

Sample Chapters from

Before They Are Hanged

Book two of *The First Law*

by Joe Abercrombie

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The Great Leveller

Damn mist. It gets in your eyes, so you can't see no more than a few strides ahead. It gets in your ears, so you can't hear nothing, and when you do you can't tell where it's coming from. It gets up your nose, so you can't smell naught but wet and damp. Damn mist. It's a curse on a scout.

They'd crossed the Whiteflow a few days before, out of the North and into England, and the Dogman had been nervy all the way. Scouting out strange land, in the midst of a war that weren't really their business. All the lads were jumpy. Aside from Threetrees, none of 'em had ever been out of the North. Except for Grim maybe. He weren't saying where he'd been.

They'd passed a few farms burned out, a village all empty of people. Union buildings, big and square. They'd seen the tracks of horses and men. Lots of tracks, but never the men themselves. Dogman knew Bethod weren't far away, though, his army spread out across the land, looking for towns to burn, food to steal, people to kill. All manner o' mischief. He'd have scouts everywhere. If he caught Dogman or any of the rest, they'd be back to the mud, and not quickly. Bloody cross and heads on spikes and all the rest of it, Dogman didn't wonder.

If the Union caught 'em they'd be dead too, most likely. It was a war, after all, and folk don't think too clearly in a war. Dogman could hardly expect 'em to waste time telling a friendly Northman from an unfriendly one. Life was fraught with dangers, alright. It was enough to make anyone nervy, and he was a nervy sort at the best of times.

So it was easy to see how the mist might have been salt in the cut, so to speak.

All this creeping around in the murk had got him thirsty, so he picked his way through the greasy brush, over to where he could hear the river chattering. He knelt down at the water's edge. Slimy down there, with rot and dead leaves, but Dogman didn't reckon a little slime would make the difference, he was about as dirty as a man could be already. He scooped up water in his hands and drank. There was a breath of wind down there, out beyond the trees, pushing the mist in close one minute, dragging it out the next. That's when the Dogman saw him.

He was lying on his front, legs in the river, top half up on the bank. They stared at each other a while, both fully shocked and amazed. He'd got a long stick coming out of his back. A broken spear. That's when the Dogman realised he was dead.

He spat the water out and crept over, checking careful all around to make sure no one was waiting to give him a blade in the back. The corpse was a man of about two dozen years. Yellow hair, brown blood on his grey lips. He'd got a padded jacket on, bloated up with wet, the kind a man might wear under a coat of mail. A fighting man, then. A straggler maybe, lost his crew and been picked off. A Union man, no doubt, but he didn't look so different to Dogman or to anyone else, now he was dead. One corpse looks much like another.

'The Great Leveller,' Dogman whispered to himself, since he was in a thoughtful frame of mind. That's what the hillmen call him. Death, that is. He levels all differences. Named Men and nobodies, south or north. He catches everyone in the end, and he treats each man the same.

Seemed like this one had been dead no more 'n a couple of days. That meant whoever killed him might still be close, and that got the Dogman worried. The mist seemed full of sounds now. Might've been a hundred Carls, waiting just out of sight. Might've been no more than the river slapping at its banks. Dogman left the corpse lying and slunk off into the trees, ducking from one trunk to another as they loomed up out of the grey.

He nearly stumbled on another body, half buried in a heap of leaves, lying on his back with his arms spread out. He passed one on his knees, a couple of arrows in his side, face in the dirt, arse in the air. There's no dignity in death, and that's a fact. The Dogman was starting to hurry along, too keen to get back to the others, tell them what he'd seen. Too keen to get away from them corpses.

He'd seen plenty, of course, more than his share, but he'd never quite got comfortable around 'em. It's an easy thing to make a man a carcass. He knew a thousand ways to do it. But once you've done it, there's no going back. One minute he's a man, all full up with hopes, and thoughts, and dreams. A man with friends, and family, and a place where he's from. Next minute he's mud. Made the Dogman think on all the scrapes he'd been in, all the battles and the fights he'd

been a part of. Made him think he was lucky still to be breathing. Stupid lucky. Made him think his luck might not last.

He was halfway running now. Careless. Blundering about in the mist like an untried boy. Not taking his time, not sniffing the air, not listening out. A Named Man like him, a scout who'd been all over the North, should've known better, but you can't stay sharp all the time. He never saw it coming.

Something knocked him in the side, hard, ditched him right on his face. He scrambled up but someone kicked him down. Dogman fought, but whoever this bastard was he was fearsome strong. Before he knew it he was down on his back in the dirt, and he'd only himself to blame. Himself, and the corpses, and the mist. A hand grabbed him round his neck, started squeezing his windpipe shut.

'Gurgh,' he croaked, fiddling at the hand, thinking his last moment was on him. Thinking all his hopes were turned to mud. The Great Leveller, come for him at last . . .

Then the fingers stopped squeezing.

'Dogman?' said someone in his ear, 'that you?'

'Gurgh.'

The hand let go his throat and he sucked in a breath. Felt himself pulled up by his coat. 'Shit on it, Dogman! I could ha' killed you!' He knew the voice now, well enough. Black Dow, the bastard. Dogman was half annoyed at being throttled near to dying, half stupid-happy at still being alive. He could hear Dow laughing at him. Hard laughter, like a crow calling. 'You alright?'

'I've had warmer greetings,' croaked Dogman, still doing his best to get the air in.

'Count yourself lucky, I could've given you a colder one. Much colder. I took you for one of Bethod's scouts. Thought you was out over yonder, up the valley.'

'As you can see,' he whispered, 'no. Where's the others at?'

'Up on a hill, above this fucking mist. Taking a look around.'

Dogman nodded back the way he'd come. 'There's corpses over there. Loads of 'em.'

'Loads of 'em is it?' asked Dow, as though he didn't think Dogman knew what a load of corpses looked like. 'Hah!'

'Aye, a good few anyway. Union dead, I reckon. Looks like there was a fight here.'

Black Dow laughed again. 'A fight? You reckon?' Dogman wasn't sure what he meant by that.

'Shit,' he said.

