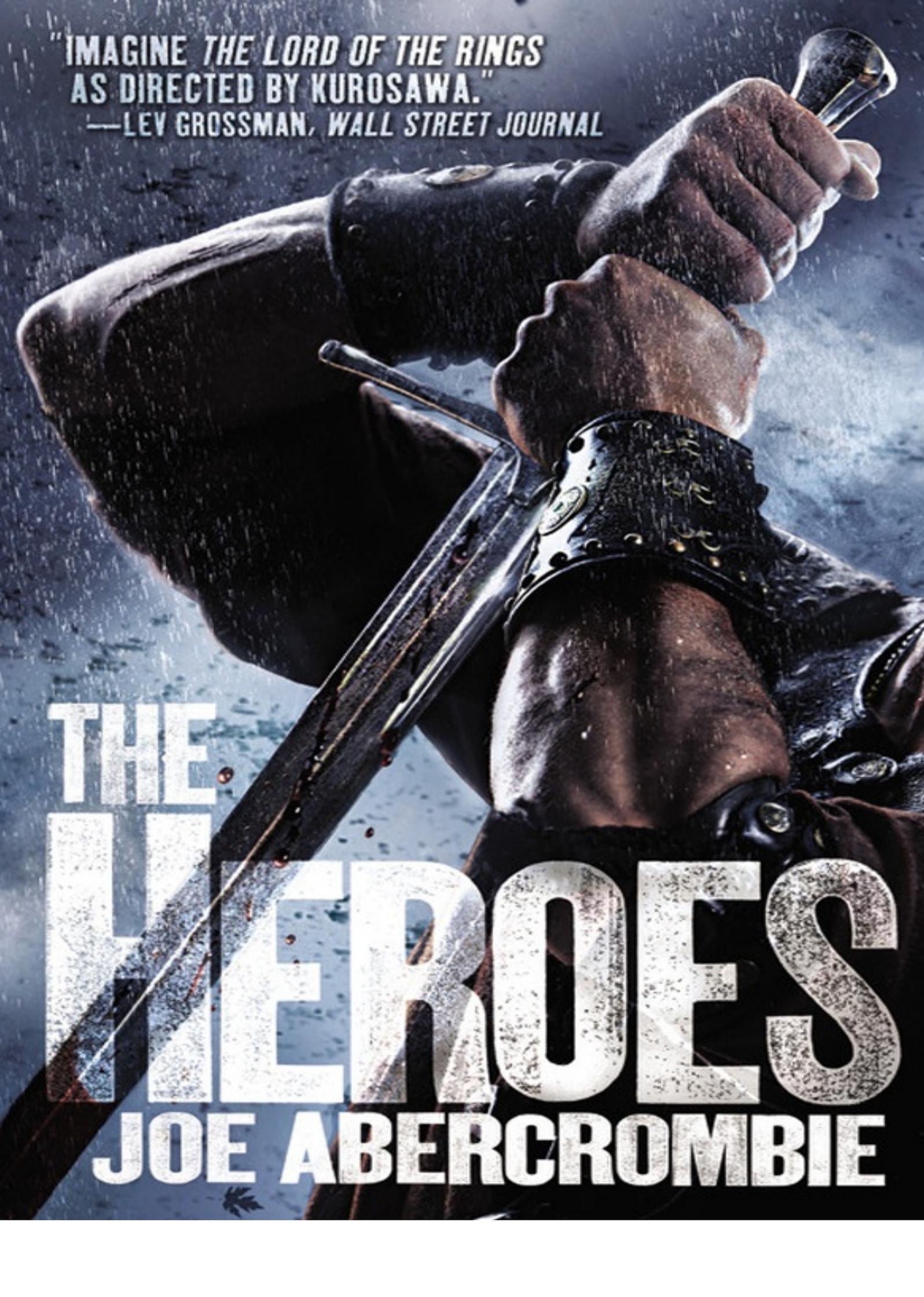


**"IMAGINE *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*
AS DIRECTED BY KUROSAWA."
—LEV GROSSMAN, *WALL STREET JOURNAL***



**THE
HEROES**
JOE ABERCROMBIE

THE HEROES

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For Eve

*One day you will read this
And say, "Dad, why all the swords?"*

Order of Battle

THE UNION

High Command

Lord Marshal Kroy—commander-in-chief of his Majesty's armies in the North.

Colonel Felnigg—his chief of staff, a remarkably chinless man.

Colonel Bremer dan Gorst—royal observer of the Northern War and disgraced master swordsman, formerly the king's First Guard.

Rurgen and Younger—his faithful servants, one old, one... younger.

Bayaz, the First of the Magi—a bald wizard supposedly hundreds of years old and an influential representative of the Closed Council, the king's closest advisors.

Yoru Sulfur—his butler, bodyguard and chief bookkeeper.

Denka and Saurizin—two old Adepti of the University of Adua, academics conducting an experiment for Bayaz.

Jalenhorm's Division

General Jalenhorm—an old friend of the king, fantastically young for his position, described as brave yet prone to blunders.

Retter—his thirteen-year-old bugler.

Colonel Vallimir—ambitious commanding officer of the King's Own First Regiment.

First Sergeant Forest—chief non-commissioned officer with the staff of the First.

Corporal Tunny—long-serving profiteer, and standard-bearer of the First.

Troopers Yolk, Klige, Worth, and Lederlingen—clueless recruits attached to Tunny as messengers.

Colonel Wetterlant—punctilious commanding officer of the Sixth Regiment.

Major Culfer—his panicky second in command.

Sergeant Gaunt, Private Rose—soldiers with the Sixth.

Major Popol—commanding the first battalion of the Rostod Regiment.

Captain Lasmak—a poor captain with the Rostod Regiment.

Colonel Vinkler—courageous commanding officer of the Thirteenth Regiment.

Mitterick's Division

General Mitterick—a professional soldier with much chin and little loyalty, described as sharp but reckless.

Colonel Opker—his chief of staff.

Lieutenant Dimbik—an unconfident young officer on Mitterick's staff.

Meed's Division

Lord Governor Meed—an amateur soldier with a neck like a turtle, in peacetime the governor of Angland, described as hating Northmen like a pig hates butchers.

Colonel Harod dan Brock—an honest and hard-working member of Meed's staff, the son of a notorious traitor.

Finree dan Brock—Colonel Brock's venomously ambitious wife, the daughter of Lord Marshal Kroy.

Colonel Brint—senior on Meed's staff, an old friend of the king.

Aliz dan Brint—Colonel Brint's naive young wife.

Captain Hardrick—an officer on Meed's staff, affecting tight trousers.

The Dogman's Loyalists

The Dogman—Chief of those Northmen fighting with the Union. An old companion of the Bloody-Nine, once a close friend of Black Dow, now his bitter enemy.

Red-Hat—the Dogman's Second, who wears a red hood.

Hardbread—a Named Man of long experience, leading a dozen for the Dogman.

Redcrow—one of Hardbread's Carls.

THE NORTH

In and Around Skarling's Chair

Black Dow—the Protector of the North, or stealer of it, depending on who you ask.

