



Dublin, August 1348

— Gull's Eye View



he white bird, blown up the Liffey by a sharp wind from the east, had a seagull's eye view of Dublin. Below him was a warren of narrow, crooked streets. Many of the timber houses were ramshackle, some of them on the edge of town little more than thatched clay cabins. To the west the river flowed past grey city walls past the yellow cornfields and green woods of the countryside; past the towers and abbeys and castles of its plain from the wild mountains in the west where it had first come out of the earth. Few Dubliners had ever been to those mountains. Dubliners loved to complain about their home town, bemoaning the crowds, the dirt, the crime, but they rarely left it.

The gull was a Dubliner, and was not going far. He perched on the roof of the great cathedral of Christ Church. The cathedral and the adjoining priory stood on a hill above the river and Fishamble Street wound around the edge of the priory lands. This was where the fish market was. The trestles were piled high with their silvery

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wares. At one end of the street was a pile of fish guts, stinking to heaven. The gull swooped and caught a mouthful, avoiding without effort the flapping hands of a fishmonger, who was loading up his wares for the evening. The gull flew west over the cloister of Christ Church to its main gate. There, he settled himself on the priory wall to eat his dinner in the light of the sinking sun. Below him were two ragged children, huddled against the wall. They were quarrelling.

The two children looked like brothers. They were both brown haired and had dark eyes, though the younger one's hair had more red in it and he was thinner and paler than the older boy.

'Let's go now. There is no one around, and I'm tired and cold and hungry,' the younger one was saying. But the other boy shook his head.

'No point going back to Ymna's if we have no food. There may not be anything to eat if we don't bring a couple of pennies with us. No, let's just try one or two more songs. There might be someone coming out of that inn, and drunk people are often generous.'

'But they stand around for ages and slobber and talk rubbish. And then demand songs from their youth that we don't know,' said the younger one. 'I couldn't believe it when that one with the greasy beard demanded *Sumer is icumin in*. It's nearly September.'

'Oh, Kai, we can make the words up. If they are far enough

gone they won't notice. We should really wait here until Pa comes back, anyway.'

Kai snorted. 'Edward, why are you always so *good*? Who knows when Pa is going to be back? It was dice he was playing, wasn't it, this time? With the farmers and shepherds who had come in with their sheep for the market?'

'Yes. I'm afraid so. Let's hope they don't look too closely at the dice. Come on, one last song. Then, if we get a penny or so, I promise you we will go buy a pie from one of the stalls before they close them down for the night.'

Kai sighed. 'Will we do "Fair Nell", then?'

The two began to sing, and, having finished his meal of fish guts, the seagull put his head to one side and listened. Not bad, he thought, not bad at all. The children had beautiful voices, high and sweet; though there were one or two moments when the voice of the older boy cracked and lost the note.

As they sang, three more boys came along the street. They were dressed identically in the black gowns and white cloaks that marked them as scholars in Holy Trinity Cathedral, known throughout Dublin as Christ Church. The tallest one, thin-faced and cold-eyed, stopped and glared at the singers. 'What have we here? Fairground children begging in the streets? And singing, disturbing the peace? Hasn't the mayor put out orders that those who do not work are not to be allowed within the city walls?'

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The two children stopped singing and the younger one said, 'And what business is it of yours what we do?'

'My father says it is the business of every Dublin man, woman and child to make sure that the city laws are kept. And I won't have some beggar give me cheek. If you have any more to say I will stuff your words back down your crowing throat!'

The boy had no sooner finished then he found himself on his back in the mud of the street. Kai was on top of him, pulling his hair hard. Edward dived in an attempt to pull Kai off. But he soon found himself in a fight with the two other boys, who had not hesitated to join in the scrap. Quite a few blows had been exchanged – Kai was particularly pleased with the one that had gone squarely into the thin boy's nose – when the fight was stopped by a stern voice.

'Children! What's going on? Roland, Jack, I am ashamed of you! And Tom too! You are a disgrace to the priory, fighting in the streets like hobbledehoys!'

Two more people had come along the street. The one who had spoken was dressed in a white gown with a black cloak over it and a cross hung around his neck. The voice and the words were angry, but Kai, looking up at him from the ground, thought that this little monk's face looked good natured. As if he were more used to smiling than frowning. The monk was old and quite plump and his hair – what little there was of it – was white. His back was rather stooped, and

he had dark eyebrows over very bright blue eyes.

The three boys stood up and said nothing, simply looked embarrassed as the thin boy tried to mop up the blood from his nose with his sleeve. He was handed a handkerchief by the monk's companion. She was a tall lady, dressed in sombre colours but in very fine cloth, and wearing a cloak trimmed with sable. She had pale gold hair and a sad, calm face.