They were standing up on the hill, the five of them. The mist had cleared up, but the Dogman almost wished it hadn't. He saw what Dow had been saying now, well enough. The whole valley was full of dead. They were dotted high up on the slopes, wedged between the rocks, stretched out in the gorse. They were scattered out across the grass in the valley bottom like nails spilled from a sack, twisted and broken on the brown dirt road. They were heaped up beside the river, heaped on the banks in a pile. Arms and legs and broken gear sticking up from the last shreds of mist. They were everywhere. Stuck with arrows, stabbed with swords, hacked with axes. Crows called as they hopped from one meal to the next. It was a good day for the crows. It had been a while since Dogman saw a proper battlefield, and it brought back some sour memories. Horrible sour.

'Shit,' he said again. Couldn't think of aught else to say.

'Reckon the Union were marching up this road.' Threetrees was frowning hard. 'Reckon they were hurrying. Trying to catch Bethod unawares.'

'Seems they weren't scouting too careful,' rumbled Tul Duru. 'Seems like it was Bethod caught them out.'

'Maybe it was misty,' said Dogman, 'like today.'

Threetrees shrugged. 'Maybe. It's the time of year for it. Either way they were on the road, in column, tired from a long day's tramp. Bethod came on 'em from here, and from up there, on the ridge. Arrows first, to break 'em up, then the Carls, coming down from the tall ground, screaming and ready to go. The Union broke quick, I reckon.'

'Real quick,' said Dow.

'And then it was a slaughter. Spread out on the road. Trapped against the water. Nowhere much to run to. Men trying to pull their armour off, men trying to swim the river with their armour on. Packing in and climbing one on top o' the other, with arrows falling down all round. Some of 'em might've got as far as

those woods down there, but knowing Bethod he'd have had a few horsemen tucked away, ready to lick the plate.'

'Shit,' said Dogman, feeling more than a bit sick. He'd been on the wrong end of a rout himself, and the memory weren't at all a happy one.

'Neat as good stitching,' said Threetrees. 'You got to give Bethod his due, the bastard. He knows his work, none better.'

'This the end of it then, chief?' asked Dogman. 'Bethod won already?'

Threetrees shook his head, nice and slow. 'There's a lot of Southerners out there. An awful lot. Most of 'em live across the sea. They say there's more of 'em down there than you can count. More men than there are trees in the North. Might take 'em a while to get here, but they'll be coming. This is just the beginning.'

The Dogman looked out at the wet valley, at all them dead men, huddled and sprawled and twisted across the ground, no more 'n food for crows. 'Not much of a beginning for them.'

Dow curled his tongue and spat, as noisy as he could. 'Pinned up and slaughtered like a bunch o' sheep! You want to die like that, Threetrees? Eh? You want to side with the likes of these? Fucking Union! They don't know anything about war!'

Threetrees nodded. 'Then I reckon we'll have to teach 'em.'

There was a great press round the gate. There were women, gaunt and hungry-looking. There were children, ragged and dirty. There were men, old and young, stooped under heavy packs or clutching gear. Some had mules, or carts they were pushing, loaded up with all kinds of useless looking stuff. Wooden chairs, tin pots, tools for farming. A lot had nothing at all, besides misery. The Dogman reckoned there was plenty of that to go round.

They were choking up the road with their bodies and their rubbish. They were choking up the air with their pleading and their threatening. Dogman could smell the fear, thick as soup in his nose. All running from Bethod.

They were shouldering each other pretty good, some pushing in, some pushed out, here and there one falling in the mud, all desperate for that gate like it was their mother's tit. But as a crowd, they were going nowhere. Dogman could

see spear tips glinting over the heads of the press, could hear hard voices shouting. There were soldiers up ahead, keeping everyone out of the city.

Dogman leaned over to Threetrees. 'Looks like they don't want their own kind,' he whispered. 'You reckon they'll want us, chief?'

'They need us, and that's a fact. We'll talk to 'em, and then we'll see, or you got some better notion?'

'Going home and staying out of it?' muttered Dogman under his breath, but he followed Threetrees into the crowd anyway.

The Southerners all gawped as they stepped on through. There was a little girl among 'em, looked at Dogman as he passed with great staring eyes, clutching some old rag to her. Dogman tried a smile but it had been a long time since he'd dealt with aught but hard men and hard metal, and it can't have come out too pleasing. The girl screamed and ran off, and she wasn't the only one scared. The crowd split open, wary and silent when they saw Dogman and Threetrees coming, even though they'd left their weapons back with the others.

They made it through to the gate alright, only having to give the odd shove to one man or another, just to start him moving. Dogman saw the soldiers now, a dozen of 'em, stood in a line across the gate, each one just the same as the one next door. He'd rarely seen such heavy armour as they had on, great plates from head to toe, polished to a blinding shine, helmets over their faces, stock-still like metal pillars. He wondered how you'd fight one, if you had to. He couldn't imagine an arrow doing much, or a sword even, less it got lucky and found a joint.

'You'd need a pickaxe for that, or something.'

'What?' hissed Threetrees.

'Nothing.' It was plain they had some strange ideas about fighting down in the Union. If wars were won by the shinier side, they'd have had Bethod well licked, the Dogman reckoned. Shame they weren't.

Their chief was sat in the midst of them, behind a little table with some scraps of paper on it, and he was the strangest of the lot. He'd got some jacket on, bright red. An odd sort of cloth for a leader to wear, Dogman thought. You'd have picked him out with an arrow easy enough. He was mighty young for the job an' all.

Scarcely had a beard on him yet, though he looked proud enough of himself all the same.

There was a big man in a dirty coat arguing with him. Dogman strained to listen, trying to make sense of their Union words. 'I've five children out here,' the farmer was saying, 'and nothing to feed them with. What do you suggest I do?'

An old man got in first. 'I'm a personal friend of the Lord Governor, I demand you admit me to the—'

The lad didn't let either one finish. 'I don't give a damn who your friends are, and I don't care if you have a hundred children! The city of Ostenhorm is full. Lord Marshal Burr has decreed that only two hundred refugees be admitted each day, and we have already reached our limit for this morning. I suggest you come back tomorrow. Early.'

The two men stood there staring. 'Your limit?' growled the farmer.

