTHUR
What plague of the Gods is this?

ROSE
There's only one plague that
spreads so fast and reaps all that
it touches. It will come for the
poor folk in the fields and the
King in his castle.

ARTHUR
Can it be stopped?

ROSE
It will come for all creatures of
hoof or paw or foot. All are
kindling for its fire.

ARTHUR
But can it be stopped?

Rose nods. She takes a deep breath.

ROSE
Burn the kindling.

They sit in silence. Tears roll down Arthur's face.

ARTHUR
All our children?

ROSE
None should suffer like Thom. We
don't have time to call for
Mercies, so we must do it
ourselves. I'll give them Owl's
Breath in milk, when they're asleep
carry them here.

ARTHUR
Thom fed apples to the neighbour's
pig. I've killed us all.

ROSE
No, Arthur. You're the best of
fathers. The best of husbands.

Rose kisses Arthur tenderly on the mouth.

ROSE (CONT'D)
But we must all be together.

INT. ROSE'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Rose enters the kitchen with a big smile. She hides the red
plague flag in her pocket. Each child is given a cup of milk.

ROSE
Eleni, make sure Myeluvve drinks
up. I have an errand.

Rose walks up the cottage path and draws three concentric
circles - she replaces the yellow flag with the red flag.

EXT. PIG FARMER'S PIG PEN - CONTINUOUS

Rose collects raspberries from a bush and smears them on the yellow flag turning it red, she draws three concentric circles in the dirt by her neighbour's pig pen and stands the red-stained plague flag in the centre.

EXT. FIELDS NEAR ROSE'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Arthur carries his axe across an open field to the central oak tree with the Nature Gods' face carved on it. He swings his axe and slams it into the face three times.

INT. ROSE'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Through the open front door, Myeluvve watches her mother return up the pathway. Eleni has already finished her glass.

ELENI

Are you going to drink your milk?

MYELUVVE

No, you can have it.

Eleni drinks Myeluvve's milk and returns the empty glass to her. Eleni is asleep by the time Rose enters.

ROSE

Are you not tired, Little Treasure?

Myeluvve tucks her toy rabbit into her dress, rests her head on the table and pretends to sleep. Arthur enters and scoops up Eleni, Rose carries Myeluvve and they head to the barn.

INT. ROSE'S BARN - CONTINUOUS

Myeluvve and Eleni are tucked into bed beside Thom.

Myeluvve's eyes are shut tight.

INT. ROSE'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Rose writes a note, places it inside a blue pot and fixes the lid on tight. She takes a kindling stick, dips it into the fireplace and sets fire to her cottage.

Rose and Arthur fetch two more cups of Owl's Breath milk and they head back to the barn.

INT. ROSE'S BARN - CONTINUOUS

Myeluvve opens her eyes and is face to face with Thom, his eyes opaque, jaw open.

A silent scream and she races outside.

INT. ROSE'S BARN - MOMENTS LATER

Rose gulps down all of her milk and Arthur takes a quick sip before tucking Eleni in next to Thom. Rose sets fire to the barn and the flames take hold quickly.

ARTHUR

Where's Little Treasure?

But he talks to himself - Rose is already asleep on the barn floor, the flames catching her hair alight. Arthur grabs his bow and quiver and races out.

EXT. FIELDS NEAR ROSE'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Myeluvve runs, her eyes are wide, tears stream down her face.

She runs through the plague circle at the bottom of the path, past the plague flag by the neighbour's pig-pen and into the field with the oak tree. Three fresh scar-cuts on its cheek.

Arthur follows. She is young and little. His pace is fast. An arrow whizzes past Myeluvve and she darts to the left. She runs for her life.

ARTHUR

My Little Treasure. You must stop!
We must be together.

Another arrow, this time to her right, then another and another. Myeluvve stops dead in her tracks. She is now by the oak stump, linden tree and spider's web.

She turns to face her father, he stops - no more than a hundred paces away.

He is crying too - he looks more like the hunted than the hunter.

Myeluvve takes a tiny step backwards and a twig snaps. Arthur reaches behind his back and grasps an arrow. He wets his finger and in turn wets the arrowhead. He draws the bow back.

Myeluvve stands still, wide-eyed at her father, he nods slowly at her and she nods slowly back in consent.