Now she spoke:

‘We heard singing as we came along the street. Please, will you sing for us again?’

Edward looked meaningfully at Kai. Surely this fine lady would be good for a penny or two at least? They began their song again. To their surprise, the three attackers joined in with the singing, and music filled the street.

When the song was over, the children looked expectantly at the couple. It seemed that the lady was as generous as they had hoped, for she drew her purse out from under her dark violet cloak. But instead of throwing the money into the shawl at their feet, the lady, a shilling in her hand, handed it carefully to Edward.

‘That was beautiful, boys,’ she said. ‘You both have very fine voices – though yours, I think, is beginning to break. What are your names?’

‘We are of the name Breakwater, and it please you, madam.’ It was the younger who spoke. ‘I am Kai and this is Edward.’

The lady smiled.

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‘And I am Dame Maria de Vincua, and this is my friend, Brother Albert, Canon of the Priory of Christ Church, which is the great building behind this wall. And are you from Dublin? I don’t think I have ever seen you here before.’

This time it was the older boy who answered.

‘We do not live here, though we have been in Dublin before now. We have come from the south, with our father. He is a musician, a medical man, and an astrologer. He can pull teeth and cure aches and make love potions and predict the future of any child, any baby born.’

Both children had been trained from an early age to advertise their father’s wares to passing strangers. But now Edward was sorry he had said anything, for the lady’s face changed. She suddenly looked even sadder than before.

Brother Albert interrupted hastily, ‘That is most interesting, but it is your voices that concern us rather than your father’s business. We have been discussing a most pressing need ...’

‘Heigh-ho, what’s the to-do here? What mischief has my flesh and blood been up to?’

A dark-haired man came strolling down the street, smiling. Ned Breakwater was exceptionally tall, a feature he sometimes regretted, for it made him more noticeable than he might otherwise have wished to be. But in any company he would have been noticed, for he was a handsome man with a glint in his eye and a laugh that rang out

very loud and very often.

‘What’s this? What need is it that my children and not I can fill? ’Tis a strange thought, for, you must believe me, I am a man of many parts. I am an apothecary, a teller of fortunes, a seller of cures and futures. I am a man who can turn my hand to any task I might be set, if it needs a ready wit to do it. I am at your service; Ned Breakwater is my name, though for some reason ...’ his smile grew wider, ‘I am sometimes called Ned Longshanks.’

He took off his cap and bowed low to the lady, so low that his dark head almost touched the ground.

The canon looked unimpressed and the lady merely lifted one golden eyebrow, as if she was not quite sure if she believed all that Ned Breakwater was saying.

Then Brother Albert said courteously, ‘Thank you for your offer, but I fear we do not need any of those services you mention. It is your children’s voices we need, or at least the voice of one of them. This lady here, Dame Maria de Vincua, is as well known for her piety as she is for her wealth in this town of Dublin.’

The lady placed a restraining hand on Brother Albert’s arm. ‘Brother, pray do not ...’

‘No, do not interrupt me, Maria, it is nothing but the truth.’

He smiled and continued, ‘Dame Maria has lately suffered a most dreadful tragedy, for her son died these two months

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gone. Young Philip was a great lover of music, and a most promising singer. For that reason, and for the love of God, the lady has decided to perform an act of great charity. She has made a generous donation to the priory. One of the things she most especially wants is for four choirboys to sing every day in the Chapel of St Mary the White, in the cathedral. She will pay for the boys keep and their education as long as they do so. We already have three boys in the choir; these young rascals here. But we have been desperate to find a fourth boy, a boy with a voice like your son's. Would you like to have your child educated and fed, and perhaps have the chance to become a monk himself?'

Ned looked thoughtful.

'He would live in the priory and be looked after there? I do not know. But perhaps it might serve – what think you, Edward?' He was looking at the older boy.

But now the woman interrupted, 'Pray you sir, a moment. I think it is the younger child we should wish to have. Your elder son's voice is wonderful, but it is beginning to break. In any case, the younger child is more of an age with the other choirboys. His name is Kai, is it not? A strange name. I have not heard it before.'

There was a silence for a moment. The two children looked at their father with wide eyes. Ned coughed.

'He is called after the foster brother and seneschal of that most famous and noble king, the legendary King Arthur

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of Britain. My wife's people are descended from that great knight, the family is partly Welsh, you know. So it is my little Kai you would wish to have serve at the cathedral. God's teeth, I do not know. What say you, Kai?