'But the Lord Governor—'

'Damn you!' screamed the lad, thumping at the table in a fit. 'Only push me further! I'll let you in alright! I'll have you dragged in, and hung as traitors!'

That was enough for those two, they backed off quick. Dogman was starting to think he should do the same, but Threetrees was already making for the table. The boy scowled up at 'em as though they stank worse than a pair of fresh turds. Dogman wouldn't have been so bothered, except he'd washed specially for the occasion. Hadn't been this clean in months. 'What the hell do you want? We've no need of spies or beggars!'

'Good,' said Threetrees, clear and patient. 'We're neither. My name is Rudd Threetrees. This here is the Dogman. We're come to speak to whoever's in charge. We're come to offer our services to your King.'

'Offer your services?' The lad started to smile. Not a friendly smile at all. 'Dogman, you say? What an interesting name. I can't imagine how he came by it.' He had himself a little snigger at that piece of cleverness, and Dogman could hear chuckles from the others. A right set of arseholes, he reckoned, stitched up tight in their fancy clothes and their shiny armour. A right set of arseholes, but there was nothing to be gained by telling 'em so. It was a good thing they'd left Dow behind. He'd most likely have gutted this fool already, and got them all killed.

The lad leaned forward and spoke real slow, as if to children. 'No Northmen are allowed within the city, not without special permission.'

Seemed that Bethod crossing their borders, slaughtering their armies, making war across their lands weren't special enough. Threetrees ploughed on, but the Dogman reckoned he was ploughing in stony ground, alright. 'We're not asking much. Only food and a place to sleep. There's five of us, each one a Named Man, veterans all.'

'His Majesty is more than well supplied with soldiers. We are a little short of mules however. Perhaps you'd care to carry some supplies for us?'

Threetrees was known for his patience, but there was a limit to it, and Dogman reckoned they were awful close. This prick of a boy had no idea what he was stepping on. He weren't a man to be toyed with, Rudd Threetrees. It was a famous name where they came from. A name to put fear in men, or courage, depending where they stood. There was a limit to his patience alright, but they weren't quite at it yet. Luckily for all concerned.

'Mules, eh?' growled Threetrees. 'Mules can kick. Best make sure one don't kick your head off, boy.' And he turned around and stalked off, down the road the way they came, the scared folks shuffling out the way then crowding back in behind, all shouting at once, pleading with the soldiers why they should be the ones to get let in while the others were left out in the cold.

'That weren't quite the welcome we was hoping for,' Dogman muttered. Threetrees said nothing, just marched away in front, head down. 'What now, chief?'

The old boy shot a grim look over his shoulder. 'You know me. You think I'm taking that fucking answer?' Somehow, the Dogman reckoned not.

Best Laid Plans

It was cold in the hall of the Lord Governor of Angland. The high walls were of plain, cold render, the wide floor was of cold stone flags, the gaping fireplace held nothing but cold ashes. The only decoration was a great tapestry hanging at one end, the golden sun of the Union stitched into it, the crossed hammers of Angland in its centre.

Lord Governor Meed was slumped in a hard chair before a huge, bare table, staring at nothing, his right hand slack around the stem of a wine cup. His face was pale and hollow, his robes of state were crumpled and stained, his thin white hair was in disarray. Major West, born and raised in Angland, had often heard Meed spoken of as a strong leader, a great presence, a tireless champion of the province and its people. He looked a shell of a man now, crushed under the weight of his great chain of office, as empty and cold as his yawning fireplace.

The temperature might have been icy, but the mood was cooler still. Lord Marshal Burr stood in the middle of the floor, feet placed wide apart, big hands clasped white-knuckle tight behind his back. Major West stood at his shoulder, stiff as a log, head lowered, wishing that he had not given up his coat. It was colder in here than outside, if anything, and the weather was bitter, even for autumn.

'Will you take wine, Lord Marshal?' murmured Meed, not even looking up. His voice seemed weak and reedy thin in the great space. West fancied he could almost see the old man's breath smoking.

'No, your Grace. I will not.' Burr was frowning. He had been frowning constantly, as far as West could tell, for the last month or two. The man seemed to have no other expressions. He had a frown for hope, a frown for satisfaction, a frown for surprise. This was a frown of the most intense anger. West shifted nervously from one numb foot to the other, trying to get the blood flowing, wishing he was anywhere but here.

'What about you, Major West?' whispered the Lord Governor. 'Will you take wine?' West opened his mouth to decline, but Burr got in first.

'What happened?' he growled, the hard words grating off the cold walls, echoing in the chilly rafters.

'What happened?' The Lord Governor shook himself, turned his sunken eyes slowly towards Burr, as though seeing him for the first time. 'I lost my sons.' He snatched up his cup with a trembling hand and drained it to the dregs.

West saw Marshal Burr's hands clench tighter still behind his back. 'I am sorry for your loss, your Grace, but I was referring to the broader situation. I am talking of Black Well.'

Meed seemed to flinch at the mere mention of the place. 'There was a battle.'

'There was a massacre!' barked Burr. 'What is your explanation? Did you not receive the King's orders? To raise every soldier you could, to man your defences, to await reinforcements? Under no circumstances to risk battle with Bethod!'

'The King's orders?' The Lord Governor's lip curled. 'The Closed Council's orders, do you mean? I received them. I read them. I considered them.'

'And then?'

'I tore them up.'

West could hear the Lord Marshal breathing hard through his nose. 'You tore ... them up?'

'For a hundred years, I and my family have governed England. When we came here there was nothing.' Meed raised his chin proudly as he spoke, puffing out his chest. 'We tamed the wilderness. We cleared the forests, and laid the roads, and built the farms, and the mines, and the towns that have enriched the whole Union!'

The old man's eyes had brightened considerably. He seemed taller, bolder, stronger. 'The people of this land look first to me for protection, before they look across the sea! Was I to allow these Northmen, these barbarians, these animals to raid across my lands with impunity? To undo the great work of my forefathers? To rob, and burn, and rape, and kill as they pleased? To sit behind my walls while they put England to the sword? No, Marshal Burr! Not I! I gathered every man, and I armed them, and I sent them to meet the savages in battle, and my three sons went at their head. What else should I have done?'

'Followed your fucking orders!' screamed Burr at the very top of his voice. West started with shock, the thunderous echoes still ringing in his ears.