Arthur fires the arrow and the path looks true but instead it slams into the linden tree. He quickly fires off another but it's too late.

Myeluvve races straight between the oak stump and arrowed-linden tree, straight through the spider's web and into the vast forest beyond.

Arthur's lip trembles and he cannot stop the tears. He walks back through the fields and past his burning cottage.

He reaches the barn, now fully aflame. Arthur throws his quiver and bow on the ground and enters the inferno.

EXT. PIG FARMER'S PIG PEN - MOMENTS LATER

Clouds gather and the rain comes slowly at first and then a torrent. The raspberry juice on the red flag is washed away.

EXT. ROSE'S BARN - CONTINUOUS

The barn is almost completely burnt down. The rain pours in through the open roof.

EXT. ROSE'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

The fires in the cottage are put out. The rain splashes in through the damaged roof onto the two remaining toy rabbits. The blue pot containing Rose's final message sits on the table. Its lid shut tight.

EXT. PIG FARMER'S PIG PEN - DAY

A PIG FARMER carries a bucket of swill to his pig-pen, whistling a merry tune. He spots the plague flag and ambles over to it, treading clumsily through the three circles.

PIG FARMER
(talking to the pig)
What's this then, Maybel?

He picks up the flag, examines it thoroughly with his big fingers and gives it a good sniff.

PIG FARMER (CONT'D)
Blooming nose neighbours. You're
the healthiest pig I've seen.

He puts his hand through the fence and gives the pig several hearty pats - it's the same pig that Thom fed apples to.

PIG FARMER (CONT'D)
 You're a lovely pig. Aren't you a lovely pig? You'd be even lovelier with some potato mash and gravy! So do you reckon I should just chuck this flag away and keep quiet?

The pig urinates a large puddle of steaming piss.

PIG FARMER (CONT'D)
 You do make a fair point, Maybel. I'll go fetch the wife.

EXT. PIG FARMER'S PIG PEN - MOMENTS LATER

The PIG FARMER'S WIFE examines the plague flag visually.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE
 Did you touch this?

PIG FARMER
 Of course not.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE
 Good. It might have miasmas on it. Does this look yellow to you? It's a very grubby yellow.

The pig snorts loudly.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE (CONT'D)
 And did you touch the pig?

PIG FARMER
 Not at all.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE
 Why is this circle all trampled?

PIG FARMER
 I wanted a clear look at the flag.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE
 You touched the flag didn't you? And the pig.

PIG FARMER
 Yes, I did.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE
 You'll be the death of me. Hold your hands out in front of you so you can't touch your face.

(MORE)

PIG FARMER'S WIFE (CONT'D)

How many circles were here? One or two? One is bad enough but two is dreadful.

PIG FARMER

One. It was definitely one.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE

Good. That all matches. A yellow flag for a one circle blight.

The Pig Farmer gives the pig a look of sheer relief. He dutifully holds his arms straight out as he walks back to his cottage with his wife.

INT. PIG FARMER'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

They wash their hands at the kitchen sink. She busies herself at the stove and is turned away from her husband as he helps himself to a glass of milk from a jug.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE

And the pig won't be able to go to market for two weeks.

PIG FARMER

Two weeks? Who would know?

PIG FARMER'S WIFE

We would know. Where would we all be if people sold diseased meat? And we'll need to put the yellow flag outside our front path too.

PIG FARMER

Why not the green or the red?

PIG FARMER'S WIFE

No one uses the red.

PIG FARMER

It must've been used once upon a time.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE

Never here in the West Country but off Wessex is the Isle Of Vectis. The Red paid them a visit many years ago. It didn't touch the fish nor the birds, but it took the rest. Hoof, foot and paw.

PIG FARMER
I've never heard of Vectis.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE
And there you have your answer.
It's called the Red for the colour
of the sky when a nation sets
itself on fire. They had the good
grace to scuttle their ships when
they were done.

Unseen by his wife, he takes some generous gulps of milk.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE (CONT'D)
And if we're not taking the pig to
market I'll bake cakes to sell
instead. So don't touch the milk.

He spits a mouthful of milk back into the glass and quietly
pours the glass back into the jug.

INT. PIG FARMER'S COTTAGE - LATER

A dozen hot steaming cakes take pride on the kitchen table.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE
Have you sent the starlings yet?

