

Mardi's Revenge Sample

Chapter One.

The Ghost.

In the stillness of a post-apocalyptic world that had finally found its balance, the remnants of old societies had begun to knit themselves into something resembling stability. Towns and villages, once razed grounds of despair and lawlessness, now hummed with the promise of a new era. It was in this renewed world that the aging grandson of a girl known only as the Ghost, wandered the land in the footsteps of his great grandparents and his grandmother. With each step, he carried with him the legacy of his grandmother, a legend woven into the very fabric of the recovery.

The Ghost, as she was called, had become a symbol of resilience and vengeance. Her tale was a dramatic saga of loss and reclamation, starting when a ruthless warlord, who had once terrorised their lands, murdered her father and brother and enslaved her mother. In the wake of devastation, she rose from the shadows of her former life, a fierce wraith driven by the fires of retribution and justice. Her grandson, now an old man with silver hair and a voice like gravel, made it his life's mission to recount her story, ensuring that her deeds would never fade into the fog of forgotten history.

As a travelling storyteller, he moved from one town or village to another, each place a patch in the quilt of a recovering civilization. His presence was heralded by the anticipation of stories from the old world and the new, tales of horrors faced and overcome, of humanity's enduring spirit. Tonight, as the orange hues of sunset bled into the horizon, he stood at the front of a bustling village hall, his audience a spectre of eager faces bathed in the warm glow of lantern light. The room settled into a reverent silence; the kind reserved for the beginning of something significant.

Tobias cleared his throat, the sound resonating softly through the hushed hall. His eyes, gleaming with the intense glow of memory and emotion, swept across the faces of the assembled crowd. With a gentle authority, he began,

"Please, everyone, settle down. It's with a deep sense of honour that I introduce my daughter Mardi, named after her great grandmother. Today, she will share with you a story of extraordinary courage and resilience."

He paused, allowing the weight of his words to sink in. "This tale is about a young girl known to many of you as 'the ghost.' Despite her tender age, her petite frame, and facing a path fraught with unknowns, she surmounted odds that many would deem insurmountable. And I am filled with immense pride today as I stand before you all, to reveal that this remarkable girl, that turned a tide in our land, was my grandmother."

His voice softened, imbued with reverence. "Before we begin, let me share something special. After today's reading, you will have the rare opportunity to take a piece of this history home. This book, a tangible connection to our past, is one of the few that has been printed in over two centuries. It represents a luxury, a beacon of knowledge, that we have lived without for far too long."

He stepped back slightly, making room for his daughter. "Now, with no further delay, I will let Mardi's voice carry the legacy of her great-grandmother—a girl whose bravery not only challenged the darkest powers of her time, but also ignited a flame of liberty that burns in our hearts to this day."

Mardi stepped up, her voice trembling with emotion as she looked out over the crowd, their faces painted with anticipation and quiet respect.

Thank you for gathering here today. The story I am about to share transcends a mere recounting of events—it is a vibrant saga of defiance against tyranny, of a young girl’s unwavering resolve to rectify the injustices that shattered her family. She stood alone, a solitary figure against a towering adversary, proving that the strength of one’s spirit can indeed bend the arc of history towards justice. Her triumph was not hers alone; it was a victory for her children, her grandchildren, for all her descendants, me included, and yes, for each of you gathered here today.

She ignited a spark, kindling a fire of fervour within the people, compelling them to rise up, to no longer accept the oppressive yoke they had borne. She awakened a dormant will—a will for freedom that had been suppressed but never extinguished. Her courage ensured that future generations would grow up in a land where they could all breathe the sweet air of freedom.

Let her indomitable spirit envelop you as we turn back the pages of time to unveil her remarkable journey. Now, let us begin. I will read you her story, immortalised in print, ensuring her resolve is never forgotten.

The room fell silent, every listener hanging on her words, ready to be swept away by the stirring tale of a girl whose spirit was unbreakable, whose legacy was their freedom.

Mardi, a slender girl with long, flowing raven black hair, navigated the challenges of a post-apocalyptic world. She found herself alone at a table in the dimly lit ale and food hall of a rundown boarding house, nervously waiting for her parents, my great grandparents, to return, a routine that had become all too familiar. Her father, a news teller and storyteller, led their nomadic family from one hamlet to the next, never settling in one place for long. They sustained themselves by sharing stories and news from their travels, receiving handouts, exchanging trinkets, and providing valuable information to the curious locals who gathered in rented halls or churches to listen for a few hours.

Restlessly, Mardi twirled a knife in her pocket, one of her few possessions. Her gaze swept across the unremarkable individuals at nearby tables, casting a pall of decay over the place. An elderly man idly picked at scabs on his face, a woman struggled to hush her crying baby, and the rowdy drunks vied for attention, creating a scene that repulsed her. At least this time, her mother had taken her little brother, Brody, along with them. He was only six, half her age, but she invariably ended up caring for him. She couldn’t help but question why she, as a girl, was entrusted with this responsibility.