Meed twitched, then gaped, then his lip began to quiver. Tears welled up in the old man's eyes and his body sagged again. 'I lost my sons,' he whispered, staring down at the cold floor. 'I lost my sons.'

'I pity your sons, and all those others whose lives were wasted, but I do not pity you. You alone brought this upon yourself.' Burr winced, then swallowed and rubbed at his stomach. He walked slowly to the window and looked out over the cold, grey city. 'You have wasted all your strength, and now I must dilute my own to garrison your towns, your fortresses. Such survivors as there are from Black Well, and such others as are armed and can fight you will transfer to my command. We will need every man.'

'And me?' murmured Meed, 'I daresay those dogs on the Closed Council are howling for my blood?'

'Let them howl. I need you here. Refugees are coming southwards, fleeing from Bethod, or from the fear of him. Have you looked out of your window lately? Ostenhorm is full of them. They crowd around the walls in their thousands, and this is only the beginning. You will see to their well-being, and their evacuation to Midderland. For thirty years your people have looked to you for protection. They have need of you still.'

Burr turned back into the room. 'You will provide Major West with a list of those units still fit for action. As for the refugees, they are in need of food, and clothing, and shelter. Preparations for their evacuation should begin at once.'

'At once,' whispered Meed. 'At once, of course.'

Burr flashed West a quick glance from under his thick eyebrows, took a deep breath then strode for the door. West looked back as he left. The Lord Governor of Angland still sat hunched in his chair in his empty, freezing hall, head in his hands.

'This is Angland,' said West, gesturing at the great map. He turned to look at the assembly. Few of the officers were showing the slightest interest in what he had to say. Hardly a surprise, but it still rankled.

General Kroy was sitting on the right-hand side of the long table, stiff upright and motionless in his chair. He was tall, gaunt, hard, grey hair cropped close to

his angular skull, black uniform simple and spotless. His enormous staff were similarly clipped, shaved, polished, as dour as a bevy of mourners. Opposite, on the left, lounged General Poulder, round-faced, ruddy-skinned, possessed of a tremendous set of moustaches. His great collar, stiff with gold thread, came almost to his large, pink ears. His retinue sat their chairs like saddles, crimson uniforms dripping with braid, top buttons carelessly undone, spatters of mud from the road worn like medals.

On Kroy's side of the room, war was all about cleanliness, self-denial, and strict obedience to the rules. On Poulder's it was a matter of flamboyance and carefully organised hair. Each group glared across the table at the other with haughty contempt, as though only they held the secrets of good soldiering, and the other crowd, try as they might, would never be more than a hindrance.

Either were hindrance enough to West's mind, but neither one was half the obstacle that the third lot presented, clustered around the far end of the table. Their leader was none other than the heir to the throne, Crown Prince Ladisla himself. It was not so much a uniform that he was wearing, as a kind of purple dressing gown with epaulettes. Bedwear with a military motif. The lace on his cuffs alone could have made a good-sized tablecloth, and his staff were little less remarkable in their finery. Some of the richest, most handsome, most elegant, most useless young men in the whole Union were sprawled in their chairs around the Prince. If the measure of a man was the size of his hat, these were great men indeed.

West turned back to the map, his throat uncomfortably dry. He knew what he had to say, he needed only to say it, as clearly as possible, and sit down. Never mind that some of the most senior men in the army were behind him. Not to mention the heir to the throne. Men who West knew despised him. Hated him for his high position and his low birth. For the fact that he had earned his place.

'This is Angland,' said West again, in what he hoped was a voice of calm authority. 'The river Cumnur,' and the end of his stick traced the twisting blue line of the river, 'splits the province into two parts. The southern part is much the smaller, but contains the great majority of the population and almost all the significant towns, including the capital, Ostenhorm. The roads here are

reasonably good, the country relatively open. As far as we know, the Northmen have yet to set foot across the river.'

West heard a loud yawning behind him, clearly audible even from the far end of the table. He felt a sudden pang of fury and spun round. Prince Ladisla himself appeared, at least, to be listening attentively. The culprit was one of his staff, the young Lord Smund, a man of impeccable lineage and immense fortune, a little over twenty but with all the talents of a precocious ten-year-old. He was slouched in his chair, staring into space, mouth extravagantly gaping.

It was the most West could do to stop himself leaping over and thrashing the man with his stick. 'Am I boring you?' he hissed.

Smund actually seemed surprised to be picked on. He stared left and right, as though West might have been talking to one of his neighbours. 'What, me? No, no, Major West, not in the least. Boring? No! The River Cumnur splits the province in two, and so forth. Thrilling stuff! Thrilling! I do apologise, really. Late night, last night, you see?'

West did not doubt it. A late night spent drinking and showing off with the rest of the Prince's hangers-on, all so that he could waste everyone's time this morning. Kroy's men might be pedantic, and Poulder's arrogant, but at least they were soldiers. The Prince's staff had no skills whatever, as far as West could see, beyond annoying him, of course. At that, they were all expert. He was almost grinding his teeth with frustration as he turned back to the map.

'The northern part of the province is a different matter,' he growled. 'An unwelcoming expanse of dense forests, trackless bogs, and broken hills, sparsely populated. There are mines, logging camps, villages, as well as several penal colonies operated by the Inquisition, but they are widely scattered. There are only two roads even faintly suitable for large bodies of men or supplies, especially given that winter will soon be upon us.' His stick traced the two dotted lines, running north to south through the woods. 'The western road goes close to the mountains, linking the mining communities. The eastern one follows the coast, more or less. They meet at the fortress of Dunbrec on the Whiteflow, the northern border of Angland. That fortress, as we all know, is already in the hands of the enemy.'

West turned away from the map and sat down, trying to breathe slow and steady, squash down his anger and see off the headache which was already starting to pulse behind his eyes.

'Thank you, Major West,' said Burr as he got to his feet to address the assembly. The room rustled and stirred, only now coming awake. The Lord Marshal strode up and down before the map for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Then he tapped at it with his own stick, a spot well to the north of the Cumnur.