PIG FARMER
Yes. Although why we need to tell
Little Jen about a one circle what-
not is beyond me.

The Pig Farmer's wife dips marigolds and violets into egg-
white and sugar and adds the glazed decorations to the cakes.

PIG FARMER'S WIFE
They'll sell well at market. My
cakes are loved both far and wide.

EXT. WISE JEN'S COTTAGE - DAY

Barrel-man knocks at the cottage door and Wise Jen answers.

BARREL-MAN
The Innkeeper sends his
compliments. The hunting party's
entirely half-cut. Good and ready.

WISE JEN
How many?

BARREL-MAN

Lots. Bring extra potions.

INT. WEST COUNTRY HUNTING LODGE - CONTINUOUS

The guardsmen are eating a hearty breakfast of eggs and bacon washed down with more beer. Prince John leans at the bar. He hands the INNKEEPER a large bag of coins.

INNKEEPER

Round the side but it's not clean.

PRINCE JOHN

Thank you for your hospitality. I trust this covers everything.

EXT. WEST COUNTRY HUNTING LODGE - CONTINUOUS

Prince John drunkenly staggers out and stumbles to the water-trough at the side of the lodge. He plunges his head deep into the icy waters, leans up against the timber frames and shakes the water from his face.

SAMUEL joins him, sober and smartly dressed in his guard's uniform. He is in his 20s - a handsome, self-assured black man and Theo's nephew.

PRINCE JOHN

I'm not in the mood to talk, Samuel.

SAMUEL

My uncle tells me you're often not in the mood to talk. That's when I must stand shoulder to shoulder with you.

PRINCE JOHN

It's a shame Theo is a thief.

Samuel stands shoulder to shoulder by him.

SAMUEL

My uncle is not a thief.

Prince John rubs his wedding band and stares out into the woods beyond. Eyes empty.

PRINCE JOHN

... I know.

EXT. WEST COUNTRY HUNTING LODGE - CONTINUOUS

Wise Jen and Barrel-man walk the dirt track to the hunting lodge. She turns her back as he prays by a Nature-God tree.

WISE JEN

We don't have time for that.

BARREL-MAN

You're usually whistling a merry tune by now.

WISE JEN

This isn't the fun it once was. Nor the challenge. There must be more than fleecing travellers.

BARREL-MAN

We live deep in a wood. What else is there to do?

WISE JEN

Maybe I should leave the wood.

BARREL-MAN

You make good money here, Little Jen. Besides, little people don't do well in castles or cities.

WISE JEN

The Gods made me short but they're not the ones who keep me little.

As they enter the Lodge, Gregor and Rob push roughly past them and head off up the dirt track.

INT. WEST COUNTRY HUNTING LODGE - CONTINUOUS

Wise Jen sits at an empty table and takes out many potion phials from her bag. The Innkeeper comes over, sits opposite and thuds a large bag of coins on the table.

Wise Jen and the Innkeeper exchange a knowing glance.

INNKEEPER

(loudly)

This is not nearly enough potion. I struggle to keep up with demand.

WISE JEN

The ingredients are expensive. I go as fast as I can.

The guardsmen put down their knives and forks and listen in.

BRYN

What are you selling?

INNKEEPER

This is of no interest to you,
young man - enjoy your breakfast.
Good lady, I will only pay a
quarter-sovereign each.

WISE JEN

My price is a half-sovereign and I
can fetch more than that elsewhere.

Wise Jen stands and starts to pack away her potions.

INNKEEPER

Sit down. I'll pay it.

Bryn and GRUFF GUARDSMAN walk over to their table, swiftly
followed by the rest. Only Oswyn remains behind.

BRYN

So what's this potion for?

INNKEEPER

It is for... it is for things that
cannot be said in front of
ladyfolk. The potion is very
effective... and long lasting.

Bryn picks up a phial and gives it a shake.

BRYN

Effective and long lasting? Well, I
have a cousin that might need that.

The Innkeeper waves a hand to dismiss him.

INNKEEPER

My buyers are in greater need than
your cousin.

GRUFF GUARDSMAN

My nephew is also in great need and
he is most deserving.

BRYN

You only have nieces. A half-
sovereign each? How much would my
cousin need to drink?

