

The Empty Throne

written by

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1/1. INT. BANQUET HALL. DAY.

SHOT 1: PAINTING - STILL

A banquet table groaning with food. Assembled guests around an empty chair in the very centre. Grandeur. Splendour. But the sense of something rotten beneath. MUSIC - unseen, distant, troubadours. The CRACKLE of a fire.

Next to the empty chair, QUEEN ISABELLA. Young and beautiful but decidedly unimpressed with proceedings. WILLIAM DE BRAOSE sits next to her, his handsome young son WILL DE BRAOSE next down the table. Then his mother MAUD DE BRAOSE. On the other side of the empty chair, WILLIAM MARSHAL, enjoying the atmosphere. Further away, ARCHBISHOP STEPHEN LANGTON and ROBERT DE ROS, more morbid than the other revellers. Two guards stand behind the empty throne. CLEMENCE, a serving girl, and RALPH, a serving boy, stand to either side. Watching, waiting. John's mistress HAWISE sits at the end of the table.

All of them near motionless. Like a painting. Something disconcerting about this. A brooding anticipation, unspoken but in the very atmosphere of the room. Slowly more movement begins - but no one touches any food or drink yet.

A door slams somewhere beyond. The sound of footsteps thudding towards us. The GUARD stands tall and thumps his standard on the ground three times.

GUARD

All stand for his grace the king!

They stand. Gathering themselves to look presentable. KING JOHN walks into frame, back to the camera, arms outstretched to his guests.

CUT BETWEEN THIS SHOT FROM BEHIND OF HIS ARMS OUTSTRETCHED AND HIM STANDING FACING CAMERA, IN FRONT OF HIS SEAT.

He picks up a glass. Raises it high.

KING JOHN

Welcome to the feast. Come. Eat and drink at my table.

The attendees listen to him with varying degrees of enthusiasm with WILLIAM MARSHAL at one extreme and a fed up ISABELLA at the other.

KING JOHN (CONT'D)

Partake of good meat and fine
mead, the fealty I owe to you in
return for your allegiance to me,
your sovereign.

The others raise their glasses and toast the king. On their toast, sudden movement. CLEMENCE and RALPH leap into action to serve the guests as they take food and begin to chatter amongst themselves. KING JOHN lowers himself regally into the empty chair. (LASTING A FEW MOMENTS)

CUT TO:

SLOW MOTION OF JOHN SAT IN HIS CHAIR, THE TABLE GONE THE ASSEMBLED GUESTS STAND AROUND HIM THROWING HANDFULS OF GOLD COINS OVER HIM. CLEMENCE AND RALPH KNEEL BESIDE HIM WITH THEIR TRAYS, HE HAS A WINE CUP IN EACH HAND AND LANGTON STANDS BEHIND HIM ARMS OUTSTRETCHED.

Over the course of the above shot we cut to sudden C/U on the faces of the various attendees.

ROBERT DE ROS (V.O.)

(defiant)

He is my king?

STEPHEN LANGTON (V.O.)

(similarly)

He is my king.

WILLIAM MARSHAL (V.O.)

(with passion)

He is my king.

WILLIAM DE BRAOSE (V.O.)

(with loyalty)

He is my king.

WILL DE BRAOSE (V.O.)

(with a sense of duty)

He is my king.

MAUD DE BRAOSE (V.O.)

He is my king.

HAWISE (V.O.)

(seductive, possessive)

He is *my* King.

ISABELLA (V.O.)

(with resigned contempt)

He is my king.

KING JOHN
 (with complete self
 belief)
 I am the king.

Close on KING JOHN's face. His sheer determination that he is right.

FADE TO BLACK.

1/2. INT. BANQUET HALL. DAY.

Shot: painting. Still.

The party is in full swing. KING JOHN at the centre of things, Clemence is next to him and he has his hand on her side, she looks frightened. ISABELLA looks particularly tired of it. Hawise looks furious. WILL DE BRAOSE looks at the queen from further down the table.

They begin to move.

KING JOHN seizes ISABELLA and forces his lips on her. A cruel kiss, no passion or love. All for display. ISABELLA pushes him off, wiping her mouth to get rid of the taste of him.

KING JOHN embarrassed, a GUARD enters with a sealed parchment that he delivers to KING JOHN. He opens it and reads, concern showing briefly on his face but then wiped clean as he tosses the letter aside. WILLIAM MARSHAL reaches for it. Opens it and reads as KING JOHN continues to drink.

A look of consternation from WILLIAM MARSHAL but KING JOHN still in full swing. He continues drinking and eating as the news within the letter spreads amongst the guests and the atmosphere changes. Discussion. Particularly between WILLIAM DE BRAOSE, WILL DE BRAOSE and STEPHEN LANGTON. Something conspiratorial. John is suspicious.

