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The Loom and the Lance

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Introduction

Wool made kings and unmade kingdoms. Before coin rang in a coffer, there was the whisper of shears in a spring pasture, the soft clatter of cards, the thud of hammers at the fulling mill. In those sounds lay a country's fortune: fleeces pressed into bales, bales into barrels, barrels onto ships that slipped across the Narrow Sea toward the tall cloth halls of Flanders. This story begins at the edge of such a bale, where a young woman's fingers, quickened by habit and hunger, learn to feel the weight of a world stitched into the weft.

She is a merchant's daughter, reared among tally sticks and sealing wax, where trust is counted by marks upon a strip of hazel as surely as by a prayer murmured in the dim of morning mass. Her England is not the pageant of tournaments and banners alone, but lanes slick with lanolin, dye vats smoking blue as bruises, and the ceaseless murmur of prices rising and falling like the tides that bring the ships. She knows the strength of a good fleece and the weakness of men who call her trade a trifle until their coats thin in winter.

Across the water, in Flanders, looms beat like a thousand hearts. Bruges and Ghent thrum with argument and ambition, their guild halls bright with candles and dark with bargains. Cloth is not simply warmth there; it is law and leverage, a passport and a pledge. A bolt of fine broadcloth can open doors a hammered sword cannot, though swords are never far away. Cities quarrel with dukes, dukes with kings, and in the space between, merchants and spinners and dyers shape their own republic of need and craft.

Into this marketplace of profit and peril rides a knight who would rather not be here at all. His is a world of oaths and lances, of service owed and honor counted in scars. Yet honor proves poor currency against interest due, and he finds that a promissory note can weigh heavier than mail. Reluctant, proud, and not a little bewildered by the language of accounts, he will discover that the balance between blade and ledger can tip a man's fate more surely than the tilt-yard.

Their alliance, uneasy as a sail in a shifting wind, begins not in romance but in reckoning. They share a common enemy—debt, certainly, but also the more subtle powers that attend it: monopoly and monopoly's cousins, corruption and extortion. They will learn how a guild vote can be purchased with a barrel of woad, how a city's peace can be knotted or cut by the price set at a staple, how a woman's labor fills a nation's coffers even as her name is rubbed from the roll. Together, they will test whether a blade can defend a ledger and whether a ledger can forgive a blade.

This is a novel, not a chronicle, but it walks within reach of history's hem. The ports, the mills, the stalls, and the halls you will enter were built by many hands, most of which left no mark upon parchment. Their work speaks instead through texture—the rasp of wool on skin, the clean bite of frost on a dawn crossing, the blue claws of woad under a dyer's nails. In their company you will find the small resistances through which people made their way: a spinner's quiet bargain, a clerk's deft correction, a promise kept when keeping it cost dearly.

If you listen closely, you may hear how cloth speaks: as livery on a lord's retainers, as a widow's only inheritance, as a flag on a mast, as a banner above a march. You may see how a bolt of fine English broadcloth could travel farther and speak louder than any rider—changing hands, changing meanings, paying ransoms, sealing marriages, fueling wars. And you may ask with our merchant's daughter and our unwilling knight what can be woven from courage and compromise when the loom of the world is strung with both.

May this tale carry you from sheepfold to countinghouse, from guild court to quay, from England's green hills to the crowded canals of Flanders. May it set beneath your fingers the rough and the smooth of an age when a nation rose on the backs of fleeces and the dreams of those who combed, spun, dyed, and dealt in them. The loom is strung; the lance is couched. The pattern, like a tide, is already pulling.

CHAPTER ONE: A Bolt of Wool and a Daughter's Oath

The air in the Lincoln warehouse was thick with the scent of lanolin and the dry, earthy smell of sun-warmed dust. It was a smell Elspeth Beaumont had known since her first steps, a scent that clung to her hair and skin like a second vocation. Outside, the midday sun beat down on the cobbled wharf of the River Witham, but inside the thick stone walls, the temperature remained as cool as a cathedral's nave. Elspeth stood before a massive bale of Cotswold fleece, her fingers dancing over the fibers with a speed born of years of quiet observation. She wasn't merely touching the wool; she was reading it, deciphering the story of the sheep's life written in the length and crimp of the staple.

"This lot is brittle, Father," she said, her voice echoing slightly against the high, timbered ceiling. She pulled a lock of the creamy wool and gave it a sharp tug near her ear. It snapped with a dry, disappointing pop. "The summer was too harsh on the high pastures, or the shearers were hurried. If we send this to the weavers in Ghent as prime grade, they'll have our heads before the first shuttle flies. It will pill under the fulling hammers and leave the finished cloth looking like a mangy dog."

