

# Roots of Rebellion

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## Introduction

This book begins in the low hum of the mill and the thick dark of the kitchen, not on the bright edge of a battlefield. Revolt does not spring from nowhere; it is brewed with weak ale, tallied in chalk on a barn door, murmured through a thatch eave at midnight. Roots of Rebellion gathers those murmurs. It is a novel made from the ordinary—letters slipped between sacks, tavern reports scribbled into the margins of delivery notes, and scenes at the field's ragged edge where fear and courage keep

trading places. Though it is fiction, it keeps one ear pressed to the soil of social history, following the arrangements and accidents that teach people how to move together.

At the center is Marta, a peasant woman accustomed to counting seed and stretching soup, who learns to count bodies and stretch time. Her days are laced with labor: gleaning after harvest, haggling for salt, mending boots, standing in the tithe line with her jaw set. She does not wake a leader; she becomes one by the slow arithmetic of necessity—tallying who owes, who hungers, who listens; which doors open at a knock, which mouths retell a secret poorly. In her hands, the familiar tools of village life—ledger, spindle, bread peel—turn into instruments of organization.

The story is braided from multiple strands. You will read letters written in a cramped hand to a sister in another parish, tavern chalkings transcribed and embellished by an idle scribe, notices torn from church doors, and third-person scenes that watch the common fill and empty with resolve. The forms change because revolt changes: it lives in rumor before it marches, in song before it shouts. Between close rooms and open fields, the chapters move like weather—carrying distant thunder, breaking in a sudden downpour, leaving behind puddles where children splash even as soldiers pass.

Attention to money and grain underpins every page. Rents rise, tithes bite, the miller takes his due, and a bad harvest turns patience bitter. You will see how debt binds ankles tighter than rope, how *corvée* days steal time that might have been spent mending a fence that later fails. But you will also see the counter-economy of solidarity: seed shared on trust, a pig slaughtered and apportioned by quiet agreement, a candle posted in a window to mark safe passage. Oaths are made with bread and salt, messages tied with red thread to a wrist, and rumors gallop faster than any horse the lord can ride.

Revolt is not only a question of numbers; it is a question of people, and people are troublesome. Old grudges sour new alliances. A generous act is repaid with suspicion. The blacksmith keeps the gate, the midwife keeps the news, and the alewife keeps the room from breaking before the last word is spoken. Jealousies, jokes, flirtations, and slights braid themselves through strategy. A glance can seal a pact or snap it. The tavern argues like a parliament; the churchyard whispers like a market; the lane at dusk is a court where verdicts are handed down with a nod.

Violence arrives intermittently, like hail—brief, damaging, and always colder than expected. There are moments of bright defiance, and there are muddled retreats where no one agrees what was meant to happen. Negotiations take place in rooms that smell of damp wool and old ink, and history can turn on whether a scribe writes a single word as “must” instead of “may.” We will see how uprisings are sparked by outrage and derailed by fatigue, by bravado, by hunger, by a single bad choice made

in a hurry. We will count the cost without romantic fog, and we will keep watch with those who wait to see if morning brings reprieve or reprisal.

This is not a ledger of facts, and yet it has been balanced against the grain of lived experience. Names and places are invented, but the pressures are not. The pages draw on a long memory: of taxes that never fall, of justice that arrives late and lame, of women who organize under the pretense of charity and men who learn to listen because they must. If the novel leans toward the patient labor of making, it is because movements are made more often at the table than at the barricade.

Read with the understanding that the archive of the poor is always partial and frequently punished. Where there are gaps, the novel speculates; where the record is noisy, it listens for the steady beat beneath. If you recognize your own world in these fields, in these kitchens, in the sly arrangements that keep a community breathing, you are meant to. Revolt is a local thing before it is a headline, a habit before it is a banner.

What follows offers the heat of a fire seen through a doorway and the steadiness of roots working in the dark. If the chapters sometimes feel like letters smuggled under your palm, that is no accident. Keep them safe. Read them aloud when the room is ready. And when the bells sound—whether for market, for mass, or for muster—remember that every clamor grows from quiet hands and from a single, ordinary thought: it does not have to be this way.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Smoke over the Barley**

The smoke came first. Not the thin silver thread that meant someone's porridge was ready, but a heavier blue-gray plume that clung to the barley fields and drifted east over the village of Cheddon like a damp cloth laid across a face. Marta saw it from the ridge above her half-acre and stopped her fork in the dirt. She stood there long enough for the earthworms to feel the shadow pass and move deeper into the soil.