Splitfoot—his Second, meaning chief bodyguard and arse-licker.

Ishri—his advisor, a sorceress from the desert South, and sworn enemy of Bayaz.

Caul Shivers—a scarred Named Man with a metal eye, who some call Black Dow's dog.

Curnden Crow—a Named Man thought of as a straight edge, once Second to Rudd Threetrees, then close to Bethod, now leading a dozen for Black Dow.

Wonderful—his long-suffering Second.

Whirrun of Bligh—a famous hero from the utmost North, who wields the Father of Swords. Also called Cracknut, on account of his nut being cracked.

Jolly Yon Cumber, Brack-i-Dayn, Scorry Tiptoe, Agrick, Athroc and Drofd—other members of Crow's dozen.

Scale's Men

Scale—Bethod's eldest son, now the least powerful of Dow's five War Chiefs, strong as a bull, brave as a bull, and with a bull's brain too.

Pale-as-Snow—once one of Bethod's War Chiefs, now Scale's Second.

White-Eye Hansul—a Named Man with a blind eye, once Bethod's herald.

"Prince" Calder—Bethod's younger son, an infamous coward and schemer, temporarily exiled for suggesting peace.

Seff—his pregnant wife, the daughter of Caul Reachey.

Deep and Shallow—a pair of killers, watching over Calder in the hope of riches.

Caul Reachey's Men

Caul Reachey—one of Dow's five War Chiefs, an elderly warrior, famously honourable, father to Seff, father-in-law to Calder.

Brydian Flood—a Named Man formerly a member of Craw's dozen.

Beck—a young farmer craving glory on the battlefield, the son of Shama Heartless.

Reft, Colving, Stodder and Brait—other young lads pressed into service with Beck.

Glama Golden's Men

Glama Golden—one of Dow's five War Chiefs, intolerably vain, locked in a feud with Cairm Ironhead.

Sutt Brittle—a famously greedy Named Man.

Lightsleep—a Carl in Golden's employ.

Cairm Ironhead's Men

Cairm Ironhead—one of Dow's five War Chiefs, notoriously stubborn, locked in a feud with Glama Golden.

Curly—a stout-hearted scout.

Irig—an ill-tempered axeman.

Temper—a foul-mouthed bowman.

Others

Brodd Tenways—the most loyal of Dow's five War Chiefs, ugly as incest.

Stranger-Come-Knocking—a giant savage obsessed with civilisation, Chief of all the lands east of the Crinna.

Back to the Mud (dead, thought dead, or long dead)

Bethod—the first King of the Northmen, father to Scale and Calder.

Skarling Hoodless—a legendary hero who once united the North against the Union.

The Bloody-Nine—once Bethod's champion, the most feared man in the North, and briefly King of the Northmen before being killed by Black Dow (supposedly).

Rudd Threetrees—a famously honourable Chief of Uffrith, who fought against Bethod and was beaten in a duel by the Bloody-Nine.

Forley the Weakest—a notoriously weak fighter, companion to Black Dow and the Dogman, ordered killed by Calder.

Shama Heartless—a famous champion killed by the Bloody-Nine. Beck's father.

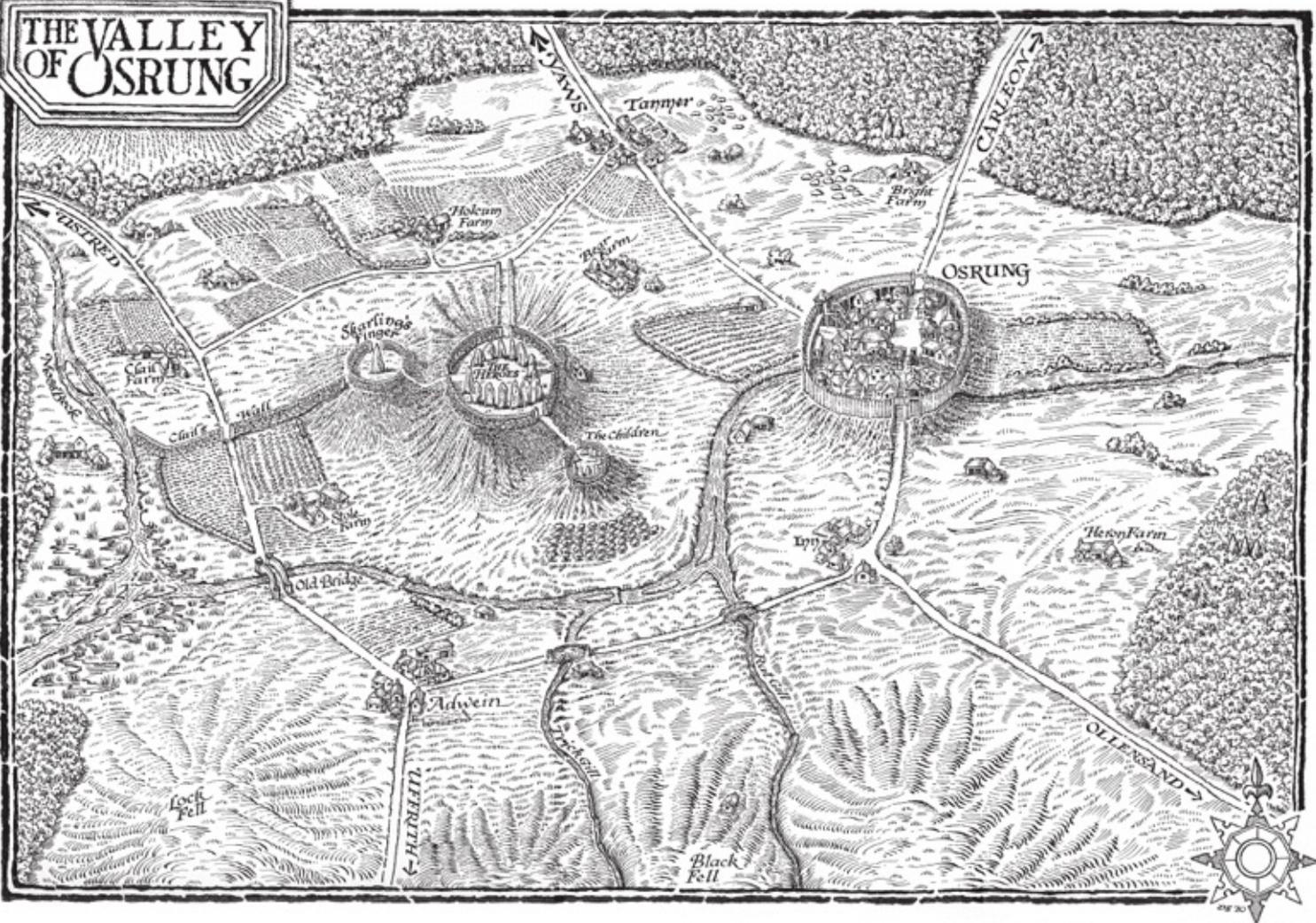


BEFORE THE BATTLE

“Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes”

Bertolt Brecht

THE VALLEY OF OSRUNG



“Too old for this shit,” muttered Crow, wincing at the pain in his dodgy knee with every other step. High time he retired. Long past high time. Sat on the porch behind his house with a pipe, smiling at the water as the sun sank down, a day’s honest work behind him. Not that he had a house. But when he got one, it’d be a good one.