'The village of Black Well. An unremarkable settlement, ten miles or so from the coast road. Little more than a huddle of houses, now entirely deserted. It isn't even marked on the map. A place unworthy of anyone's attention. Except, of course, that it is the site of a recent massacre of our troops by the Northmen.'

'Damn fool Anglanders,' someone muttered.

'They should have waited for us,' said Poulder, with a self-satisfied smirk.

'Indeed they should have,' snapped Burr. 'But they were confident, and why not? Several thousand men, well equipped, with cavalry. Many of them were professional soldiers. Not in the same class as the King's Own perhaps, but trained and determined nonetheless. More than a match for these savages, one would have thought.'

'They put up a good fight though,' interrupted Prince Ladisla, 'eh, Marshal Burr?'

Burr glared down the table. 'A good fight is one you win, your Highness. They were slaughtered. Only those with good horses and very good luck escaped. In addition to the regrettable waste of manpower, there is the loss of equipment and supplies. Considerable quantities of each, with which our enemy is now enriched. Most seriously, perhaps, the defeat has caused panic among the population. The roads our army will depend on are clogged with refugees, convinced that Bethod will come upon their farms, their villages, their homes at any moment. An utter disaster, of course. Perhaps the worst suffered by the Union in recent memory. But disasters are not without their lessons.'

The Lord Marshal planted his big hands firmly on the table and leaned forwards. 'This Bethod is careful, clever, and ruthless. He is well supplied with horse, foot, and archers, and has sufficient organisation to use them together. He

has excellent scouts and his forces are highly mobile, probably more so than ours, especially in difficult country, such as that we will face in the northern part of the province. He set a trap for the Anglanders and they fell into it. We must not do the same.'

General Kroy gave a snort of joyless laughter. 'So we should fear these barbarians, Lord Marshal? Would that be your advice?'

'What was it that Stolicus wrote, General Kroy? "Never fear your enemy, but always respect him." I suppose that would be my advice, if I gave any.' Burr frowned across the table. 'But I don't give advice. I give orders.'

Kroy twitched with displeasure at the reprimand, but at least he shut up. For the time being. West knew that he wouldn't stay quiet for long. He never did.

'We must be cautious,' continued Burr, now addressing the room at large, 'but we still have the advantage. We have twelve regiments of the King's Own, at least as many men in levies from the noblemen, and a few Anglanders who avoided the carnage at Black Well. Judging from such reports as we have, we outnumber our enemy by five to one, or more. We have the advantage in equipment, in tactics, in organisation. The Northmen, it seems, are not ignorant of this. Despite their successes, they are remaining north of the Cumnur, content to forage and mount the odd raid. They do not seem keen to come across the river and risk an open battle with us.'

'One can hardly blame 'em, the dirty cowards,' chuckled Poulder, to mutterings of agreement from his own staff. 'Probably regretting they ever crossed the border now!'

'Perhaps,' murmured Burr. 'In any case, they are not coming to us, so we must cross the river and hunt them down. The main body of our army will therefore be split into two parts, the left wing under General Kroy, the right under General Poulder.' The two men eyed each other across the table with the deepest hostility. 'We will push up the eastern road from our camps here at Ostenhorm, spread out beyond the river Cumnur, hoping to locate Bethod's army and bring him to a decisive battle.'

'With the greatest respect,' interrupted General Kroy, in a tone that implied he had none, 'would it not be better to send one half of the army up the western road?'

‘The west has little to offer aside from iron, the one thing with which the Northmen are already well supplied. The coast road offers richer pickings, and is closer to their own lines of supply and retreat. Besides, I do not wish our forces to be too thinly spread. We are still guessing at Bethod’s strength. If we can bring him to battle, I want to be able to concentrate our forces quickly, and overwhelm him.’

‘But, Lord Marshal!’ Kroy had the air of a man addressing a senile parent who still, alas, retains the management of their own affairs. ‘Surely the western road should not be left unguarded?’

‘I was coming to that,’ growled Burr, turning back to the map. ‘A third detachment, under the command of Crown Prince Ladisla, will dig in behind the Cumnur and stand guard on the western road. It will be their job to make sure the Northmen do not slip around us and gain our rear. They will hold there, south of the river, while our main body splits in two and flushes out the enemy.’

‘Of course, my Lord Marshal.’ Kroy sat back in his chair with a thunderous sigh, as though he had expected no better but had to try anyway, for everyone’s sake, while the officers of his staff tutted and clucked their disapproval for the scheme.

‘Well, I find it an excellent plan,’ announced Poulder warmly. He smirked across the table at Kroy. ‘I am entirely in favour, Lord Marshal. I am at your disposal in any way you should think fit. I shall have my men ready to march within ten days.’ His staff nodded and hummed their assent.

‘Five would be better,’ said Burr.

Poulder’s plump face twitched his annoyance, but he quickly mastered himself. ‘Five it is, Lord Marshal.’ But now it was Kroy’s turn to look smug.

Crown Prince Ladisla, meanwhile, was squinting at the map, an expression of puzzlement slowly forming on his well-powdered face. ‘Lord Marshal Burr,’ he began slowly, ‘my detachment is to proceed down the western road to the river, correct?’

‘Indeed, your Highness.’

‘But we are not to pass beyond the river?’

‘Indeed not, your Highness.’

‘Our role is to be, then,’ and he squinted up at Burr with a hurt expression, ‘a purely defensive one?’

‘Indeed. Purely defensive.’

Ladislav frowned. ‘That sounds a meagre task.’ His absurd staff shifted in their seats, grumbled their discontent at an assignment so far beneath their talents.

‘A meagre task? Pardon me, your Highness, but not so! Angland is a wide and tangled country. The Northmen may elude us, and if they do it is on you that all our hopes will hang. It will be your task to prevent the enemy from crossing the river and threatening our lines of supply, or, worse yet, marching on Ostenhorn itself.’ Burr leaned forward, fixing the Prince with his eye, and shook his fist with great authority. ‘You will be our rock, your Highness, our pillar, our foundation! You will be the hinge on which the gate will hang, a gate which will swing shut on these invaders, and drive them out of Angland!’

West was impressed. The Prince’s assignment was indeed a meagre one, but the Lord Marshal could have made mucking out the latrines sound like noble work. ‘Excellent!’ exclaimed Ladislav, the feather on his hat thrashing back and forth. ‘The hinge, of course! Capital!’