Thomas Beaumont, a man whose face was a map of twenty years of maritime trade and fluctuating markets, let out a heavy sigh that whistled through his grey-streaked beard. He leaned against a stack of oak crates, a tally stick clutched in his hand as if it were a talisman against misfortune. "The Flemish are screaming for volume, Elspeth. The Duke of Burgundy has tightened the tolls again, and if we don't get this shipment on the tide, the margins will evaporate before the wool even hits the quay at Sluys. Brittle or not, it represents four hundred marks of our capital."

Elspeth turned, her eyes sharp. She was nineteen, with the steady hands of a surgeon and the mind of a master clerk, though the Guild of the Staple would never officially acknowledge the latter. "And if we lose our reputation for quality, we lose the next ten shipments. If we cannot be honest, we must at least be clever. Sort the brittle locks for the coarser russets and keep the long-staple white for the fine broadcloths. I'll oversee the grading myself. The girls in the sorting room know I can spot a second-grade fleece from across the yard."

Her father watched her, a mix of pride and trepidation warring in his gaze. In the countinghouses of Lincoln and London, daughters were meant to be dowries, assets to be traded for alliances with other merchant houses or, if one was feeling particularly ambitious, a minor knight with a crumbling manor and a clean pedigree. But Elspeth had always been different. While other girls practiced their embroidery, she had been learning the difference between woad and madder, and how to calculate the interest

on a Lombard loan without scratching a single mark on parchment.

The heavy oak door of the warehouse creaked open, admitting a shaft of blinding white light and the salt-tinged breeze of the river. A young clerk, his tunic stained with ink and sweat, hurried toward them. "Master Beaumont," the boy panted, "the King's tax collectors are at the Guildhall. They're calling for an extraordinary levy on every sack of wool leaving the port. They say the war in France requires a 'gift' from the merchants, or the ships stay moored."

Thomas cursed, a colorful string of oaths that would have earned him a week's penance had the local priest been in earshot. "A gift? They've already bled us dry with the last subsidy. This is the third time this year the King's hand has reached into our pockets before the fleece is even off the sheep's back." He looked at the massive pile of wool, then at Elspeth. The politics of London felt far away until they landed on the wharf with the weight of an iron mace.

Elspeth felt a familiar tightening in her chest—not of fear, but of a cold, calculating resolve. She knew the arithmetic of power all too well. Every penny added to the export tax was a penny taken from the spinners' wages or the merchants' security. "They are testing us, Father. They know the Flemish looms are hungry, and they think we are desperate enough to pay any price to feed them. If we bow now, the 'gift' will become the standard. We must find a way to move the prime stock without the King's men seeing the full value of the cargo."

"That's talk of smuggling, Elspeth," Thomas whispered, glancing toward the open door. "The penalties for bypassing the Staple are more than just fines. They take the ships, the goods, and sometimes the man's ears." He paced the length of the warehouse, his boots thudding on the packed earth. "And yet, if we pay, we go to the wall. The Italians are already undercutting our prices in Bruges. It is a pincer, my girl, and we are right in the middle."

Elspeth stepped forward and laid a hand on a bolt of finished cloth—a deep, rich crimson that had cost a fortune in cochineal. It was soft, heavy, and radiated a silent sort of power. "It isn't smuggling if the accounts are simply... reinterpreted. We are merchants, Father. We live by the ledger. If the King wants his share of the wool, he shall have it, but he need not know the quality of every sack. A 'bolt of wool' is a vague term in the hands of a clever clerk. Let me handle the manifests for the *Mary Rose*."

Thomas looked at her, his eyes narrowing. "You? The collectors will expect to see my seal and my hand. They don't bargain with women, Elspeth. They barely acknowledge your presence when you walk through the market." He wasn't being unkind; he was merely stating the reality of the world they inhabited. A woman's labor was the backbone of the wool trade—from the spinning wheels in every cottage to the finishing

shops in the towns—but her voice was supposed to be silent in the halls of commerce.

"They won't bargain with me because they won't see me," Elspeth replied, her voice cooling into a tone of absolute certainty. "They will see the scrolls you provide, and those scrolls will be written by me. I know the customs officers; they are lazy men who prefer a flagon of ale and a quiet afternoon to counting every thread in a bale. We will provide them with a surplus of the brittle stuff for their taxes, and we will ship the gold—the true prime Cotswold—under the cover of 'seconds'."

