

This story follows the life of one of the great kings in history, Henry II through the eyes of an obscure concubine, known simply as Ykenai, who was at his side for over 20 years. She was the sweetheart of his youth and mother to Geoffrey Archbishop of York. The narrative undertakes an exploration of the silences and gaps in historical accounts: primarily what life was like for an “other” in medieval England while being attached to one of the greatest kings of the period. Combining historical fact with fiction this is a narrative that makes use of unanswered questions and omissions in recorded history to present major historic figures in a different light.

The Devil's King

Genesis

A historical novel

“We come from the Devil, and we’ll end by going to the Devil.”

– Richard I (*the Lionheart*)

ACCESSION

CHAPTER ONE

Spring, 1149

The coast of Dorset

It felt like being welcomed into the arms of an old friend. Henry stood at the helm of the ship, the early rays of an awakening sun alighting gently on his eyes. He scoped a misty horizon in anticipation of land, revelling in the crispness of the air: fresh and full of promise. As it had been two years earlier, he was acting autonomously in this latest invasion. The Empress had been left to her retirement in Rouen, the Count to his many exploits within the domain of Anjou. These were parents, long wearied by a son whom it seemed no man could subjugate, a son so singular of mind and unrelenting that he would time and time again seek to conquer an entire kingdom whilst not yet at the threshold of manhood – nay, they often said, still in the throes of boyhood. Yet, for Henry, childhood had never truly existed. He'd always felt ready and more than amply equipped to take back what was stolen: the crown shamelessly snatched by a miscreant uncle, Stephen, self-styled King of England. For this he would not seek any person's permission. By divine appointment, by the sacred right of primogeniture, the English Crown was his. It had been acquired by his great-grandfather The Great Conqueror. It passed, albeit because of tragedy, to his grandfather, the king for whom he'd been named, and it was only fitting that he, the second Henry, possess it now.

The theft of the crown by an unworthy usurper rankled him to the point of torture. It sickened and enraged him, how his mother, an Imperial Empress in her own right, had been betrayed and pushed aside by the sordid corruption of Stephen of Blois. With the contemptible man's taking of the crown for himself and the subsequent warring between what became two factions, England was ripped to shreds. This in itself worse of a rancour for Henry. What was it the people now came to say of their land? *Torn asunder, Christ and all his angels sleep.*

Indeed. The English soil squelched as a bloodied mud pile on which godless slaughter had become commonplace; anarchy that knew no bounds. The soul of any man with a conscience couldn't help but weep. Though it was not any man who could see the situation salvaged or any who could ever hope to restore stability to such entrenched chaos. It had to be him, Henry. The masses thought him still a boy, the young son of a lame she-wolf with little to recommend himself. But he would not be trivialised. He had the heart of not just a full-fledged man, but that of an unimpeachable king. This he knew with clarity and confidence.

The shoreline rose to view, iridescent. He breathed deeply, calloused fingers continually working on a tunic buckle before shifting to impatiently tap at a breastplate. Shoulders rising and falling in steady rhythm to the lapping waves pushing up against the side of the ship, he was both eager and anxious. Things had to move quickly. He had to move quickly. The crown would be his, at last. The upcoming knighting ceremony in Carlisle was a first step, a crucial step.

'My lord, our barges are at the ready.' Behind him a knight spoke, one of the modest retinue of service men and mercenaries he'd procured with funding from his great-uncle the King of the Scots. All contingent on plans to unify with the Scots

against King Stephen. More men had been promised and no doubt awaited him along the shores slowly creeping into view. He turned to the knight with revived verve.

‘We take our place then. Disembark!’ The latterly bellowed call to action was a raspy roar carrying on sea breezes to be echoed a hundred-fold when they finally touched land. On beach soils an uproarious welcome rang out from supporters long watching and waiting for just such a healing presence. Many were wearied by the continual bloodshed and lawlessness run rampant, many reduced to dread-filled shells desperate for restoration. Henry FitzEmpress was their hope embodied, and they lauded his return.

Henry himself stoically shouldered this hope. Their applause sparked fresh energy in him. It was a lightning bolt to his bloodstream, igniting in him fierce flames he knew could never be extinguished. Yes, he’d been a boy once, two years ago when he’d first besieged these shores. And, true, the disintegration of that expedition had been notable in its failure. But it had only taken that harsh schooling combined with twenty-four months of warfare training with his father to make more of a man of him than Stephen of Blois could ever be, even at his considerable age of nearly three score. Nearly three score to Henry’s sixteen years. But the aged king would soon learn the measure of might contained in the fiery underbelly of a young Angevin prince.