‘Unless there are any further questions then, gentlemen, we have a great deal of work to do.’ Burr looked round the half-circle of sulky faces. No one spoke. ‘Dismissed.’

Kroy’s staff and Poulder’s exchanged frosty glances as they hurried to be first out of the room. The two great generals themselves jostled each other in the doorway, which was more than wide enough for both of them, neither wanting to turn his back on the other, or to follow behind him. They turned, bristling, once they had pushed their way out into the corridor.

‘General Kroy,’ sneered Poulder, with a haughty toss of his head.

‘General Poulder,’ hissed Kroy, tugging his impeccable uniform smooth.

Then they stalked off in opposite directions.

As the last of Prince Ladislav’s staff ambled out, holding forth to each other noisily about who had the most expensive armour, West got up to leave himself. He had a hundred tasks to be getting on with, and there was nothing to be gained by waiting. Before he got to the door, though, Lord Marshal Burr began to speak.

‘So there’s our army, eh, West? I swear, I sometimes feel like a father with a set of squabbling sons, and no wife to help me. Poulder, Kroy, and Ladisla.’ He shook his head. ‘My three commanders! Every man of them seems to think the purpose of this whole business is his personal aggrandisement. There aren’t three bigger heads in the whole Union. It’s a wonder we can fit them all in one room.’ He gave a sudden burp. ‘Damn this indigestion!’

West racked his brains for something positive. ‘General Poulder seems obedient, at least, sir.’

Burr snorted. ‘Seems, yes, but I trust him even less than Kroy, if that’s possible. Kroy, at least, is predictable. He can be depended on to frustrate and oppose me at every turn. Poulder can’t be depended on at all. He’ll smirk, and flatter, and obey to the tiniest detail, until he sees some advantage to himself, and then he’ll turn on me with double the ferocity, you’ll see. To keep ’em both happy is impossible.’ He squinted and swallowed, rubbing at his gut. ‘But as long as we can keep them equally unhappy, we’ve a chance. The one thing to be thankful for is that they hate each other even more than they do me.’

Burr’s frown grew deeper. ‘They were both ahead of me in the queue for my job. General Poulder is an old friend of the Arch Lector, you know. Kroy is Chief Justice Marovia’s cousin. When the post of Lord Marshal became available, the Closed Council couldn’t decide between them. In the end they fixed on me as an unhappy compromise. An oaf from the provinces, eh, West? That’s what I am to them. An effective oaf to be sure, but an oaf still. I daresay that if Poulder or Kroy died tomorrow, I’d be replaced the next day by the other. It’s hard to imagine a more ludicrous situation for a Lord Marshal, until you add in the Crown Prince, that is.’

West almost winced. How to turn that nightmare into an advantage? ‘Prince Ladisla is . . . enthusiastic?’ he ventured.

‘Where would I be without your optimism?’ Burr gave a mirthless chuckle. ‘Enthusiastic? He’s living in a dream! Pandered to, and coddled, and utterly spoiled his whole life! That boy and the real world are entire strangers to one another!’

‘Must he have a separate command, sir?’

The Lord Marshal rubbed at his eyes with his thick fingers. 'Unfortunately, he must. The Closed Council have been most specific on that point. They are concerned that the King is in poor health, and that his heir is seen as an utter fool and wastrel by the public. They hope we might win some great victory here, so they can heap the credit on the Prince. Then they'll ship him back to Adua, glowing with the glamour of the battlefield, ready to become the kind of King the peasants love.'

Burr paused for a moment, and looked down at the floor. 'I've done all I can to keep Ladisla out of trouble. I've put him where I think the Northmen aren't, and with any luck won't ever be. But war is anything but a predictable business. Ladisla might actually be called upon to fight. That's why I need someone to look over his shoulder. Someone with experience in the field. Someone as tenacious and hard-working as his joke of a staff are soft and lazy. Someone who might stop the Prince blundering into trouble.' He looked up from under his heavy brows.

West felt a horrible sinking sensation in his guts. 'Me?'

'I'm afraid so. There's no one I'd rather keep, but the Prince has asked for you personally.'

'For me, sir? But I'm no courtier! I'm not even a nobleman!'

Burr snorted. 'Aside from me, Ladisla is probably the one man in this army who doesn't care whose son you are. He's the heir to the throne! Nobleman or beggar, we're all equally far below him.'

'But why me?'

'Because you're a fighter. First through the breach at Ulrioch and all that. You've seen action, and plenty of it. You've a fighter's reputation, West, and the Prince wants one himself. That's why.' Burr fished a letter from his jacket and handed it across. 'Maybe this will help to sweeten the medicine.'

West broke the seal, unfolded the thick paper, scanned the few lines of neat writing. When he had finished, he read it again, just to be sure. He looked up. 'It's a promotion.'

'I know what it is. I arranged it. Maybe they'll take you a little more seriously with an extra star on your jacket, maybe they won't. Either way, you deserve it.'

'Thank you, sir,' said West numbly.

‘What, for the worst job in the army?’ Burr laughed, and gave him a fatherly clap on the shoulder. ‘You’ll be missed, and that’s a fact. I’m riding out to inspect the first regiment. A commander should show his face, I’ve always thought. Care to join me, Colonel?’

Snow was falling by the time they rode out through the city gates. White specks blowing on the wind, melting as soon as they touched the road, the trees, the coat of West’s horse, the armour of the guards that followed them.

‘Snow,’ Burr grumbled over his shoulder. ‘Snow already. Isn’t that a little early in the year?’

‘Very early, sir, but it’s cold enough.’ West took one hand from his reins to pull his coat tighter round his neck. ‘Colder than usual, for the end of autumn.’

‘It’ll be a damn sight colder up north of the Cumnur, I’ll be bound.’

‘Yes, sir, and it won’t be getting any warmer now.’

‘Could be a harsh winter, eh, Colonel?’

‘Very likely, sir.’ Colonel? Colonel West? The words still seemed strange together, even in his own mind. No one could ever have dreamed a commoner’s son would go so far. Himself least of all.