Eventually WILLIAM DE BRAOSE is sent forwards as an envoy to the KING. He approaches KING JOHN.

Cut to sudden C/U on WILLIAM DE BRAOSE and KING JOHN. KING JOHN angry and impatient.

WILLIAM DE BRAOSE
 My lord, the Irish barons are
 angry. Perhaps this invasion now is
 not wise. Look to the seas and
 bring our men back home.

JOHN WITH THE BARONS KNEELING BEFORE HIM. THEY FACE AWAY FROM HIM.

KING JOHN

The bastards will do my bidding. My will. Am I not king of this isle? We advance. We will take Ireland.

WILLIAM DE BRAOSE is displeased with this result. Cut back to KING JOHN at the banquet, more uproarious than before. Disputes still brewing between the others at the table.

The SERVING BOY delivers a note to WILLIAM MARSHAL. What he reads within concerns him. He gathers himself and approaches the king.

Cut to C/U WILLIAM MARSHAL and KING JOHN. KING JOHN unimpressed - what now?

WILLIAM MARSHAL

There is dissent among the barons in the North. They resent you taking their sons hostage in exchange for their loyalty. They talk of taxes being too high and that Parliament has not agreed the legislation. People are imprisoned without trial; and when they do go to trial we permit bribery in our courts of law. Now is the time to act; quell these disputes or you risk their allegiance.

CUT TO:

JOHN WITH THE BARONS KNEELING BEFORE HIM BUT FACING AWAY. ONE BY ONE THEY GET UP AND LEAVE.

KING JOHN

Their allegiance is not a choice they are free to make. It is what is right. It is their duty to me as king. This is how I choose to rule. Who are they to argue? This is my kingdom and I shall run it how I see fit. I am their God-given keeper. Send out a proclamation to these barons that will keep them in their place.

BACK TO THE PAINTING SHOT

FADE SCENE TO BLACK:

1/3. INT. BANQUET HALL. DAY.

SLOW MOTION OF ISABELLA KISSING WILL DE BRAOSE.

CUT TO:

SHOT: painting. Still.

KING JOHN is still at the centre of the party. But next to him, ISABELLA is deeply bored of proceedings. She drinks, listens without hearing to the courtiers around her. Caught in a man's world that has no place for her. Then suddenly she becomes aware of a gaze on her from the other end of the table. She looks up and meets WILL DE BRAOSE's eyes.

She looks into his eyes and slowly he smiles at her. A smile of understanding, of friendship, of something more. ISABELLA returns the smile, tentative.

KING JOHN begins to take an interest in CLEMENCE who is serving him.

CU. CLEMENCE

CLEMENCE (V.O.)

He is my king.

ISABELLA notices and KING JOHN catches her eye. He is playing ISABELLA and she knows it. Will she rise to it? WILL DE BRAOSE is still watching her.

HAWISE stands. Tall. Regal. Proud. WILLIAM MARSHAL immediately stands to make room for HAWISE on KING JOHN's other side. ISABELLA also stands to make a point. She will not stay to made a fool of. But KING JOHN now stands also and greets his mistress with a kiss to the hand.

ISABELLA turns angrily but is met by WILLIAM DE BRAOSE. His face tells her it would be unwise to anger the king. She relents and sits back down.

The banquet continues much as before. KING JOHN now oblivious to CLEMENCE and more interested in HAWISE. He offers her food and drink. HAWISE accepts all with dignity.

ISABELLA ignores KING JOHN - and everyone else. She sits alone and drinks from her cup. Until finally she looks over and meets the concerned gaze of WILL DE BRAOSE.

WILL DE BRAOSE moves in closer, cupping a hand around her ear to whisper to her. ISABELLA slowly breaks into a smile as he jests for only her to hear.

SLOW MOTION OF ISABELLA KISSING WILL DE BRAOSE. The guards come in and seize him. They stop the queen following.

KING JOHN makes a decision. He waves his hand to dismiss WILL DE BRAOSE. Meets KING JOHN's gaze. Barely disguised contempt between them.

KING JOHN calls for more wine. Dismissing WILL.

WILL DE BRAOSE turns on his heel with contempt to leave, the hem of his cloak flipping up in his wake.

SWEEP OF CLOAK OVER SCREEN TO BLACK:

1/4. INT. BANQUET HALL. DAY.

SLOW MOTION. HAWISE IS LAYING ON THE TABLE, JOHN LEANS OVER HER. ONLY ISABELLA IS IN THE ROOM. SHE WATCHES THEM FROM A DISTANCE.

CUT TO:

CU.

HAWISE
He is my king.

SHOT: PAINTING - STILL.

ISABELLA sits sullenly beside the KING. WILL DE BRAOSE at the far end of the table, drinking moodily, turned away from everyone else.

KING JOHN leering over HAWISE now.

MOVEMENT.