INNKEEPER

It is not for drinking.

The guardsmen all nod sagely. Oswyn rolls his eyes.

INNKEEPER (CONT'D)

Each phial is good for twenty or thirty applications... dependent upon the... size of the area receiving the application.

BRYN

So the value is excellent!

WISE JEN

(to the Innkeeper)

I am reluctant but if these men have faithfully married relatives, then I could sell them these phials and bring you more next week.

General mutterings from all the guardsmen that this sounds most fair indeed. The Innkeeper takes the deepest of breaths.

INNKEEPER

I agree.

Grins and slaps on backs all round. Phials and coins exchange hands. Wise Jen whispers in the Innkeeper's ear.

INNKEEPER (CONT'D)

The Gentlelady informs me that the potion must be applied in a vigorous up and down motion.

Oswyn chokes on his bacon.

INNKEEPER (CONT'D)

Be sure to give that advice to your cousins and nephews!

The guardsmen cheerfully gather their phials and belongings and head off. Wise Jen counts out her money and gives the Innkeeper his cut.

INT. WISE JEN'S COTTAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Wise Jen arrives home and pushes at a half open door - the latch has been broken. Sweet Jenny stands at the kitchen table sandwiched between Gregor and Rob.

Rob has his arm around Sweet Jenny and is keeping her there by force.

Gregor is seated, carving his knife into the table, relaxed and smiling. A kettle bubbles on the stove.

GREGOR

How disappointing. The second one is not as young. We shall both have to make do with the first.

WISE JEN

My Sweet Jenny, did you give permission for these men to cross our threshold?

SWEET JENNY

I did not.

WISE JEN

You have no rights of hospitality in my house. I require you to leave. Or there will be regret.

The men laugh. The kettle continues to bubble on the stove.

GREGOR

Go wait for me in the bedroom... and get undressed.

Sweet Jenny walks calmly to the bedroom, exchanging a last glance with her aunt.

GREGOR (CONT'D)

Fetch me a drink!

Wise Jen does not move.

GREGOR (CONT'D)

Now, don't make a fuss. We are all friends in a deep, dark wood.

Wise Jen reaches for a green jug and pours two cups of ale.

GREGOR (CONT'D)

You drink some first.

Wise Jen hesitates and then drinks from both cups. Satisfied, both men accept their drinks. Gregor stands, removes his leather belt and begins to undo his shirt buttons.

GREGOR (CONT'D)

(to Rob)

Wait your turn.

Wise Jen moves to a shelf and discretely moves her money purse behind the bat jar but Gregor sees her.

GREGOR (CONT'D)
 Bring that here. No, not the jar.
 The purse.

She takes the purse to Gregor, holding it so that the false bottom of the purse is sideways. Gregor snatches the purse and in holding it upright gold coins scatter everywhere.

ROB
 Gold sovereigns and half
 sovereigns. A ransoms worth.

GREGOR
 They might not be gold. They could
 be pewter painted.

Gregor picks up a coin and bites into it.

GREGOR (CONT'D)
 This one is good.

ROB
 And this. They are all good.

The men bite and check each coin. Sweet Jenny returns from the bedroom, fully clothed.

GREGOR
 I told you to get undressed!

WISE JEN
 Hush now, don't make a fuss. We are
 all friends in a deep, dark wood.

The kettle whistles.

Rob froths blood from his eyes and collapses on the floor. Gregor starts to bleed from his nose and grasps his throat.

SWEET JENNY
 Shall I go fetch Betsy?

WISE JEN
 No, it doesn't matter how much I
 scrub I always feel I've missed a
 spot. We'd better drag them to her.

Sweet Jenny puts on leather gloves, stuffs the coins back in the purse and places it sideways once more on the shelf.

The men are both groaning and trembling. Wise Jen fetches a cup of milk, a knife and whetting stone and kneels by Gregor.

WISE JEN (CONT'D)
 If I studied an eyeball I could
 help with the baker's eyesight.

Sweet Jenny collects Gregor's discarded belt, opens a cupboard and hangs it on a hook. It joins a dozen men's belts already hanging there. She drags Rob out of the cottage.

Wise Jen sharpens her knife on the whetting stone and holds open one of Gregor's eyelids. He is terrified and paralysed. She holds the knife to his eyeball.