He found his way through a gap in the tumble-down wall, heart banging like a joiner’s mallet. From the long climb up the steep slope, and the wild grass clutching at his boots, and the bullying wind trying to bundle him over. But mostly, if he was honest, from the fear he’d end up getting killed at the top. He’d never laid claim to being a brave man and he’d only got more cowardly with age. Strange thing, that—the fewer years you have to lose the more you fear the losing of ’em. Maybe a man just gets a stock of courage when he’s born, and wears it down with each scrape he gets into.

Crow had been through a lot of scrapes. And it looked like he was about to snag himself on another. He snatched a breather as he finally got to level ground, bent over, rubbing the wind-stung tears from his eyes. Trying to muffle his coughing which only made it louder. The Heroes loomed from the dark ahead, great holes in the night sky where no stars shone, four times man-height or more. Forgotten giants, marooned on their hilltop in the scouring wind. Standing stubborn guard over nothing.

Crow found himself wondering how much each of those great slabs of rock weighed. Only the dead knew how they’d dragged the bastard things up here. Or who had. Or why. The dead weren’t telling, though, and Crow had no plans on joining ’em just to find out.

He saw the faintest glow of firelight now, at the stones’ rough edges. Heard the chatter of men’s voices over the wind’s low growl. That brought back the risk he was taking, and a fresh wave of fear washed up with it. But fear’s a healthy thing, long as it makes you think. Rudd Threetrees told him that, long time ago. He’d thought it through, and this was the right thing to do. Or the least wrong thing, anyway. Sometimes that’s the best you can hope for.

So he took a deep breath, trying to remember how he’d felt when he was young and had no dodgy joints and didn’t care a shit for nothing, picked out a likely gap between two of those big old rocks and strolled through.

Maybe this had been a sacred place, once upon an ancient day, high magic in these stones, the worst of crimes to wander into the circle uninvited. But if any old Gods took offence they’d no way of showing it. The wind dropped away to a mournful sighing and that was all. Magic was in scarce supply and there wasn’t much sacred either. Those were the times.

The light shifted on the inside faces of the Heroes, faint orange on pitted stone, splattered with moss, tangled with old bramble and nettle and seeding grass. One was broken off half way up, a couple more had toppled over the centuries, left gaps like missing teeth in a skull’s grin.

Crow counted eight men, huddled around their wind-whipped campfire with patched cloaks and worn coats and tattered blankets wrapped tight. Firelight flickered on gaunt, scarred, stubbled and bearded faces. Glinted on the rims of their shields, the blades of their weapons. Lots of weapons. Fair bit younger, in the main, but they didn’t look much different to Crow’s own crew of a night. Probably they weren’t much different. He even thought for a moment one man with his face side-on was Jutlan. Felt that jolt of recognition, the eager greeting ready on his lips. Then he remembered Jutlan was twelve years in the ground, and he’d said the words over his grave.

Maybe there are only so many faces in the world. You get old enough, you start seeing 'em used again.

Craw lifted his open hands high, palms forward, doing his best to stop 'em shaking any. "Nice evening!"

The faces snapped around. Hands jerked to weapons. One man snatched up a bow and Craw felt his guts drop, but before he got close to drawing the string the man beside him stuck out an arm and pushed it down.

"Whoa there, Redcrow." The one who spoke was a big old lad, with a heavy tangle of grey beard and a drawn sword sitting bright and ready across his knees. Craw found a rare grin, 'cause he knew the face, and his chances were looking better.

Hardbread he was called, a Named Man from way back. Craw had been on the same side as him in a few battles down the years, and the other side from him in a few more. But he'd a solid reputation. long-seasoned hand, likely to think things over, not kill then ask the questions, which was getting to be the more popular way of doing business. Looked like he was Chief of this lot too, 'cause the lad called Redcrow sulkily let his bow drop, much to Craw's relief. He didn't want anyone getting killed tonight and wasn't ashamed to say that counted double for his self.

There were still a fair few hours of darkness to get through, though, and a lot of sharpened steel about.

"By the dead." Hardbread sat still as the Heroes themselves, but his mind was no doubt doing a sprint. "'Less I'm much mistaken, Curnden Craw just wandered out o' the night."

"You ain't." Craw took a few slow paces forwards, hands still high, doing his best to look light-hearted with eight sets of unfriendly eyes weighing him down.

"You're looking a little greyer, Craw."

"So are you, Hardbread."

"Well, you know. There's a war on." The old warrior patted his stomach. "Plays havoc with my nerves."

"All honesty, mine too."

"Who'd be a soldier?"

"Hell of a job. But they say old horses can't jump new fences."

"I try not to jump at all these days," said Hardbread. "Heard you was fighting for Black Dow. You and your dozen."

"Trying to keep the fighting to a minimum, but as far as who I'm doing it for, you're right. Dow buys my porridge."

"I love porridge." Hardbread's eyes rolled down to the fire and he poked thoughtfully at it with a twig. "The Union pays for mine now." His lads were twitchy-tongues licking at lips, fingers tickling at weapons, eyes shining in the firelight. Like the audience at a duel, watching the opening moves, trying to suss who had the upper hand. Hardbread's eyes came up again. "That seems to put us on opposite sides."

"We going to let a little thing like sides spoil a polite conversation?" asked Craw.

As though the very word "polite" was an insult, Redcrow had another rush of blood. "Let's just kill this fucker!"

Hardbread turned slowly to him, face squeezed up with scorn. "If the impossible happens and I feel the need for your contribution, I'll tell you what it is. 'Til then keep it shut, halfhead. Man o' Curnden Craw's experience don't just wander up here to get killed by the likes o' you." His eyes flicked around the stones, then back to Craw. "Why'd you come, all by your lone self? Don't want to fight for that

bastard Black Dow no more, and you've come over to join the Dogman?"

"Can't say I have. Fighting for the Union ain't really my style, no disrespect to those that do. We all got our reasons."

"I try not to damn a man on his choice o' friends alone."

"There's always good men on both sides of a good question," said Craw. "Thing is, Black Dow asked me to stroll on down to the Heroes, stand a watch for a while, see if the Union are coming up this way. But maybe you can spare me the bother. Are the Union coming up this way?"

"Dunno."

"You're here, though."

"I wouldn't pay much mind to that." Hardbread glanced at the lads around the fire without great joy. "As you can see, they more or less sent me on my own. The Dogman asked me to stroll up to the Heroes, stand a watch, see if Black Dow or any of his lot showed up." He raised his brows. "You think they will?"

Craw grinned. "Dunno."

"You're here, though."

"Wouldn't pay much mind to that. It's just me and my dozen. 'Cept for Brydian Flood, he broke his leg a few months ago, had to leave him behind to mend."