Recalling her own childhood when, at six, she had to wait alone regardless of their location, enduring uncomfortable encounters with older men making inappropriate remarks, clumsiness resulting in spilled drinks, and some patrons even bringing their animals inside. Meanwhile, Brody, being a boy, received preferential care, though he was fragile. Mardi couldn’t understand why the duty always fell on her.

She yearned for the day when she could break free and strike out on her own, rather than facing the prospect of her father marrying her off to an undesirable suitor. She had witnessed such arrangements before; Sylvia, an acquaintance of hers, had been wed to an elderly butcher old enough to be her grandfather. They called it a dowry, but Mardi dismissed it as nonsense. Her own parents were even poorer than Sylvia’s father, with three other children and another on the way. Sylvia, barely fourteen, had been sacrificed to secure her family’s future. Mardi was determined that the same fate would never befall her; she would escape before her father could arrange such a marriage.

The deafening clamour surrounding her made Mardi yearn for her father’s return; he could secure a room for the night, away from this relentless racket. Just as her anxiety peaked, two men unexpectedly occupied her table. She instinctively tightened her grip on the knife, prepared for action. But to her relief, their conversation centred on a topic that didn’t involve her directly: Victor Anhalt.

However, discussing Victor Anhalt was far from a good idea. Simply coming into contact with him or his henchmen could significantly shorten your life expectancy. While this region wasn't exactly his stronghold, with Victor being over fifty miles to the south, he was infamous as a slave trader, murderer, and drug dealer—dealing in anything he could trade. He held villages in terror, demanding tribute, or else he'd abduct people to use as slaves. Those who dared to cross him would mysteriously vanish. This was the first time Mardi had heard anyone speak of Victor other than her father.

She recollected her father's stories, which included the unsettling tidbit that Victor might be related to the infamous Russ, who had instigated the catastrophic events known as the black days over a century and a half ago. Mardi had always prided herself on her fearlessness, but some of the chilling tales her father had shared about Victor sent shivers down her spine.

She absentmindedly pushed a piece of bread around her dish, sopping up the remnants of the soup. Despite being filling, the soup had a taste akin to musty wood. Her disinterest in the meal allowed her to eavesdrop with full attention as the two dishevelled men conversed in hushed tones. It became apparent that Victor had intentions of expanding northward.

These grimy, bedraggled individuals, dressed in tattered clothes, were fervently plotting their escape, and they aimed to do it soon, before Victor's impending arrival in the region. The tone of their conversation conveyed a deep fear of Victor, and although Mardi couldn't catch every word, she did overhear that Victor's henchmen had been conducting raids in villages just fifteen miles away. These ruthless incursions resulted in the slaughter of all adult men, while women and children were taken captive to be sold in the slave markets under Victor's control.

Mardi knew her mother and father would return shortly, but she preferred the idea of sleeping in the woods, a place she felt safe. Her trusty companions, her knife, slingshot, and bow, gave her a sense of security. Whether they would find lodgings for the night or opt for one of the shared rooms depended on their earnings at the door that night and whether her mother had managed to sell any of the jewellery she crafted.

If they made enough, her father would rent a room, but if not, they might end up in one of those cramped shared spaces, where sleep was an elusive luxury. Ten people squeezed into one room meant enduring the cacophony of loud snores, men relieving themselves against walls, and the unfortunate souls who couldn't hold their liquor. While the outside was frigid, with snow on the ground, it still seemed more inviting than those crowded shared rooms.

Mardi was abruptly pulled back to the present as the door swung open, ushering in a blast of icy air that sent shivers through her body. Five burly men clad in heavy, fur-collared leather coats, sturdy boots, and fur hats entered, each carrying swords or long knives at their belts, along with longbows or crossbows in hand. The room fell into an immediate hush as the newcomers made their way to the bar. It was evident that these men were Victor's henchmen, as the two individuals seated across from Mardi swiftly and discreetly departed, as did many others who seemed eager to vacate the premises.

The area around the bar cleared as they approached, and few wanted to remain in their vicinity. Mardi couldn't help but watch them, even though they instilled a sense of unease. Then, she overheard them asking about her father, and the barman pointed in her direction. Fear gripped her, and it took her precious seconds to realise that she needed to flee, and fast.

Snatching her coat, gloves, and hat, she dashed for the door. Thud, a long imposing knife, appeared like magic in the door, but it didn't deter her as she tumbled into the snow. Her immediate concern was to warn her parents, especially at the church—she hadn't paid much attention to its location before, as all these places tended to look alike. She scanned the snow-covered surroundings

for a spire or crucifix on a tall building, but the falling snow obscured her view. Then she noticed that they hadn't pursued her.

Stumbling through the snowy streets, heading up the main road, she finally spotted it—the church.

Battling through the relentless blizzard, Mardi finally reached the grandiose doors of the wooden church. She pushed them open with great effort and stumbled into the small interior.

"Mardi, what's wrong?" her mother inquired with a hesitant tone.

"Victor's men," Mardi gasped, breathless and terrified. "They're at the boarding house asking about Father. They look dangerous. One of them even threw a knife at me when I left. We need to leave, right now."