‘A long, harsh winter,’ Burr was musing. ‘We need to catch Bethod quickly. Catch him and put a quick end to him, before we all freeze.’ He frowned at the trees as they slipped by, frowned up at the flecks of snow eddying around them, frowned over at West. ‘Bad roads, bad ground, bad weather. Not the best situation, eh, Colonel?’

‘No, sir,’ said West glumly, but it was his own situation that was worrying him.

‘Come now, it could be worse. You’ll be dug in south of the river, nice and warm. Probably won’t see a hair of a Northman all winter. And I hear the Prince and his staff eat pretty well. A damn stretch better than blundering around in the snow with Poulder and Kroy for company.’

‘Of course, sir.’ But West was less than sure.

Burr glanced over his shoulder at the guards, trotting along at a respectful distance. ‘You know, when I was a young man, before I was given the dubious honour of commanding the King’s army, I used to love to ride. I’d ride for miles, at the gallop. Made me feel . . . alive. Seems like there’s no time for it these days.

Briefings, and documents, and sitting at tables, that's all I do. Sometimes, you just want to ride, eh, West?

'Of course, sir, but now would—'

'Yah!' The Lord Marshal dug his spurs in with a will and his horse bolted down the track, mud flicking up from its hooves. West gaped after him for a moment.

'Damn it,' he whispered. The stubborn old fool would most likely get thrown and break his thick neck. Then where would they be? Prince Ladisla would have to take command. West shivered at the prospect, and kicked his own horse into a gallop. What choice did he have?

The trees flashed past on either side, the road flowed by underneath him. His ears filled with the clattering of hooves, the rattling of harness. The wind rushed in his mouth, stung his eyes. The snow flakes came at him, straight on. West snatched a look over his shoulder. The guards were tangled up with each other, horses jostling, lagging far back down the road.

It was the best he could do to keep up and stay in his saddle at the same time. The last time he'd ridden so hard had been years ago, pounding across a dry plain with a wedge of Gurkish cavalry just behind him. He'd hardly been any more scared then. His hands were gripping the reins painfully tight, his heart was hammering with fear and excitement. He realised that he was smiling. Burr had been right. It did make him feel alive.

The Lord Marshal had slowed, and West reined his own horse in as he drew level. He was laughing now, and he could hear Burr chuckling beside him. He hadn't laughed like that in months. Years maybe, he couldn't remember the last time. Then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

He felt a sickening jolt, a crushing pain in his chest. His head snapped forward, the reins were ripped from his hands, everything turned upside down. His horse was gone. He was rolling on the ground, over and over.

He tried to get up and the world lurched. Trees and white sky, a horse's kicking legs, dirt flying. He stumbled and pitched into the road, took a mouthful of mud. Someone helped him up, pulling roughly at his coat, dragging him into the woods.

'No,' he gasped, hardly able to breathe for the pain in his chest. There was no reason to go that way.

A black line between the trees. He staggered forward, bent double, tripping over the tails of his coat, crashing through the undergrowth. A rope across the road, pulled tight as they passed. Someone was half dragging him, half carrying him. His head was spinning, all sense of direction lost. A trap. West fumbled for his sword. It took him a moment to realise that his scabbard was empty.

The Northmen. West felt a stab of terror in his gut. The Northmen had him, and Burr too. Assassins, sent by Bethod to kill them. There was a rushing sound somewhere, out beyond the trees. West struggled to make sense of it. The guards, following down the road. If he could only give them a signal somehow . . .

'Over here . . .' he croaked, pitifully hoarse, before a dirty hand clamped itself over his mouth, dragged him down into the wet undergrowth. He struggled as best he could, but there was no strength in him. He could see the guards flashing by through the trees, no more than a dozen strides away, but he was powerless.

He bit the hand, as hard as he could, but it only gripped tighter, squeezing his jaw, crushing his lips. He could taste blood. His own blood maybe, or blood from the hand. The sound of the guards faded into the woods and was gone, and fear pressed in behind it. The hand let go, gave him a parting shove and he tumbled onto his back.

A face swam into view above him. A hard, gaunt, brutish face, black hair hacked short, teeth bared in an animal scowl, cold, flat eyes, brimful of fury. The face turned and spat on the ground. There was no ear on the other side of it. Just a flap of pink scar, and a hole.

Never in his life had West seen such an evil-looking man. The whole set of him was violence itself. He looked strong enough to tear West in half, and more than willing to do it. There was blood running from a wound in his hand. The wound that West's teeth had made. It dripped from his fingertips onto the forest floor. In his other fist he held a length of smooth wood. West's eyes followed it, horrified. There was a heavy, curved blade at the end, polished bright. An axe.

So this was a Northman. Not the kind who rolled drunk in the gutters of Adua. Not the kind who had come to his father's farm to beg for work. The other kind. The kind his mother had scared him with stories of when he was a child. A man

whose work, and whose pastime, and whose purpose, was to kill. West looked from that hard blade to those hard eyes and back, numb with horror. He was finished. He would die here in the cold forest, down in the dirt like a dog.

West dragged himself up by one hand, seized by a sudden impulse to run. He looked over his shoulder, but there was no escape that way. A man was moving through the trees towards them. A big man with a thick beard and a sword over his shoulder, carrying a child in his arms. West blinked, trying to get some sense of scale. It was the biggest man he had ever seen, and the child was Lord Marshal Burr. The giant tossed his burden down on the ground like a bundle of sticks. Burr stared up at him, and burped.

West ground his teeth. Riding off like that, the old fool, what had he been thinking? He'd killed them both with his fucking 'sometimes you just want to ride'. Makes you feel alive? Neither one of them would live out the hour.

He had to fight. Now might be his last chance. Even if he had nothing to fight with. Better to die that way than on his knees in the mud. He tried to dig the anger out. There was no end to it, when he didn't want it. Now there was nothing. Just a desperate helplessness that weighed down every limb.

Some hero. Some fighter. It was the most he could do to keep from pissing himself. He could hit a woman alright. He could throttle his sister half to death. The memory of it still made him choke with shame and revulsion, even with his own death staring him in the face. He had thought he would make it right later. Only now there was no later. This was all there was. He felt tears in his eyes.

'Sorry,' he muttered to himself. 'I'm sorry.' He closed his eyes and waited for the end.