Hardbread gave a rueful smile, prodded the fire with his twig and sent up a dusting of sparks. "Yours always was a tight crew. I daresay they're scattered around the Heroes now, bows to hand."

"Something like that." Hardbread's lads all twitched to the side, mouths gaping. Shocked at the voice coming from nowhere, shocked on top that it was a woman's. Wonderful stood with her arms crossed, sword sheathed and bow over her shoulder, leaning up against one of the Heroes as careless she might lean on a tavern wall. "Hey, hey, Hardbread."

The old warrior winced. "Couldn't you even nock an arrow, make it look like you take us serious?"

She jerked her head into the darkness. "There's some boys back there, ready to put a shaft through your face if one o' you looks at us wrong. That make you feel better?"

Hardbread winced even more. "Yes and no," he said, his lads staring into the gaps between the stones, the night suddenly heavy with threat. "Still acting Second to this article, are you?"

Wonderful scratched at the long scar through her shaved-stubble hair. "No better offers. We've got to be like an old married couple who haven't fucked for years, just argue."

"Me and my wife were like that, 'til she died." Hardbread's finger tapped at his drawn sword. "Miss her now, though. Thought you'd have company from the first moment I saw you, Craw. But since you're still jawing and I'm still breathing, I reckon you're set on giving us a chance to talk this out."

"Then you've reckoned the shit out o' me," said Craw. "That's exactly the plan."

"My sentries alive?"

Wonderful turned her head and gave one of her whistles, and Scorry Tiptoe slid out from behind one of the stones. Had his arm around a man with a big pink birthmark on his cheek. Looked almost like two old mates, 'til you saw Scorry's hand had a blade in it, edge tickling at Birthmark's throat.

"Sorry, Chief," said the prisoner to Hardbread. "Caught me off guard."

"It happens."

A scrawny lad came stumbling into the firelight like he'd been shoved hard, tripped over his own feet and sprawled in the long grass with a squawk. Jolly Yon stalked from the darkness behind him, axe held loose in one fist, heavy blade gleaming down by his boot, heavy frown on his bearded face.

"Thank the dead for that." Hardbread waved his twig at the lad, just clambering up. "My sister's

son. Promised I'd keep an eye out. If you'd killed him I'd never have heard the end of it."

"He was asleep," growled Yon. "Weren't looking out too careful, were you?"

Hardbread shrugged. "Weren't expecting anyone. If there's two things we've got too much of in the North it's hills and rocks. Didn't reckon a hill with rocks on it would be a big draw."

"It ain't to me," said Craw, "but Black Dow said come down here—"

"And when Black Dow says a thing..." Brack-i-Dayn half-sang the words, that way the hillmen tend to. He stepped into the wide circle of grass, tattooed side of his great big face turned towards the firelight, shadows gathered in the hollows of the other.

Redcrow made to jump up but Hardbread weighed him down with a pat on the shoulder. "My, my You lot just keep popping up." His eyes slid from Jolly Yon's axe, to Wonderful's grin, to Brack's belly, to Scorry's knife still at his man's throat. Judging the odds, no doubt, just the way Craw would've done. "You got Whirrun of Bligh with you?"

Craw slowly nodded. "I don't know why, but he insists on following me around."

Right on cue, Whirrun's strange valley accent floated from the dark. "Shoglig said... I would be shown my destiny... by a man choking on a bone." It echoed off the stones, seeming to come from everywhere at once. He'd quite the sense of theatre, Whirrun. Every real hero needs one. "And Shoglig is old as these stones. Hell won't take her, some say. Blade won't cut her. Saw the world born, some say, and will see it die. That's a woman a man has to listen to, ain't it? Or so some say."

Whirrun strolled through the gap one of the missing Heroes had left and into the firelight, tall and lean, face in shadow from his hood, patient as winter. He had the Father of Swords across his shoulders like a milkmaid's yoke, dull grey metal of the hilt all a gleam, arms slung over the sheathed blade and his long hands dangling. "Shoglig told me the time, and the place, and the manner of my death. She whispered it, and made me swear to keep it secret, for magic shared is no magic at all. So cannot tell you where it will be, or when, but it is not here, and it is not now." He stopped a few paces from the fire. "You boys, on the other hand..." Whirrun's hooded head tipped to one side, only the end of his sharp nose, and the line of his sharp jaw, and his thin mouth showing. "Shoglig didn't say when you'd be going." He didn't move. He didn't have to. Wonderful looked at Craw, and rolled her eyes towards the starry sky.

But Hardbread's lads hadn't heard it all a hundred times before. "That Whirrun?" one muttered to his neighbour. "Cracknut Whirrun? That's him?"

His neighbour said nothing, just the lump on the front of his throat moving as he swallowed.

"Well, my old arse if I'm fighting my way out o' this," said Hardbread, brightly. "Any chance you'd let us clear out?"

"I've a mind to insist on it," said Craw.

"We can take our gear?"

"I'm not looking to embarrass you. I just want your hill."

"Or Black Dow does, at any rate."

"Same difference."

"Then you're welcome to it." Hardbread slowly got to his feet, wincing as he straightened his legs, no doubt cursed with some sticky joints of his own. "Windy as anything up here. Rather be down in Osrung, feet near a fire." Craw had to admit he'd a point there. Made him wonder who'd got the better end of the deal. Hardbread sheathed his sword, thoughtful, while his lads gathered their gear. "This is right decent o' you, Craw. You're a straight edge, just like they say. Nice that men on different sides can still talk things through, in the midst of all this. Decent behaviour... it's out o' fashion."

"Those are the times." Craw jerked his head at Scorry and he slipped his knife away from

Birthmark's throat, gave this little bow and held his open hand out towards the fire. Birthmark backed off, rubbing at the new-shaved patch on his stubbly neck, and started rolling up a blanket. Craw hooked his thumbs in his sword-belt and kept his eyes on Hardbread's crew as they made ready to go just in case anyone had a mind to play hero.

Redcrow looked most likely. He'd slung his bow over his shoulder and now he was standing there with a black look, an axe in one white-knuckled fist and a shield on his other arm, a red bird painted on it. If he'd been for killing Craw before, didn't seem the last few minutes had changed his mind. "A few old shits and some fucking woman," he snarled. "We're backing down to the likes o' these without a fight?"

"No, no." Hardbread slung his own scarred shield onto his back. "I'm backing down, and these fellows here. You're going to stay, and fight Whirrun of Bligh on your own."

"I'm what?" Redcrow frowned at Whirrun, twitchy, and Whirrun looked back, what showed of his face still stony as the Heroes themselves.

"That's right," said Hardbread, "since you're itching for a brawl. Then I'm going to cart your hacked-up corpse back to your mummy and tell her not to worry 'cause this is the way you wanted it. You loved this fucking hill so much you just had to die here."

Redcrow's hand worked nervously around his axe handle. "Eh?"

"Or maybe you'd rather come down with the rest of us, blessing the name o' Curnden Craw for giving us a fair warning and letting us go without any arrows in our arses."

"Right," said Redcrow, and turned away, sullen.