September was nearly spent. The barley should have been stoked three days ago, but Aldric Fenn had pulled his men from the fields to help the lord's steward lay stone along the river path, and no one wanted to cut alone. The grain hung heavy on its stalks, bowed by the wet weeks, and the tips had begun to darken where rain collected in the husks. Marta set her fork against the gatepost and looked east toward Draymoor Fen, where the reed beds stirred in a wind that did not reach the hill.

The smoke was coming from below. Not from a hearth fire, not from a kiln. It was too broad and too still for that. She wiped her hands on her apron, called once to Tom, her

eldest, who was chasing a slow hen along the furrow, and walked down toward the village without hurry but without pause.

By the time she reached the lane that led to the common, others had seen it too. They stood in twos and threes outside their doors, faces pinched, not yet speaking. In a village where most conversation happened at arm's length across a vegetable bed, this quiet gathering was unusual enough to make Marta's stomach tighten. Old Hennicker leaned on his gate with his jaw working, the way he did when he was counting losses in his head. Widow Coris had her shawl pulled tight across her chest, though the day was warm enough for short sleeves.

"It's the Bywater field," said Hennicker before anyone asked. "Half of it's gone."

Marta followed his nod. Beyond the thatch and timber of the nearest roofs, the land rose gently to a fallow strip that belonged to no one in particular and everyone in practice. Grazing there in spring, cut for hay in summer, left to rot in autumn. The lord's reeve claimed a portion for his own use when the season suited him, and the rest was scraped by whoever needed straw. Now a dark stain of fire scarred the browning grass, and the smell came to them—not the clean smell of a hearth fire but something acrid and sour, the smell of wet roots burning.

"Hennicker's boy was grazing his cow there yesterday," said Widow Coris, adjusting her shawl with both hands as though it were the most important object in the world. "He said the ground smelled strange."

"That doesn't mean he set it." Marta spoke before she had decided to speak, and the words came out sharper than she had intended. Hennicker turned his head and looked at her the way a man looks at a woman who has been right when he wanted to be wrong.

"No," he said slowly. "No, it doesn't."

They stood together watching the smoke thin and gray, the way people watch a cart pull away when they know something is in the back of it they do not want to see. The wind shifted and the smell changed, became something closer to peat. Marta thought of the peat bank beyond the fen, where the children sometimes dug on warm evenings, and pushed the thought away.

She should have gone back to her half-acre. The barley would not stook itself, and Tom had no more sense with a sickle than the hen had with a bread knife. But her feet carried her forward, down the slope and into the village, toward the raised ground where the Bywater field met the common track. Already a small knot of men and women had gathered there, drawn by the same slow gravity that pulled floodwater downhill.

Marta recognized most of them. There was Della, the weaver's wife, holding her daughter by the wrist and staring at the blackened earth with an expression Marta had seen on her face only once before, when the midwife had come too late. There was young Salken, broad-backed and silent, who hired himself out to anyone with a load to carry and who, Marta suspected, carried more than loads. There was old Mother Wren, who knew every herb on the hillside and every injury on the lord's land, and who had a way of appearing wherever trouble brewed as though trouble were itself a kind of herb she needed to harvest.

"No fire was lit here," said Mother Wren, crouching near the edge of the burn. She held a sprig of dried something between her fingers and brought it to her nose. "Not by any hand I'd recognize."

"Then how—" Della began.

"The ground remembers heat," said Mother Wren, and stood up slowly, brushing the earth from her knees. "Even when the rain comes."

Marta did not stay long at the burn. She collected a handful of the blackened soil, rubbed it between her fingers, and decided it was not the kind of thing a woman should carry openly if she wanted answers rather than accusations. She put it in her apron pocket and walked home by the lane, not the track, taking the longer way past the churchyard where the stones were so old the names had softened into shapes.

The church did not stand empty, but it might as well have. Father Othin had been replaced two years ago by a younger man sent from the bishop's seat, a thin fellow with a pinched mouth who collected the tithe with the efficiency of a man counting blows. Marta ducked past the south wall, where the ivy was thick enough to hide a child, and let herself into her own yard through the gate that did not latch properly.

The house was small and square, built of the same grey stone as every other house in Cheddon, with a thatch so old it had turned from gold to the color of stale bread. Inside, the air was cool and close, sweet with the smell of drying herbs hung from the rafters. Marta hung her apron on its peg, pulled the soil from her pocket onto a scrap of old parchment, and set it on the table.