The younger child glared fiercely at Ned Breakwater.

'No, Pa, no.'

The three boys from the priory had been looking on in surprise. Two of them, thought Kai, looked nice. One had black shining hair and very black eyes, and stood waiting with his head on one side and a faint smile on his face. He reminded Kai of a blackbird; he had the same curious, bright eyes. The other was taller and more solidly built, with fair hair cut in a fringe and wide blue eyes. When they saw that Kai was looking at them they both grinned. It was clear that they harboured no hard feelings about the fight. But the boy who had started the battle, the thin-faced boy the canon had addressed as Roland, looked furious. Now he interrupted angrily, 'Don't tell me you want to bring that brat into the priory? To share our lessons and our table? He stinks!'

Brother Albert said sharply, 'Roland, hold your tongue. I have often had cause to speak to you about the evil that comes from your mouth. This boy has the voice of an angel. And one does not judge any child of God by the clothes they wear or the money they have in their pockets. Tell me, boy,' he turned to Kai again, 'can you read? And do you know any Latin?'

'Indeed he does,' Ned Breakwater answered. 'My chil-

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dren are both scholars. I have taught them well, despite our travelling life.'

The children grimaced. They wondered what their father would say if he was asked about their teacher, Gilbert. He certainly would not mention that Gilbert had been an ex-monk. Gilbert had left his monastery in disgrace after dipping into the altar wine one too many times. But he had not left empty handed; he had taken some of the monastery's treasures with him. After he had used up all his ill-gotten gains, he had made a new career for himself from selling fake holy relics. The Breakwater family had teamed up with Gilbert on the road to Wexford and he had travelled with them. He had taught the children Latin in exchange for a share in their food.

Now the lady said, 'And what of the child's mother? We should speak to her. Will she not have something to say?'

Ned sighed. 'That fair lady is dead these many long years,' he said. 'But I think – can you excuse me awhile? – I must take my son away for a few moments to discuss this idea with him. We will not be long.'

The lady smiled. 'We have time. We will wait here until you come back with your decision. But I would not willingly take a child from his father if he does not wish to go,' continued the lady. 'That would not serve God in any good way.'

She placed her hand gently on Kai's shoulder. 'Child, you

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must come to the cathedral of your own free will, or not at all. But I think you will find that the monks are kind and you will be warm and fed through all the coming winter months.'

She cast a glance at the thin, ragged clothes that Kai was wearing, but said no more.

Kai, dragged unceremoniously away by Ned, whispered fiercely, 'Pa, I cannot do it, you know that I cannot.'

'I know nothing of the kind. This is a most wonderful opportunity to get into the priory. Stay there a couple of months and you'll hear a whistle at your window in the night. Then you can let your dear old pa in. I'm sure the holy canons have good pickings in their treasure house ... chests upon chests of gold and silver!'

As always, it was impossible to tell if Ned Breakwater was joking or serious. He was a trickster, not a thief, but Kai never really knew what he might decide to do next. But this must be the most dangerous trick he had ever tried to play. And Kai did not want to be part of it.

'No, Father, no. They would be bound to find out.'

'Now there is no need for you to shake your head at me like that. They will not find out, not if you are careful. As careful as I know you can be. They are all so innocent, these canons, they will suspect nothing. And you will be safe and sheltered there. It won't be for long, in any case. Then I will send you a message and we can be off on a boat to Wales

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before the canons have woken from their godly slumbers.’

There was another fierce shake of the head from Kai.

‘There is no way it can work. We are sure to be caught. And anyway I’m not going to let you in to steal their things, the fat monk was nice. And the lady was lovely.’

Ned Breakwater shrugged.

‘Then it’s off out onto the road again tomorrow, for I have not a penny left and I think I dare not play dice in this town again. How will that be with you?’

Kai’s face dropped. To be on the road again with no money in their pockets was a horrible thought. A sharp wind blew up from the Liffey and Kai remembered that winter was on the way. Last winter had been very bad, with weeks of snow and ice. The priory would indeed be warm and dry. And the choir boys had looked well fed and happy – well, all of them except Roland. But Roland, the boy who had started the fight, seemed to be somebody who rarely looked happy, no matter how kind people were to him. Kai made a decision.

‘Very well then. I’ll go with them. But Pa, I’m not going to let you in to rob their treasure. And if they find out my secret, you must come and get me, right away. Do you promise me that?’

‘If they do find out your secret, I promise you I will come to you, though the demons of Hell bar the way. I give my word to you, child. Nothing will stop me. Send a message through Ymna, her people will be able to find me. Now, let’s

go back and tell them what we have decided.'