Hardbread puffed his cheeks at Craw. "Young ones these days, eh? Were we ever so stupid?"

Craw shrugged. "More'n likely."

"Can't say I felt the need for blood like they seem to, though."

Craw shrugged again. "Those are the times."

"True, true, and three times true. We'll leave you the fire, eh? Come on, boys." They made for the south side of the hill, still stowing the last of their gear, and one by one faded into the night between the stones.

Hardbread's nephew turned in the gap and gave Craw the fuck yourself finger. "We'll be back here you sneaking bastards!" His uncle cuffed him across the top of his scratty head. "Ow! What?"

"Some respect."

"Ain't we fighting a war?"

Hardbread cuffed him again and made him squeal. "No reason to be rude, you little shit."

Craw stood there as the lad's complaints faded into the wind beyond the stones, swallowed sour spit, and eased his thumbs out from his belt. His hands were trembling, had to rub 'em together to hide it, pretending he was cold. But it was done, and everyone involved still drawing breath, so he guessed it had worked out as well as anyone could've hoped.

Jolly Yon didn't agree. He stepped up beside Craw frowning like thunder and spat into the fire. "Time might come we regret not killing those folks there."

"Not killing don't tend to weigh as heavy on my conscience as the alternative."

Brack tut-tutted from Craw's other side. "A warrior shouldn't carry too much conscience."

"A warrior shouldn't carry too much belly either." Whirrun had shrugged the Father of Swords off his shoulders and stood it on end, the pommel coming up to his neck, watching how the light moved on the crosspiece as he turned it round and round. "We all got our weights to heft."

"I've got just the right amount, you stringy bastard." And the hillman gave his great gut a proud p like a father might give his son's head.

“Chief.” Agrick strode into the firelight, bow loose in his hand and an arrow dangling between two fingers.

“They away?” asked Craw.

“Watched ’em down past the Children. They’re crossing the river now, heading towards Osrung. Athroc’s keeping a watch on ’em, though. We’ll know if they double back.”

“You reckon they will?” asked Wonderful. “Hardbread’s cut from the old cloth. He might smile, but he won’t have liked this any. You trust that old bastard?”

Craw frowned into the night. “ ’Bout as much as I’d trust anyone these days.”

“Little as that? Best post guards.”

“Aye,” said Brack. “And make sure ours stay awake.”

Craw thumped his arm. “Nice o’ you to volunteer for first shift.”

“Your belly can keep you company,” said Yon.

Craw thumped his arm next. “Glad you’re in favour, you can go second.”

“Shit!”

“Drofd!”

You could tell the curly lad was the newest of the crew ’cause he actually hurried up with some snap. “Aye, Chief?”

“Take the saddle horse and head back up the Yaws Road. Not sure whose lads you’ll meet first—Ironhead’s most likely, or maybe Tenways’. Let ’em know we ran into one of the Dogman’s dozens and the Heroes. More’n likely just scouting, but...”

“Just scouting.” Wonderful nibbled some scab off one knuckle and spat it from the tip of her tongue. “The Union are miles away, split up and spread out, trying to make straight lines out of a country with none.”

“More’n likely. But hop on the horse and pass on the message anyway.”

“Now?” Drofd’s face was all dismay. “In the dark?”

“No, next summer’ll be fine,” snapped Wonderful. “Yes, now, fool, all you’ve got to do is follow road.”

Drofd heaved a sigh. “Hero’s work.”

“All war work is hero’s work, boy,” said Craw. He’d rather have sent someone else, but then they’ve been arguing ’til dawn over why the new lad wasn’t going. There are right ways of doing things a man can’t just step around.

“Right y’are, Chief. See you in a few days, I reckon. And with a sore arse, no doubt.”

“Why?” And Wonderful gave a few thrusts of her hips. “Tenways a special friend o’ yours is he?” That got some laughs. Brack’s big rumble, Scorry’s little chuckle, even Yon’s frown got a touch softer which meant he had to be rightly tickled.

“Ha, bloody ha.” And Drofd stalked off into the night to find the horse and make a start.

“I hear chicken fat can ease the passage!” Wonderful called after him, Whirrun’s cackle echoing around the Heroes and off into the empty dark.

With the excitement over Craw was starting to feel all burned out. He dropped down beside the fire, wincing as his knees bent low, the earth still warm from Hardbread’s rump. Scorry had found a place on the far side, sharpening his knife, the scraping of metal marking the rhythm to his soft, high singing. A song of Skarling Hoodless, greatest hero of the North, who brought the clans together long ago to drive the Union out. Craw sat and listened, chewed at the painful skin around his fingernails and thought about how he really had to stop doing it.

Whirrun set the Father of Swords down, squatted on his haunches and pulled out the old bag he

kept his runes in. "Best do a reading, eh?"

"You have to?" muttered Yon.

"Why? Scared o' what the signs might tell you?"

"Scared you'll spout a stack of nonsense and I'll lie awake half the night trying to make sense of it."

"Guess we'll see." Whirrun emptied his runes into his cupped hand, spat on 'em then tossed 'em down by the fire.

Craw couldn't help craning over to see, though he couldn't read the damn things for any money.

"What do the runes say, Cracknut?"

"The runes say..." Whirrun squinted down like he was trying to pick out something a long way off.

"There's going to be blood."

Wonderful snorted. "They always say that."

"Aye." Whirrun wrapped himself in his coat, nuzzled up against the hilt of his sword like a lover, eyes already shut. "But lately they're right more often than not."

Craw frowned around at the Heroes, forgotten giants, standing stubborn guard over nothing. "Those are the times," he muttered.

The Peacemaker

He stood by the window, one hand up on the stone, fingertips drumming, drumming, drumming. Frowning off across Carleon. Across the maze of cobbled streets, the tangle of steep slate roofs, the looming city walls his father built, all turned shiny black by the drizzle. Into the hazy fields beyond, past the fork of the grey river and towards the streaky rumour of hills at the head of the valley. As if, by sulking hard enough, he could see further. Over two score miles of broken country to Black Dow's scattered army. Where the fate of the North was being decided.

Without him.

"All I want is just for everyone to do what I tell them. Is that too much to ask?"

Seff slid up behind him, belly pressing into his back. "I'd say it's no more than good sense on the part."

"I know what's best anyway, don't I?"

"I do, and I tell you what it is, so... yes."

"It seems there are a few pig-headed bastards in the North who don't realise we have all the answers."

Her hand slipped up his arm and trapped his restless fingers against the stone. "Men don't like to come out for peace, but they will. You'll see."

"And until then, like all visionaries, I find myself spurned. Scorned. Exiled."

"Until then, you find yourself locked in a room with your wife. Is that so bad?"

"There's nowhere I'd rather be," he lied.

"Liar," she whispered, lips tickling his ear. "You're almost as much of a liar as they say you are. You'd rather be out there, beside your brother, with your armour on." Her hands slid under his armpits and across his chest, giving him a ticklish shiver. "Hacking the heads from cartloads of Southerners."

"Murder is my favourite hobby, as you know."

"You've killed more men than Skarling."

"And I'd wear my armour to bed if I could."