As she spoke, she felt a sudden, sharp clarity. It was a gamble, certainly, but it was also a choice. She could sit by and watch her father's business, the legacy of three generations of Beaumonts, be slowly devoured by the twin greeds of the crown and the guilds, or she could use the very tools they gave her—the ink, the wax, and the wool—to fight back. This was her battlefield. There were no lances here, no fluttering banners, only the steady rhythm of the loom and the scratch of the quill, but the stakes were just as high.

"I won't have you risking the gallows for a few sacks of fleece," Thomas said, though the conviction in his voice was wavering. He knew as well as she did that his own strength was flagging. The constant travel, the haggling, and the shifting alliances of the Guild of the Staple had worn him down. He was a man of the old world, where a handshake and a steady price were enough. He was not prepared for this new age of predatory taxes and cross-channel intrigue.

"It isn't just about the fleece, Father," Elspeth said, stepping closer. "It's about who we are. If we cannot trade freely, we are nothing but serfs in finer clothes. I swear to you, by the wool on this loom and the name we carry, I will see this shipment through to Bruges. I will navigate their tolls and their collectors. I will make sure the Beaumont mark remains a sign of quality that the Flemish will pay for in gold, not promises."

She spoke with a fierce intensity that startled him. In that moment, she wasn't just his daughter; she was a partner in a dangerous and necessary enterprise. The oath she took was silent but binding, woven into the very fabric of the room. She would become the ghost in the countinghouse, the mind behind the ledgers, and the guardian of the family's fortune. She would learn to speak the language of power, even if she had to do it from behind a screen of modesty and tradition.

Outside, the bells of the cathedral began to toll the hour, a deep, resonant sound that seemed to vibrate in the very bones of the building. It was a reminder of the order of the world—the church above all, the king below it, and the rest of them scrambling for a place in the dirt. Elspeth looked at the tall stacks of wool, each one representing a year of growth, a season of shearing, and the livelihoods of dozens of families who depended on the Beaumont trade.

"Then we begin tonight," Thomas said finally, his voice low. "We will sort the bales by candlelight. If anyone asks, we are merely preparing for the morning inspection. But Elspeth... if this goes wrong, if the King's men find the discrepancy, I will take the blame. You are to know nothing of it. You are just a daughter helping her father with the heavy lifting."

Elspeth nodded, though she knew in her heart that the days of her being "just a daughter" were over. She had seen the way the world worked, the way the threads of commerce were knotted with the threads of politics, and she knew she could no longer be a passive observer. She picked up a pair of shears from the table, the cold iron fitting perfectly into her palm. With a single, deft motion, she snipped the binding on the next bale, releasing the compressed wool like a long-held breath.

The work began in earnest as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long, distorted shadows across the warehouse floor. Elspeth and her father worked in a focused silence, broken only by the rustle of wool and the occasional grunt of effort. They were building a lie, but it was a lie designed to protect a greater truth: that their work had value, and that no king's whim should be allowed to destroy it. Each fleece she graded felt like a small act of defiance, a knot tied in the face of an uncertain future.

By the time the moon was high, the warehouse looked exactly as it had before, yet everything had changed. The prime wool was hidden at the center of the bales, wrapped in layers of coarser, tax-friendly fiber. The manifests were drawn up, the figures tweaked with a precision that would escape all but the most diligent auditor. Elspeth sat at the small desk in the corner, her fingers stained with ink, staring at the fresh parchment.

She thought of the journey ahead—the trek to the coast, the dangerous crossing of the Narrow Sea, and the labyrinthine markets of Flanders. She thought of the men who would try to stop her, and the alliances she would have to forge with people she didn't yet know. Somewhere out there, perhaps in a dusty camp or a draughty manor, was the knight her father occasionally mentioned—a man of iron and debt who might one day cross their path. But for now, he was a ghost, a secondary concern to the immediate reality of the wool.

"Go to bed, Elspeth," Thomas said, blowing out one of the lamps. "The collectors will be here at dawn, and you'll need your wits about you."

"I have my wits, Father," she replied, stood up, and brushed the stray fibers from her kirtle. "And I have the wool. That is more than enough to start with."

As she walked back toward their house through the darkened streets of Lincoln, the city felt different to her. The familiar sights—the timber-framed houses, the flickering

lanterns of the night watch, the distant sound of the river—were no longer just scenery. They were part of a vast, interlocking machine of trade and power, and she had just reached in to turn the gears. She felt the weight of her oath like a heavy cloak, warm and protective, yet reminding her of the cold wind that waited outside. The Beaumont trade would survive, not by the grace of the King, but by the skill of a merchant's daughter who knew that in the world of wool, the finest threads were often the ones you couldn't see.

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