WISE JEN (CONT'D)
 I believe this is the part where
 you feel regret.

EXT. WISE JEN'S PIG PEN - CONTINUOUS

Sweet Jenny drags Rob to their pig-pen. In the foreground an elderly woman, MISTRESS THORNE, unseen by Sweet Jenny stops to watch. Sweet Jenny undoes Rob's shirt and slices his belly. The pig begins to eat.

MISTRESS THORNE
 A grockle from Wessex? Is he giving
 you any trouble?

Sweet Jenny looks up startled and then her face relaxes.

SWEET JENNY
 No trouble at all.

Wise Jen drags Gregor up the path.

WISE JEN
 You look well, Mistress Thorne. How
 is your husband's leg?

MISTRESS THORNE
 So much better, your ointment is a
 marvel. I'm going to bake you a pie
 as thanks. Any sort?

They both look down at Gregor, half-dead, one eye missing.

WISE JEN
 That's very kind. Blackberry.

She keeps her distance while Wise Jen drags Gregor over to the pig.

MISTRESS THORNE
 Nice boots.

WISE JEN

You can collect both pairs in the morning.

Wise Jen's hands are on her hips, apron covered in blood.

WISE JEN (CONT'D)

Hurry up now, Betsy! We both know you can go quicker than this.

INT. WISE JEN'S COTTAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Wise Jen and Sweet Jenny remove their blood splattered aprons and wash their hands. A loud knock at the door.

SWEET JENNY

Another Grockle?

Wise Jen answers and Prince John courteously takes two steps back from the threshold.

PRINCE JOHN

I'm sorry to bother you. My hunting party is leaving for home and two of our men are missing. Have you seen them?

WISE JEN

We've not seen them. We're quite deep in the woods.

Sweet Jenny leans over her aunt's shoulder.

SWEET JENNY

How did you find your way here?

PRINCE JOHN

The cobbler sent me. She thought you might have seen something. A lovely old lady, she paid me many compliments about my boots --

SWEET JENNY

-- Why don't you come in?

Prince John sits at the kitchen table, his chair wobbles and he pulls out a large hunting knife.

WISE JEN

Sweet Jenny, please fetch our guest some ale.

Sweet Jenny pours Prince John an ale and slips in a powder.

PRINCE JOHN

Many thanks.

He upends the chair, slices off a slither of wood and sits back down - good and steady. He returns the knife to his belt, raises the tankard to his lips and looks about.

PRINCE JOHN (CONT'D)

Lovely home. You should hide your money purse a little more I think. Not everyone in the woods is of good character.

WISE JEN

Please fetch our guest some water instead -- the ale is off.

Sweet Jenny exchanges his poisoned tankard for a cup of water. It's hard to tell who is the more disappointed - Prince John or Sweet Jenny. Wise Jen looks at his sigil.

WISE JEN (CONT'D)

A Starcross Huntsman?

PRINCE JOHN

Yes. I am John.

WISE JEN

I'm sorry to hear of the King's death. A good and kind king.

PRINCE JOHN

Thank you. He's much missed. But we have King Jaimes now -- also good and kind. So you are Sweet Jenny and you are...?

WISE JEN

I am Little Jen. Although I have grown an inch.

SWEET JENNY

The people in the village call my aunt 'Wise Jen'.

WISE JEN

None in the village call me 'Wise Jen'.

PRINCE JOHN

If you do see the men, don't invite them in. I do not consider them to be safe around women.

Wise Jen tries to keep a straight face.

SWEET JENNY
We will keep an eye out.

Sweet Jenny's eyes widen at the slip of her tongue. Wise Jen glances sideways at the cup of milk containing Gregor's bobbing eyeball.

She stands abruptly and Prince John takes this as a sign his visit is over. He shakes Wise Jen's hand firmly and kisses Sweet Jenny's hand courteously.

Prince John opens the front door and as he steps over the threshold he spots a glint - a missed poisoned coin. He picks it up and bites it.

PRINCE JOHN
A good honest half-sovereign.

He smiles, flicks the coin onto the table and heads off out the door. After a few paces he drops like a stone.

EXT. WISE JEN'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

They race to his side.

SWEET JENNY
He is dead. There is no breath.

Wise Jen ...

... Full 104 page script available to industry professionals upon request.