"It's only concern for my soft, soft skin that stops you."

"But severed heads are prone to squirt." He wriggled around to face her and pushed one lazy fingertip into her breastbone. "I prefer a quick thrust through the heart."

"Just like you've skewered mine. Aren't you the swordsman?"

He squeaked as he felt her hand between his legs and slid away sniggering across the wall, arms up to fend her off. "All right, I admit it! I'm more lover than fighter!"

"At last the truth. Only look what you've done to me." Putting one hand on her stomach and giving him a disapproving frown. It turned into a smile as he came close, slid his hand over hers, fingertips between hers, stroking her swollen belly.

"It's a boy," she whispered. "I feel it. An heir to the North. You'll be king, and then—"

"Shhhhh." And he stopped her mouth with a kiss. There was no way of knowing when someone might be listening, and anyway, "I've got an older brother, remember?"

"A pinhead of an older brother."

Calder winced, but didn't deny it. He sighed as he looked down at that strange, wonderful, frightening belly of hers. "My father always said there's nothing more important than family." Except power. "Besides, there's no point arguing over what we don't have. Black Dow's the one who wears

my father's chain. Black Dow's the one we need to worry on."

"Black Dow's nothing but a one-eared thug."

"A thug with all the North under his boot and its mightiest War Chiefs taking his say-so."

"Mighty War Chiefs." She snorted in his face. "Dwarves with big men's names."

"Brodd Tenways."

"That rotten old maggot? Even the thought of him makes me sick."

"Cairm Ironhead."

"I hear he has a tiny little prick. That's why he frowns all the time."

"Glama Golden."

"Even tinier. Like a baby's finger. And you have allies."

"I do?"

"You know you do. My father likes you."

Calder screwed up his face. "Your father doesn't hate me, but I doubt he'll be leaping up to cut the rope if they hang me."

"He's an honourable man."

"Of course he is. Caul Reachey's a real straight edge, everyone knows it." For what that was worth. "But you and I were promised when I was the son of the King of the Northmen and the world was all different. He was getting a prince for a son-in-law, not just a well-known coward."

She patted his cheek, hard enough to make a gentle slapping sound. "A beautiful coward."

"Beautiful men are even less well liked in the North than cowardly ones. I'm not sure your father's happy with the way my luck's turned."

"Shit on your luck." She took a fistful of his shirt and dragged him closer, much stronger than she looked. "I wouldn't change a thing."

"Neither would I. I'm just saying your father might."

"And I'm saying you're wrong." She caught his hand in hers and pressed it against her bulging stomach again. "You're family."

"Family." He didn't bother saying that family could be as much a weakness as a strength. "So we have your honourable father and my pinhead brother. The North is ours."

"It will be. I know it." She was swaying backwards slowly, leading him away from the window and towards the bed. "Dow may be the man for war, but wars don't last forever. You're better than him."

"Few would agree." But it was nice to hear it, especially whispered in his ear in that soft, low, urgent voice.

"You're cleverer than him." Her cheek brushing his jaw. "Far cleverer." Her nose nuzzling his chin. "The cleverest man in the North." By the dead, how he loved flattery.

"Go on."

"You're certainly better looking than him." Squeezing his hand and sliding it down her belly. "The most handsome man in the North..."

He licked her lips with the tip of his tongue. "If the most beautiful ruled you'd be Queen of the Northmen already..."

Her fingers were busy with his belt. "You always know just what to say, don't you, Prince Calder..."

There was a thumping at the door and he froze, the blood suddenly pounding in his head and very much not in his cock. Nothing like the threat of sudden death for killing a romantic mood. The thumping came again, making the heavy door rattle. They broke apart, flushed and fussing with their clothes. More like a pair of child lovers caught by their parents than a man and woman five years

married. So much for his dreams of being king. He didn't even command the lock on his own door.

"The damn bolt's on your side isn't it?" he snapped.

Metal scraped and the door creaked open. A man stood in the archway, shaggy head almost touching the keystone. The ruined side of his face was turned forwards, a mass of scar running from near the corner of his mouth, through his eyebrow and across his forehead, the dead metal ball in his blind socket glinting. If any trace of romance had been lingering in the corners, or in Calder's trousers, that eye and that scar were its grisly end. He felt Seff stiffen and, since she was a long stretch braver than he was, her fear did nothing for his own. Caul Shivers was about the worst omen a man could see. Folk called him Black Dow's dog, but never to his burned-out face. The man the Protector of the North sent to do his blackest work.

"Dow wants you." If the sight of Shivers' face had only got some hero half way horrified, his voice would have done the rest of the job. A broken whisper that made every word sound like it hurt.

"Why?" asked Calder, keeping his own voice sunny as a summer morning in spite of his hammering heart. "Can't he beat the Union without me?"

Shivers didn't laugh. He didn't frown. He stood there, in the doorway, a silent slab of menace.

Calder tried his best at a carefree shrug. "Well, I suppose everyone serves someone. What about my wife?"

Shivers' good eye flicked across to Seff. If he'd looked with leering lust, or sneering disgust, Calder would've been happier. But Shivers looked at a pregnant woman like a butcher at a carcass, only a job to be done. "Dow wants her to stay and stand hostage. Make sure everyone behaves. She'll be safe."

"As long as everyone behaves." Calder found he'd stepped in front of her, as if to shield her with his body. Not much of a shield against a man like Shivers.

"That's it."

"And if Black Dow misbehaves? Where's my hostage?"

Shivers' eye slid back to Calder, and stuck. "I'll be your hostage."

"And if Dow breaks his word I can kill you, can I?"

"You can try."

"Huh." Caul Shivers had one of the hardest names in the North. Calder, it hardly needed to be said, didn't. "Can you give us a moment to say our goodbyes?"

"Why not?" Shivers slid back until only the glint of his metal eye showed in the shadows. "I'm no monster."

"Back to the snake pit," muttered Calder.

Seff caught his hand, eyes wide as she looked up at him, fearful and eager at once. Almost as fearful and eager as he was. "Be patient, Calder. Tread carefully."

"I'll tiptoe all the way there." If he even made it. He reckoned there was about a one in four Shivers had been told to cut his throat on the way and toss his corpse in a bog.

She took his chin between her finger and thumb and shook it, hard. "I mean it. Dow fears you. My father says he'll take any excuse to kill you."

"Dow should fear me. Whatever else I am, I'm my father's son."

She squeezed his chin even harder, looking him right in the eye. "I love you."

He looked down at the floor, feeling the sudden pressure of tears at the back of his throat. "Why? Don't you realise what an evil shit I am?"

"You're better than you think."

When she said it he could almost believe it. "I love you too." And he didn't even have to lie. How

he'd raged when his father announced the match. Marry that pig-nosed, dagger-tongued little bitch? Now she looked more beautiful every time he saw her. He loved her nose, and her tongue even more. It was almost enough to make him swear off other women. He drew her close, blinking back the wet, and kissed her once more. "Don't worry. No one's less keen to attend my hanging than I am. I'll be back in your bed before you know it."

"With your armour on?"