He moved briskly among the throng of armed men. An ally of old stood at the fore of the crowd, ready with earnest welcome and renewed fealty. As Henry approached him, the man bowed low to his would-be king.

‘Sir Maurice.’ Coming to a halt, Henry firmly grasped the shoulder of the English nobleman. Not only did the majority of Norman barons stand staunch in support of his cause, a great number of Anglo-Saxons had also been added to their ranks. Maurice’s family had been most loyal. ‘It is good to see you, my friend,’ Henry said affectionately.

‘It is good to have you in the country again, m’lord. And not a moment too soon.’ Maurice rose to his feet. ‘Yonder village, I’m told, there is a scuffle. It may be that the Weakling King has had word of your arrival and would wish to prevent your advance.’

‘Not half an hour landed, and we have our first battle,’ Henry smiled. ‘We shan’t waste a moment. We’ll beat these renegades back – nothing will prevail in keeping us from Carlisle. Onwards!’ The steed brought to him was a dark, sturdy animal draped in the red and gold colours of Normandy. Ferocious like the deep-yellow twin lions emblazoned on the cloak about his shoulders. The cloak was a gift from Henry’s father Count Geoffrey and intended to be a reminder of the Angevin heritage raging in his veins. Riding hard from the beach, through the thicket of dewy forests, horse and man synchronised as though they’d been in comradery all their life. And as he drew sword in a charge against the enemy waylaying them, the steadfast steed was an unflinching bearer, carrying him forwards into the heart of the conflict.

The would-be king proved a forceful rider. Having kept as close behind as he could, Maurice tried to dissuade the move. ‘My lord, the men can see to this,’ he yelled above the furore. ‘I would caution restraint! You need to –’

But Henry moved forward without any slackening of pace. Restraint was as good as inaction in his view. He'd come to overrun a kingdom. Sharp steel sparked with sharp steel, soon lodging into flesh. Errant hooves struck out, inflicting mortal wounds. Bodies hit moist earth one after the other. And finally, with deadly efficacy, the scuffle appeared well contained. Secure in his side's advantage, Henry allowed a few of his mercenaries to flank him. They were foot soldiers, brutish men who took to their employment with precision. In addition to being skilled swordsmen, they were fierce combatants who oftentimes sheathed weaponry to simply rely on fists and agility alone. From his loftier vantage point, one such fighter caught his eye. The fellow moved with supreme fluidity, bringing down half a dozen men swiftly. A well-placed boot to the chest in combating one adversary. A perfect disarming by a grab and throttle of another. And so it went until the man stood alone, all who had dared come at him fallen at his feet. Then it was over: Stephen's unwelcoming committee effectively trampled.

Amidst the cheers that followed, Henry dismounted. He beckoned for Maurice. 'Bring me that knight.'

Maurice followed his gaze and, sighting who'd been marked out, gave a nod. Henry watched the knight brought forward. The man's helmet still covered his head, his sword remaining unsheathed. Sunlight caught and glinted off his armour as he moved. He had a small sort of stature, on which this armour seemed to hang heavy, but, as Henry had witnessed moments before, that fact didn't diminish the speed or agility with which the soldier moved. And now with the same swift steps, he stepped forward to bow before Henry.

'My good man, thou art a soldier of the highest order.'

The head remained bowed. 'A soldier ever in your service, lord.' The voice was soft and mellifluous. A feminine voice. Henry's brows furrowed deeper. The sun breaking in through the foliage seemed to hit harder, its glare all the more striking.

The soldier discarded the helmet, letting loose a tumble of errant dark curls. She looked up at him with familiar brown eyes set in a flushed deep-honey face. To be true, it was as familiar to him as his own image. Its smoothness and delicacy were in sharp contrast to the harshness of attire and surroundings. An influx of sensation ambushed his senses, instant recollections of a childhood interval. Flashes of swimming in sun-soaked summers; of leaf tumbles in blustery autumns and play on endless hills of pure white in the winter; of learning the ways of the land and growing to love it. The happiest days of his life.

'Kenai,' he said softly.

A smile touched the edges of her lips. 'My lord Henry. Welcome home.'