ISABELLA is disinterested until KING JOHN suddenly grabs at HAWISE and pulls her, onto his lap. They flirt. Everyone's attention begins to wander towards the scene as HAWISE LAYS BACK.

ISABELLA gets to her feet she stands next to KING JOHN and HAWISE.

STILL PAINTING.

CUT TO:

SLOW MOTION: KING JOHN STRIKES ISABELLA HARD IN THE FACE AND SHE FALLS BACKWARDS.

CUT TO:

WILL DE BRAOSE is on his knees with a guard behind him. The room is empty.

WILLIAM MARSHAL and the GUARD meet him with their own swords drawn. KING JOHN looks at WILL DE BRAOSE coldly. The hint of a smile on his lips as WILL DE BRAOSE realises he cannot fight a king. He puts his sword back in the hilt. Silently fuming. KING JOHN smiles more widely. He summons the GUARD to him. Whispers something in his ear. The GUARD goes out.

GUARD

The lady Maud de Braose.

This gets everyone's attention, particularly WILLIAM and WILL DE BRAOSE.

CUT TO:

C/U on MAUD DE BRAOSE and KING JOHN.

KING JOHN

You have spoken ill of your king, claimed I murdered my own nephew. Yet you are not spotless. You are not without stain. Does not your own husband owe me a debt? Would you have me punish him?

MAUD DE BRAOSE

I spoke ill, my lord, but do not punish my husband.

KING JOHN

Not your husband? Then perhaps...your son.

MAUD DE BRAOSE

No my lord, please.

MAUD DE BRAOSE's terror as she realises what KING JOHN means.

CUT TO:

SLOW MOTION, KING JOHN TAKES HIS GUARD'S SWORD AND RAISES IT HIGH.

On MAUD DE BRAOSE, sheer panic. Begging now.

MAUD DE BRAOSE (CONT'D)
 No, my lord, please!

Behind, KING JOHN gives an almighty battle cry as he swings the sword high. WILL DE BRAOSE's fear.

On MAUD DE BRAOSE, a mother's fear.

MAUD DE BRAOSE (CONT'D)
 I beg you! Not my son!

Her scream. KING JOHN roars as the sword swings down in his grasp, cutting across the screen as it chops and swishes, the sting of metal whistling through cold air.

CUT JUST BEFORE THE IMPACT.

SWEEP TO BLACK WITH THE MOTION OF THE SWORD:

1/5. INT. BANQUET HALL. DAY.

Back at the banquet, everyone in their places once more. A noticeable empty chair where WILL DE BRAOSE once sat. His father and Mother in grief. Being consoled by ROBERT DE ROS.

The atmosphere is changed. Something darker and more pestilent than before. KING JOHN struggling to keep the party alive with HAWISE and WILLIAM MARSHAL. The repugnance of greed, a stench that surrounds KING JOHN as he calls for more and more food and wine.

CUT TO:

SLOW MOTION: LANGTON ON HIS KNEES. JOHN STANDS OVER HIM AND BLESSES HIM.

CUT TO:

Aside, STEPHEN LANGTON moves into conversation with WILLIAM DE BRAOSE and ROBERT DE ROS. Clear sense of men coming together with shared grievance. The brewing of rebellion.

KING JOHN senses the atmosphere of dissent. He watches for a while, brooding, growing angrier and more internalised. Then suddenly he snaps. Leans forwards. Eyes keen on the rebels.

KING JOHN
 Archbishop Langton. You have something to say.

The action freezes between STEPHEN LANGTON, ROBERT DE ROS and WILLIAM DE BRAOSE.

They look amongst each other, fearful but determined. STEPHEN LANGTON turns and faces the KING, a mask of negotiation on his face.

KING JOHN and STEPHEN LANGTON.

STEPHEN LANGTON

My lord, I implore you. Enough blood has been shed. There has been such cruelty at the heart of this nation. Do not allow any more to be spilt in your name. Speak with your barons, hear their grievances and act now for the sake of your kingdom. For the sake of all your subjects who live in pain and poverty and slavery.

KING JOHN is fuming with the insult to his pride.

KING JOHN

Negotiate? Listen to common people? To men who think they have the right to question my command? They should bow down to me and obey me as their king.

On STEPHEN LANGTON, uncomfortable. Facing the choice of telling the truth to a tyrant or sacrificing all he believes in. Makes a decision.

STEPHEN LANGTON

God looks on you with shame, John.

KING JOHN

(Shouting)
I am your king!

And he gives a great battle cry as he seizes the platter and hurls it forwards.

CRASH TO BLACK AS THE PLATTER COLLIDES WITH THE SCREEN:

1/6. INT. BANQUET HALL. DAY.

SLOW MOTION ON THE BANQUET. An entirely different atmosphere. Suspicious. Dangerous. The brooding of threat and rebellion bubbling closer to the surface.