"If you like," as he backed away.

"And no lying while you're gone."

"I never lie."

"Liar," she mouthed at him before the guards closed the door and slid the bolt, leaving Calder in the shadowy hallway with only the sappy-sad thought that he might never see his wife again. That gave him a rare touch of bravery and he hurried after Shivers, catching up with him as he trudged away and slapping a hand down on his shoulder. He was more than a little unnerved by the wood-like solidity of it, but plunged on regardless.

"If anything happens to her, I promise you—"

"I hear your promises ain't up to much." Shivers' eye went to the offending hand and Calder carefully removed it. He might only rarely be brave, but he was never brave past the point of good sense.

"Who says so? Black Dow? If there's anyone in the North whose promises are worth less than mine it's that bastard's." Shivers stayed silent, but Calder wasn't a man to be easily put off. Good treacher takes effort. "Dow won't ever give you more than you can rip from him with both hands, you know. There'll be nothing for you, however loyal you are. In fact, the more loyal you are, the less there'll be. You'll see. Not enough meat and too many hungry dogs to feed."

Shivers' one eye narrowed just the slightest fraction. "I'm no dog."

That think of anger would have been enough to scare most men silent, but to Calder it was only a crack to chisel at. "I see that," he whispered, as low and urgent as Seff had whispered to him. "Most men don't see past their fear of you, but I do. I see what you are. A fighter, of course, but a thinker too. An ambitious man. A proud man, and why not?" Calder brought them to a halt in a shadowy stretch of the hallway, leaned in to a conspiratorial distance, smothering his instinct to cringe away at that awful scar turned towards him. "If I had a man like you working for me I'd make better use of him than Black Dow does, that much I promise."

Shivers raised one beckoning hand, a big ruby on his little finger gleaming the colour of blood in the gloom. Giving Calder no choice but to come closer, closer, far too close for comfort. Close enough to feel Shivers' warm breath. Close enough almost to kiss. Close enough so all Calder could see was his own distorted, unconvincing grin reflected in that dead metal ball of an eye.

"Dow wants you."

Your August Majesty,

We are entirely recovered from the reverse at Quiet Ford and the campaign proceeds. For all Black Dow's cunning, Lord Marshal Kroy is driving him steadily north towards his capital at Carleon. We are no more than two weeks' march from the city, now. He cannot fall back for ever. We will have him where your Majesty can depend upon it.

General Jalenhorm's division won a small engagement on a chain of hills to the northeast yesterday. Lord Governor Meed leads his division south towards Ollensand in the hope of forcing the Northmen to split their forces and give battle at a disadvantage. I travel with General Mitterick's division, close to Marshal Kroy's headquarters. Yesterday, near a village called Barden, Northmen ambushed our supply column as it was stretched out along the bad roads. Through the alertness and bravery of our rearguard they were beaten back with heavy losses. I recommend to your Majesty one Lieutenant Kerns who showed particular valour and lost his life in the engagement, leaving, I understand, a wife and young child behind him.

The columns are well ordered. The weather is fair. The army moves freely and the men are in the highest spirits.

I remain your Majesty's most faithful and unworthy servant,

*Bremer dan Gorst
Royal Observer of the Northern Wars*

The column was in chaos. The rain poured down. The army was mired in the filth and the men were the most rotten spirits. *And mine the most rotten in the whole putrefying swarm.*

Bremer dan Gorst forced his way through a mud-spattered crush of soldiers, all wriggling like maggots, their armour running with wet, their shouldered pikes poking lethally in all directions. They were stopped as solid as milk turned rank in a bottle but men still squelched up from behind, adding their own burdens of ill temper to the jostling mass, choking the thread of muck that passed for a road and forcing men cursing into the trees. Gorst was already late and had to assert himself as the press tightened, brushing men aside. Sometimes they would turn to argue as they stumbled in the slop, but they soon shut their mouths when they saw who he was. They knew him.

The adversary that had so confounded his Majesty's army proved to be one of its own wagons, slipping from the ankle-deep mud of the track and into the considerably deeper bog beside. Following the universal law that the most frustrating thing will always happen, no matter how unlikely, it had somehow ended up almost sideways, back wheels mired to their axles. A snarling driver whipped two horses into a pointless lather of terror while a half-dozen bedraggled soldiers floundered ineffectually about the back. On both sides of the road men slithered through the sodden undergrowth, cursing as gear was torn by brambles, pole-arms were tangled by branches, eyes were whipped at by twigs.

Three young officers stood nearby, the shoulders of their scarlet uniforms turned soggy maroon by the downpour. Two were arguing, stabbing at the wagon with pointed fingers while the other stood and watched, one hand carelessly resting on the gilded hilt of his sword, idle as a mannequin in a military tailor's.

The enemy could scarcely have arranged a more effective blockage with a thousand picked men.

“What is this?” Gorst demanded, fighting and, of course, failing, to sound authoritative.

“Sir, the supply train should be nowhere near this track!”

“That’s nonsense, sir! The infantry should be held up while—”

Because the blame is what matters, of course, not the solution. Gorst shouldered the officers aside and squelched into the quagmire, wedging himself between the muddy soldiers, delving into the muck for the wagon’s back axle, boots twisting through the slime to find a solid footing. He took a few short breaths and braced himself.

“Go!” he squeaked at the driver, for once forgetting even to try to lower his voice.

Whip snapped. Men groaned. Horses snorted. Mud sucked. Gorst strained from his toes to his scalp, every muscle locked and vibrating with effort. The world faded and he was left alone with his task. He grunted, then growled, then hissed, the rage boiling up in him as if he had a bottomless tank of it instead of a heart and he only had to turn the tap to rip this wagon apart.

The wheels gave with a protesting shriek, lurched from the bog and forward. Suddenly straining at nothing Gorst stumbled despairingly then flopped face down in the mire, one of the soldiers falling beside him. He struggled up as the wagon rattled away, the driver fighting to bring his plunging horse under control.

“Thanks for the help, sir.” The mud-caked soldier reached out with a clumsy paw and managed to smear the muck that now befouled Gorst’s uniform even more widely. “Sorry, sir. Very sorry.”

Keep your axles oiled you retarded scum. Keep your cart on the road you gawping halfwits. Do your damn jobs you lazy vermin. Is that too much to ask? “Good,” muttered Gorst, brushing the man’s hand away and making a futile attempt to straighten his jacket. “Thank you.” He stalked off into the drizzle after the wagon, and could almost hear the mocking laughter of the men and their officers prickling at his back.

Lord Marshal Kroy, commander-in-chief of his Majesty’s armies in the North, had requisitioned for his temporary headquarters the grandest building within a dozen miles, namely a squat cottage so riddled with moss it looked more like an abandoned dunghill. A toothless old woman and her even more ancient husband, presumably the dispossessed owners, sat in the doorway of the accompanying barn under a threadbare shawl, and watched Gorst squelch up towards their erstwhile front door. They did not look impressed. Neither did the four guards loitering about the porch in wet oilskins. Nor the collection of damp officers infesting the low living room, who all looked around expectantly when Gorst ducked through the door, and all looked equally crestfallen when they realised who it was.