Tom appeared in the doorway, still clutching the hen, which had by now resigned itself to being held. "Mama, can I keep it?"

"No."

"It followed me."

"That's exactly why you can't keep it."

He released the hen, which departed with offended dignity, and Marta sat in her chair and looked at the table. The chair was her mother's. The table was her father's. The house had been her husband Edric's, and when he died three summers ago from a fever that moved through the village like a rumor given legs, the house and the half-acre and the small debt to the lord's granary had passed to her the way everything passes to a widow—grudgingly, incompletely, with strings attached.

She opened the kitchen cupboard and counted what was there: a thumb of butter, wrapped in cloth and smelling of the cow that had nearly died in spring; a crock of salted beans, half of which had gone soft; a heel of rye bread so hard it could have been used as a doorstep but would, with water and patience, become soup. She closed the cupboard and stood there with her hands flat on the table.

It would do. It always did.

Outside, the smoke had gone thin. Marta washed her hands at the basin, changed her apron, and took up her fork again. The barley waited. She worked until the light began to fail, cutting and binding, keeping her back to the village and the smell of wet smoke. Tom followed behind her, collecting the stooks in a crooked line that would need correcting before night.

They ate in near silence: a thin barley porridge with the soft beans stirred in and a smear of what was left of the butter. Tom scraped his bowl and left it on the bench outside the door for washing, the way he always did, and Marta washed it in cold water because the fire was too small to waste on hot. She sat with her back against the doorframe and watched the stars come out, one by one, like pinholes in a dark cloth.

She was thinking about the burn. Not the fire—fires were not uncommon at this time of year, when the stubble was dry and someone was always careless with a pipe or a lantern. What interested her was what Mother Wren had said about the ground remembering heat. The soil in that patch had been warm hours after the smoke had stopped. Not sun-warm. Warm the way a body is warm after a fever breaks, spent but still holding the memory of something it had fought.

She did not know what that meant. She was not sure she wanted to know. But she folded the parchment with the soil into three and slipped it behind the stone at the side of the hearth, where she kept the things she did not want the children to find and could not yet bring herself to throw away.

The next morning brought ordinary trouble. Marta went to the mill before dawn, as the custom was, to be first in line. The mill belonged to the lord, though no lord had set

foot in Cheddon in living memory. What the lord owned, the miller managed, and what the miller managed, he took a share of. For every sack of grain the tenants brought, he kept one measure in fourteen, and the stones were set to his hand, not theirs. If your grain was wet, or the stones were dull, or the millstream ran low, you might lose two measures instead. The lord's law said nothing about this. The lord's steward took care of that.

The queue was already long when Marta arrived, lantern-light catching the edges of familiar faces. There was Della, early for once, and Hennicker, and a man Marta did not recognize from the far side of the parish, sitting on his sack with the patience of a man who had waited before.

"They've changed the stones again," Della said by way of greeting, without looking up. "These ones take more. I could feel it in the grain."

Marta set her sack down and listened. She had felt it too, a coarseness in the meal that had nothing to do with the barley. The old millstones had been replaced in the spring by a pair brought up from the lowlands, harder stone cut with a tighter pattern. They ground faster but held less of the grain in the web, and what passed through was darker and heavier. The miller called it an improvement. No one had asked Marta what she called it.

"Hennicker's boy measured last week," said Della, leaning closer. "He lost a full bowl. A whole bowl, Marta. You know his mother can't spare that."

Marta did know. She knew every household in Cheddon the way a weaver knew the pattern of her cloth—thread by thread, color by color, each one pulled tight against the next so that if you took any single strand, the whole thing might unravel in ways no one intended. Widow Hennicker took in washing. Her son tended the village goats. Between them, they owed three measures of barley to the granary and had paid two, and the remaining measure had sat like a stone in the family for a month.

Marta said nothing. She was next at the millstone, and the miller was watching her with his arms folded and his ledger open on the stool beside him.

The miller's name was Brest, and he was not a cruel man in the way that lords in songs are cruel—swaggering and loud, with whips and dogs. Brest was cruel the way a river is cruel: without intention, without malice, simply following the path of least resistance and taking everything it could carry. He was efficient and quiet, and he kept the accounts in a careful hand that left no room for argument. When you brought your grain, he weighed it, he milled it, he measured your flour, and he wrote it down. What the writing said was more generous than what the scales showed, and by the time you reached the bottom of the sack there was always a discrepancy that worked in his favor. No one complained because complaining required writing of your own, and most

of the tenants in Cheddon could not write. Marta could, though her hand was not elegant, and she had learned the numbers from her father, who had kept the books for the village before his hands gave out.