KING JOHN at the centre of it, closing off to the feasting. Focussed now on his sheer determination he is right. But a creeping sense of his vulnerability.

Aside, STEPHEN LANGTON and ROBERT DE ROS gravitate together once more. They step apart from the rest of the group.

ROBERT DE ROS

It is not treason to wish for a king who serves his country before himself. We deserve a just, faithful ruler. We deserve a say. We deserve more.

In the background, KING JOHN suddenly becomes aware of the conspirators. He watches them, fear growing on his face. He tries to mask it but it creeps into the corners of his eyes and the twitch of his mouth.

Finally he can stand it no more. He gets to his feet. This time it takes a while for everyone to notice he has stood. Conversation slowly peters away as they look to their KING. He waits until he is sure he has their attention.

C/U on KING JOHN.

KING JOHN

Everything I have done, I have done in the name of this country. I have done it in the pursuit of greatness. As is my right, my duty, to make good my role as leader of this realm. I should not be shunned. I should not be hated. I should not be judged. I should be above contempt. I should have your fear. I should have your respect.

C/U ON THE VARIOUS ATTENDEES. INTERCUT WITH ALL THE PREVIOUS SLOW MOTION SECTIONS

WILLIAM MARSHAL

(with tired determination)
He is my king.

WILLIAM DE BRAOSE

(hopeless)
He is my king.

ISABELLA

(with resignation)
He is my king.

HAWISE

(with neutrality)
He is my king.

CLEMENCE
 (with fear)
 He is my king.

RALPH
 (with puppyish anger)
 He is my king.

GUARD
 (with devotion)
 He is my king.

WILL DE BRAOSE
 (with contempt)
 He is my king.

ROBERT DE ROS
 (with a new determination)
 He is my king?

ROBERT DE ROS (CONT'D)
 You are not my king, for I renounce
 you as my sovereign. Do what you
 will to me but you will not quench
 the fire that burns within this
 nation.

KING JOHN
 (shouting)
 He is a traitor! Seize him! I
 demand Justice!

The GUARDS and WILLIAM MARSHAL haul ROBERT in front of the table. He struggles against them, earning himself a few more punches before they send him hurtling into the camera.

THE GUARDS AND WILLIAM MARSHAL MOVE INTO ACTION - IN SLOW MOTION - BEATING ROBERT TO THE GROUND. THEY KICK, PUNCH AND BEAT HIM BLOODY AND BATTERED. KING JOHN WATCHES, SATISFIED.

ROBERT DE ROS stops just inches away from the screen, right up in our faces, bloody and bruised. He addresses us directly.

ROBERT DE ROS
 ROBERT DE ROS Justice. He speaks of
 justice. What does he know of
 justice? What do any of us know of
 justice when we live in such a
 world as this?
 (MORE)

ROBERT DE ROS (CONT'D)

A world where our own human nature is compromised, overruled, destroyed - and day after day man turns on man fuelling the endless wheel of dissent and disease and corruption? You - each and every one of you - what would you do? What would you do for the sake of your freedom? To fight for the very things you believe to be right, to be true? Do you look back on us and think we are nothing? Mere figments of the past, conjured at will by your imagination, as dead as the painted faces of a tableau on a wall? Look again. Look beyond what lies above. See into our souls and see that we are alive. We are alive because you are alive and because of the things that we must come to do, the war that we will wage to protect those basic rights that make us who we are. You will look back and you will see that what we did, we did for ourselves. I am not too proud, I am not ashamed, because it was all we could do. We fought for ourselves and our own rights because that was all we knew to do. But deep down, underneath the names of baron or freeman or villain, we were simply fighting for something worth fighting for. Something that should be freely and equally granted. The right to a voice. The right to say. The right to a future of our own making. We didn't know if the world could ever be a truly freeborn place. Look around you. So much we have gained in 800 years but yet still so far to create a future truly free of pain, of prejudice, of persecution. And now that future is now in your hands. A future for you to make with your words and deeds and the power of your imagination. The power of belief.

(MORE)

ROBERT DE ROS (CONT'D)

Because if people like you and I choose to believe, we choose to fight for something worth more than anything else in this life - the dream of a better tomorrow. Our tomorrow was not perfect but it was possible because of the things we did, the choices we made. Now is your turn; now is your time and I charge you today. What is your dream? What kind of future do you seek? What will you do today for the good of tomorrow? And as you look on us mere shadows, think on this. How will the world remember you? How will history remember you? How will you change the world?

He seems to penetrate through the camera with his gaze, hard, unrelenting and determined. A call to arms. A battle cry. He puts his hand on his sword and walks away. He takes his place at the table once more.

The banquet, much as before. A calmer atmosphere now, after the storm. The guests begin to talk again. The sense of hope, a new future dawning. Smiles where there were frowns, especially ISABELLA.

And at the centre of it, the empty throne.

FADE TO BLACK.