Roland looked dismayed when they returned and broke the news that Kai was to go to the priory. Edward too had a worried look on his face. But the canon and Dame Maria were delighted. Dame Maria said, 'Come back with me to my house. I live not far from here, though outside the gates. It's down by the river near the hospital of St John the Baptist. We will clean you up and find you some warm clothes, something to wear under the priory tunic and cloak. Then you will be fit to make your introductions to the prior.

'Brother Albert, will you go ahead and make a place ready for the child? And you Kai, I will leave you for a moment to say your farewells to your father and brother, and you can catch up with me. Just go westwards through the New Gate and along St Thomas's Street.'

No sooner had she left them than Edward turned to Ned and said fiercely, 'What in Beelzebub's name have you done now? What plot are you brewing? Can you not imagine what trouble there will be if they find out?'

Ned shrugged his shoulders and laughed. 'But they won't, for my little kitten is a wonderful actor, are you not, Kai?'

The children looked at each other. Their father was always like this: teasing, laughing, making everything a joke. Always asking his children if they did not want to have an adventure. Most days, Edward and Kai answered with a decisive *No*. An adventure was very often the last thing they wanted to

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have, especially if it involved being cold and hungry. 'Having an adventure' sometimes meant midnight flights from farmhouses and inns, and hiding in barns during the day so they would not be caught by the angry men their father had tricked. At other times it involved getting stuck half way through windows or explaining to disgruntled ladies that their father's magic potions did not always work. What both children wanted more than anything else was to live like other people, in a house, with four solid walls. To see the same thing day after day. To be bored, rather than cold and hungry and frightened, rather than constantly having to live on their wits.

And yet they both loved their father. Everyone loved their father. He was funny and loving and clever, and would do anything for them: spending his last pennies on a toy or a sweetmeat for them, and doing his best to make sure that they were kept safe in the rough life they lived. Now Kai took Edward's hand.

'Brother, listen, it will be only for a short time. And you know that things have been very hard, lately. If you want to stay in Dublin, whatever the monks give me to eat, I'll keep part of it, and will meet you here to share it.'

Edward shook his head. 'No, if you are safe in the priory, I have my own ideas about what I want to do. Now I will be able to follow my own road. I – I have been offered work, father, an apprenticeship with Giles the stonemason, here in

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Dublin. Do you remember the last time we were here; I went down to his yard? This time I went down again, and tried my hand at working a piece of stone. And he says I have a real gift, and he would be happy to teach me. There is always work for a mason, he says. But I did not say anything, because I could not leave the two of you alone. But now Kai will be in Dublin, so I will stay too.'

It was not often Ned Breakwater looked taken aback, but now even he looked as if he thought things might be moving too fast for him.

'Good Lord, a child of mine a respectable craftsman, and another in the bosom of the church – who would have thought it? Though your mother's people were masons, so perhaps it is the blood from that side of the family that has come out ...'

'I thought you said to the lady that our mother was descended from Lord Kai of the court of King Arthur,' said Kai.

Ned Breakwater grinned. So did Kai.

'Tch, him too, of course. We all have a great many ancestors. Hard to keep track, really. And as they say, "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman?" Or some such words ... Well, it seems that you have made up your mind and there is little I can do about it. And I am glad you are here to keep an eye on Kai, Edward. Now Kai, get you gone as fast as you can after Dame Maria, in case

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she should change her mind. And have a good look around her house for me while you are there.'

'I told you I wasn't going to open any locks for you,' was the response, and then Kai took off at a run towards the New Gate.

Edward looked at Ned Breakwater. Even though he knew that his father loved to live on the edge of danger, he could not believe that he had agreed to this masquerade.

'Pa, Pa,' he said, 'of all the mad things you have ever done, this is the maddest. Have you any idea of the trouble we will all be in if the canons find out that their new choirboy is a girl?'

His father did not reply, but the gull, making his way back towards the river, gave a mocking cry into the east wind. The sun was beginning to sink in the west. Down below him, Dubliners prepared for night. From above, the city was a toy, neatly boxed in by the sea to the east and the mountains to the south. East was where strangers from the sea had come, century after century; and in the mountains to the south the wild Irish lived. Dubliners said that they ate their young. To the north, the great river formed another boundary. Dominating all were the castle and the cathedral. Guards patrolled the battlements of the castle, and the towers dotted along the city walls. As he flew by Wood Quay, the gull swept down to take a closer look at something. Among the ships docked there, he noticed a family of rats run deftly along a rope that tied one of the boats to the moorings. They were black rats, and the gull decided against trying to catch one. Rats were savage creatures, best left alone.