She watched Brest measure her flour into the cloth and saw the heap just barely reach the mark. One finger's width short. It was the width of a finger that separated survival from hunger over the course of a winter, and everyone in that queue knew it.

"Good barley this year," Brest said, not looking up.

"The rain came late," Marta said. "The grain was wet at harvest. You know this."

He looked up then, and there was no expression on his face that Marta could use against him—no contempt, no pity, no apology. Just the flat attention of a man reciting numbers.

"The stones take what the stones take," he said, and he wrote something in the ledger and tore off the page and handed it to her. On it, in his careful hand, was a figure that did not match the mound of flour in her cloth.

Marta folded the page without reading it, tucked it into her pocket, and lifted the sack onto her back. Tom was waiting outside with the cart, small and serious, and he helped her load without speaking. They walked home in the early light, past the common where sheep grazed under the watch of a boy too young to be dangerous, past the alehouse with its shuttered windows and its sign creaking on a single nail—a painted sheaf of wheat that had faded to the color of bone.

She did not say anything about the mill. There was nothing new to say. The mill had always taken its share. Her mother had complained about it. Her grandmother had complained about it. The complaint was itself a kind of inheritance, passed down like a recipe or a prayer, and it kept you warm in the same way a complaint keeps you warm—briefly, and without actually changing the temperature.

The rest of the day passed in the rhythm that Marta knew as well as her own breathing. She fed the chickens, though two of the hens had gone broody again and refused to leave the nest, and the eggs under them were old and would not hatch. She mended a tear in Tom's shirt, using thread she had spun herself from flax that grew brittle at the edges of the road. She went to the well and filled the barrel and carried it back on a yoke across her shoulders, feeling the familiar ache in her left hip that had settled there after the birth of her youngest and never left.

In the evening, she sat with Widow Coris at the Coris cottage, drinking small beer and watching the younger woman's children attempt to behave, which they accomplished for approximately the space of one question before returning to chaos. Widow Coris's

husband had died the previous winter of a cough that turned inward, and she kept the household together with a combination of prayer, shrewdness, and an unwillingness to sleep.

"The Bywater field," said Widow Coris, lowering her voice as though the children might understand the weight of certain fields. "What do you think happened there?"

"I think the ground caught," said Marta. "The peat is close in that corner. One hot day and a careless pipe is all it takes."

"Old Mother Wren does not think it was a pipe."

"Old Mother Wren thinks everything is a sign." Marta took a drink. The beer was thin and slightly sour, the way it had been since the new barley hadn't come through clean. "She thinks the wind carries warnings. She thinks the crows line up to watch the road."

"Perhaps she is right about the crows."

They sat with that. The children shrieked. The evening light came through the window and made the room look like it was dissolving. Marta set down her cup.

"There is a meeting at the alehouse tomorrow," she said. "The steward is sending word about the autumn tally. They will read the accounts."

Widow Coris looked up sharply. "The accounts."

"The accounts." Marta did not need to say what they both knew. The autumn tally was the yearly reckoning of what the tenants owed, and every year the number grew. Not because the land grew less—it was the same land, the same rain, the same thin soil—but because the numbers themselves seemed to shift and multiply like living things. Last year, Edric had still been alive, and he had shouldered the reckoning. This year, Marta would have to face it alone, with her figures and her careful hand and the knowledge that careful hands had not saved her from anything so far.

Widow Coris reached across and took Marta's wrist. "You should bring your father's book," she said. "The one with the old tallies. Let them see what was asked before and what was paid. Sometimes memory is shorter on the steward's side than on ours."

"I'll bring it."

"Do more than that." Widow Coris squeezed her wrist and released it. "Bring someone who can see what they cannot see themselves."

Marta finished her beer, wiped the rim of the cup, and said nothing to that. She walked home in the dark, following the lane by memory, the stars overhead so thick she felt she could reach up and press them like the nails in a cartwheel. By the time she reached her door, the meeting at the alehouse had already begun to rearrange itself in her mind—not as an obligation, but as something closer to a question she had not yet decided how to ask.

She did not yet know that a question could be the most dangerous thing a person carries. That discovery, like most important discoveries, would come later, and not all at once, and at a cost she would not have believed possible on this warm September evening, walking home through the village where the smoke had almost disappeared and the barley waited in the fields like a debt that would never be paid.

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