Her father, a stout man in his mid-thirties with a pacifist disposition, had little chance of fighting his way out of this situation, much to the relief of his family. Her mother, a tall and slender woman in her late twenties, appeared to be the better candidate for a fight, but taking on Victor's men, let alone five of them, was out of the question. Their only hope lay in escape.

Mardi's younger brother remained blissfully unaware, fast asleep under the table. It had been a dismal night; they had encountered only two people, and no one had shown up for the news reading.

They wasted no time packing, and her father returned in a frantic rush.

"Mardi, grab your brother, get on the cart. We need to go," he urged urgently.

The aging shire horse dutifully hauled the four-wheeled canvas-topped cart that Mardi's father had lovingly crafted many years ago, inspired by a picture in a magazine depicting a place called The Wild West. He had constructed the entire cart himself, save for the wheels and axles, which he had bartered from a local farmer. These essential components had originally belonged to a decaying wooden flatbed cart, yet they were surprisingly well-preserved. Over the years, this cart had faithfully served as their home, and it had become an integral part of their nomadic existence.

As they left the village behind, albeit at a slow pace, Mardi felt a sense of relief. She retrieved her bow and slingshot from beneath the seat, ready to defend against any potential threats from behind. When it came to using a bow, Mardi was a skilled archer. She could track and hunt with precision, but her targets had always been animals — rabbits, squirrels, fish, and birds. The thought of having to use her skills against another person was unsettling, and she wasn't even sure if she could do it if the situation demanded it.

The steep slope leading up the narrow track through the mountainous terrain was treacherous even during daylight, and tackling it in the dark added a whole new level of danger. However, they were somewhat fortunate that night, as a brilliant full moon illuminated the landscape, and the snowfall had ceased. Gilbert, Mardi's father, couldn't help but dread the descent on the other side. The road dropped off sharply on one side, leading to a steep wooded slope, then a ravine that plunged hundreds of feet into the trees and a river below. They knew they would need to proceed cautiously, and it would likely be daylight before they reached the valley, where the terrain would become more manageable.

"Mardi, walk about a hundred yards ahead of the horse, and raise your hand if you see any obstacles or rocks in the track. Please keep a close watch," her father instructed as they reached the crest of the track.

Mardi carefully disembarked from the wagon, clutching her bow tightly. She squeezed past the cart, giving the horse an affectionate pat as she made her way through. Slowly, she walked ahead of the cart, taking care to remove any rocks that might pose obstacles along the way, all the while keeping a safe distance from the precipitous drop on her left where the ground sloped steeply all the way to the cavernous ravine.

As she descended, the track widened and levelled somewhat, and on her right, the sheer rock face gave way to a stand of trees. Her father called out for her to halt, signalling the need for a brief break.

"Father, we can't stop now. They'll catch up with us if we do," she urged, her worry evident.

"No, my girl, I need to stretch my legs. We've been on the move for hours, and there's been no sign of them," he insisted. "We'll take a short rest so I can catch a bit of sleep, just an hour or two. The moon's hidden behind the clouds, and I can't see a thing. The most perilous part of our journey lies ahead, and it'll be daylight in a few hours. Get some rest."

Mardi wasn't thrilled about this decision. She had seen those men, and they were specifically looking for her father. They wouldn't stop their pursuit just because her father wanted to rest.

Gilbert, her father, had pulled the cart aside into the shelter of the trees but left the horse tethered to the cart, securing it to a tree before retiring to the back of the cart to catch some sleep, joined by the others. Mardi, however, insisted on keeping watch, deeming her father's decision unwise. She voiced her concerns, which earned her a sharp reprimand for her impertinence. Once she saw them settle down, Mardi grabbed a blanket and her bow, then retraced her steps back up the hill to maintain a vigil from the rise overlooking the path they had just travelled.

She ascended slowly, mindful that working up a sweat could lead to freezing moisture once she ceased moving. The biting cold caused her fingers, nose, and ears to burn, but she pressed on until she reached the summit. As she turned the corner, her worst fears were confirmed. First, she spotted the flickering torches in the distance, and then the unmistakable sound of horse hooves clattering toward her. They were approaching, and she needed to return quickly.

Her heart raced in her chest, pounding like a hammer, and it turned out her concerns were valid. Exhausted, she turned and sprinted back down the hill as fast as her legs would carry her, shouting at the top of her lungs, even though she knew they were over a mile away, and they wouldn't hear her. The thundering hoofbeats grew steadily nearer, and she had no choice but to run faster, though her body protested, fatigued and pushed to its limit.

The thundering hooves of the horses were upon her, and Mardi could hear them panting heavily. As she turned to face them, the lead rider struck her hard in the face with an object, sending her tumbling and rolling down the hill. Her world spun, and she was only half-conscious as she desperately clutched at the ground, seeking anything to prevent her from plummeting over the edge. But there was nothing, and she slid down the steep ground helplessly into the darkness.

Her body was jolted as she careened into bushes, rocks, and trees. Agonising pain coursed through her as she frantically attempted to grasp onto something, anything, to halt her descent. The horrifying thought of the ravine flashed through her mind, and then, suddenly, there was no ground beneath her feet anymore—she was falling.