“It’s Gorst,” sneered one, as if he had been expecting a king and got a pot-boy.

It was quite the concentration of martial splendour. Marshal Kroy was the centrepiece, sitting with unflinching discipline at the head of the table, impeccable as always in a freshly pressed black uniform, stiff collar encrusted with silver leaves, every iron grey hair on his skull positioned at rigid attention. His chief of staff Colonel Felnigg sat bolt upright beside him, small, nimble, with sparkling eyes that missed no detail, his chin lifted uncomfortably high. Or rather, since he was a remarkably chinless man, his neck formed an almost straight line from his collar to the nostrils of his beaked nose. *Like an over-haughty vulture waiting for a corpse to feast upon.*

General Mitterick would have made a considerable meal. He was a big man with a big face, oversized features positively stuffed into the available room on the front of his head. Where Felnigg had too little chin Mitterick had far too much, and with a big, reckless cleft down the middle. *As if he*

had an arse suspended from his magnificent moustache. He had affected buff leather gauntlets reaching almost to the elbow, probably intended to give the impression of a man of action, but which put Gorst in mind of the gloves a farmer might wear to wind a troubled cow.

Mitterick cocked an eyebrow at Gorst's mud-crust uniform. "More heroics, Colonel Gorst?" he asked, accompanied by some light sniggering.

Ram it up your chin-arse, you cow-winding bladder of vanity. The words tickled Gorst's lips. But his falsetto, whatever he said the joke would be on him. He would rather have faced a thousand Northmen than this ordeal by conversation. So he turned the first sound into a queasy grin, and smile along with his humiliation as he always did. He found the gloomiest corner, crossed his arms over his filthy jacket and dampened his fury by imagining the smirking heads of Mitterick's staff impaled on the pikes of Black Dow's army. Not the most patriotic pastime, perhaps, but among his most satisfying.

It's an upside-down sham of a world in which men like these, if they can be called men at all, can look down on a man like me. I am worth twice the lot of you. And this is the best the Union has to offer? We deserve to lose.

"Can't win a war without getting your hands dirty."

"What?" Gorst frowned sideways. The Dogman was leaning beside him in his battered coat, a look of world-weary resignation on his no less battered face.

The Northman let his head tip back until it bumped gently against the peeling wall. "Some folk would rather keep clean, though, eh? And lose."

Gorst could ill afford to strike up an alliance with the one man even more of an outsider than himself. He slipped into his accustomed silence like a well-worn suit of armour, and turned his attention to the nervous chatter of the officers.

"When are they getting here?"

"Soon."

"How many of them?"

"I heard three."

"Only one. It only takes one member of the Closed Council."

"The Closed Council?" squeaked Gorst, voice driven up almost beyond the range of human hearing by a surge of nerves. A nauseating after-taste of the horror he had felt the day those horrible old men had stripped him of his position. *Squashing my dreams as carelessly as a boy might squash a beetle.* "And next..." as he was ushered into the hallway and the black doors were shut on him like coffin lids. *No longer commander of the king's guards. No longer a Knight of the Body. No longer anything but a squealing joke, my name made a byword for failure and disgrace.* He could see that panel of creased and sagging sneers still. And at the head of the table the king's pale face, jaw clenched, refusing to meet Gorst's eye. *As though the ruin of his most loyal servant was no more than an unpleasant chore...*

"Which of them will it be?" Felnigg was asking. "Do we know?"

"It hardly matters." Kroy looked towards the window. Beyond the half-open shutters the rain was getting heavier. "We already know what they will say. The king demands a great victory, at twice the speed and half the cost."

"As always!" Mitterick crowed with the regularity of an overeager cockerel. "Damn politicians, sticking their noses into our business! I swear those swindlers on the Closed Council cost us more lives than the bloody enemy ever—"

The doorknob turned with a loud rattle and a heavy-set old man entered the room, entirely bald

with a short grey beard. He gave no immediate impression of supreme power. His clothes were only slightly less rain-soaked and mud-spattered than Gorst's own. His staff was of plain wood shod with steel, more walking stick than rod of office. But still, though he and the single, unassuming servant who scraped in after him were outnumbered ten to one by some of the finest peacocks in the army, it was the officers who held their breath. The old man carried about him an air of untouchable confidence, disdainful ownership, masterful control. *The air of a slaughterman casting an eye over that morning's hogs.*

"Lord Bayaz." Kroy's face had paled, slightly. It might have been the very first time Gorst had seen the marshal surprised, and he was not alone. The crowded room could not have been more dumbstruck if the corpse of Harod the Great had been trundled in on a trolley to address them.

"Gentlemen." Bayaz tossed his staff carelessly to his curly-headed servant, wiped the beads of moisture from his bald pate with a faint hissing and flicked them from the edge of his hand. For a legendary figure, there was no ceremony to him. "Some weather we're having, eh? Sometimes I love the North and sometimes... less so."

"We were not expecting—"

"Why would you be?" Bayaz chuckled with a show of good humour that somehow managed to seem a threat. "I am retired! I had left my seat on the Closed Council empty once again and was seeing out my dotage at my library, far removed from the grind of politics. But since this war is taking place on my very doorstep, I thought it would be neglectful of me not to stop by. I have brought money with me—I understand pay is standing somewhat in arrears."

"A little," conceded Kroy.

"A little more and the soldier's veneration of honour and obedience might swiftly rub away, eh, gentlemen? Without its golden lubricant the great machine of his Majesty's army would soon stutter to a halt, would it not, as with so much in life?"

"Concern for the welfare of our men is always uppermost in our minds," said the marshal, uncertainly.

"And mine!" answered Bayaz. "I am here only to help. To keep the wheels oiled, if you will. To observe and perhaps, should the occasion call, offer some trifling guidance. Yours is the command, Lord Marshal, of course."

"Of course," echoed Kroy, but no one was convinced. This, after all, was the First of the Magi. A man supposedly hundreds of years old, supposedly possessed of magical powers, who had supposedly forged the Union, brought the king to his throne, driven out the Gurkish and laid a good section of Adua to waste doing it. Supposedly. *Hardly a man noted for a reluctance to interfere.* "Er... might I introduce General Mitterick, commander of his Majesty's second division?"

"General Mitterick, even sealed away with my books I have heard tales of your valour. An honour!" The general fluffed up with happiness. "No, no! The honour is mine!"

"Yes," said Bayaz, with casual brutality.

Kroy charged boldly into the ensuing silence. "This is my chief of staff, Colonel Felnigg, and this is the leader of those Northmen who oppose Black Dow and fight alongside us, the Dogman."

"Ah, yes!" Bayaz raised his brows. "I believe we had a mutual friend in Logen Ninefingers."

The Dogman stared evenly back, the one man in the room who showed no sign of being overawed. "I'm a long way from sure he's dead."

"If anyone can cheat the Great Leveller it was—or is—he. Either way, he is a loss to the North. To the world. A great man, and much missed."

Dogman shrugged. "A man, anyway. Some good and some bad in him, like most. As for much

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