'No need for sorry, friend, I reckon he's been bitten harder.'

Another Northman had melted out of the woods, crouching down beside West on his haunches. Lank, matted brown hair hung around his lean face. Quick, dark eyes. Clever eyes. He cracked a wicked grin, anything but reassuring. Two rows of hard, yellow, pointed teeth. 'Sit,' he said, accent so thick that West could scarcely understand him. 'Sit and be still is best.'

A fourth man was standing over him and Burr. A great, broadchested man, his wrists as thick as West's ankles. There were grey hairs in his beard, in his tangled hair. The leader, it seemed, from the way the others made room for him. He

looked down at West, slow and thoughtful, as a man might look at an ant, deciding whether or not to squash it under his boot.

‘Which of ‘em’s Burr, do you think?’ he rumbled in Northern.

‘I’m Burr,’ said West. Had to protect the Lord Marshal. Had to. He clambered up without thinking, but he was still dizzy from the fall, and he had to grab hold of a branch to stop himself falling. ‘I’m Burr.’

The old warrior looked him up and down, slow and steady. ‘You?’ He burst into a peal of laughter, deep and menacing as a storm in the distance. ‘I like that! That’s nice!’ He turned to the evil-looking one. ‘See? I thought you said they got no guts, these Southerners?’

‘It was brains I said they was short on.’ The one-eared man glowered down at West the way a hungry cat looks at a bird. ‘And I’ve yet to see otherwise.’

‘I think it’s this one.’ The leader was looking down at Burr. ‘You Burr?’ he asked in the common tongue.

The Lord Marshal looked at West, then up at the towering Northmen, then he got slowly to his feet. He straightened and brushed down his uniform, like a man preparing to die with dignity. ‘I’m Burr, and I’ll not entertain you. If you mean to kill us, you should do it now.’ West stayed where he was. Dignity hardly seemed worth the effort now. He could almost feel the axe biting into his head already.

But the Northman with the grey in his beard only smiled. ‘I can see how you’d make that mistake, and we’re sorry if we’ve frayed your nerves at all, but we’re not here to kill you. We’re here to help you.’ West struggled to make sense of what he was hearing.

Burr was doing the same. ‘To help us?’

‘There’s plenty in the North who hate Bethod. There’s plenty who don’t kneel willing, and some who don’t kneel at all. That’s us. We’ve a feud with that bastard has been a long time brewing, and we mean to settle it, or die in the trying. We can’t fight him alone, but we hear you’re fighting him, so we reckoned we’d join you.’

‘Join us?’

‘We came a long way to do it, and from what we seen on the way you could use the help. But when we got here, your people weren’t keen to take us.’

‘They was somewhat rude,’ said the lean one, squatting next to West.

‘They was indeed, Dogman, they was indeed. But we ain’t men to back off at a little rudeness. That’s when I hit on the notion of talking to you, chief to chief, you might say.’

Burr stared over at West. ‘They want to fight with us,’ he said. West blinked back, still trying to come to terms with the notion that he might live out the day. The one called Dogman was holding out a sword towards him, hilt first, and grinning. It took West a moment to realise it was his own.

‘Thanks,’ muttered West as he fumbled with the grip.

‘No bother.’

‘There’s five of us,’ the leader was saying, ‘all Named Men and veterans. We’ve fought against Bethod, and we’ve fought with him, all across the North. We know his style, few better. We can scout, we can fight, we can lay surprises, as you see. We’ll not shirk any task worth the doing, and any task that hurts Bethod is worth it to us. What do you say?’

‘Well . . . er,’ murmured Burr, rubbing his chin with his thumb. ‘You plainly are a most . . .’ and he looked from one hard, dirty, scarred face to the next ‘. . . useful set of men. How could I resist an offer so graciously made?’

‘Then I better make the introductions. This here is the Dogman.’

‘That’s me,’ growled the lean one with the pointy teeth, flashing his worrying grin again. ‘Good to meet.’ He grabbed hold of West’s hand and squeezed it until his knuckles clicked.

Threetrees jerked his thumb sideways at the evil one with the axe and the missing ear. ‘This friendly fellow’s Black Dow. I’d say he gets better with time, but he don’t.’ Dow turned and spat on the ground again. ‘The big lad is Tul Duru. They call him the Thunderhead. Then there’s Harding Grim. He’s off out there in the trees, keeping your horses off the road. Not to worry though, he’d have nothing to say.’

‘And you?’

‘Rudd Threetrees. Leader of this little crew, on account of our previous leader having gone back to the mud.’

‘Back to the mud, I see.’ Burr took a deep breath. ‘Well then. You can report to Colonel West. I’m sure that he can find food and quarters for you, not to mention work.’

'Me?' asked West, sword still dangling from his hand.

'Absolutely.' The Lord Marshal had the tiniest smile at the corner of his mouth. 'Our new allies should fit right in with Prince Ladisla's retinue.' West couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. Just when he had thought his situation could not be any more difficult, he had five primitives to handle.

Threetrees seemed happy enough with the outcome. 'Good,' he said, slowly nodding his approval. 'That's settled then.'

'Settled,' said the Dogman, his evil smile growing wider still.

The one called Black Dow gave West a long, cold stare.

'Fucking Union,' he growled.

Questions

To Sand dan Glokta,

Superior of Dagoska, and for his eyes alone.

You will take ship immediately, and assume command of the Inquisition in the city of Dagoska. You will establish what became of your predecessor, Superior Davoust. You will investigate his suspicion that a conspiracy is afoot, perhaps in the city's ruling council itself. You will examine the members of that council, and uproot any and all disloyalty. Punish treason with scant mercy, but ensure that your evidence is sound. We can afford no further blunders.

Gurkish soldiers already crowd to the peninsula, ready to exploit any weakness. The King's regiments are fully committed in Angland, so you can expect little help should the Gurkish attack. You will therefore ensure that the defences of the city are strong, and that provisions are sufficient to withstand any siege. You will keep me informed of your progress in regular letters. Above all, you will ensure that Dagoska does not, under any circumstances, fall into the hands of the Gurkish.

Do not fail me.

Sult

Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.

Gloкта folded the letter carefully and slipped it back into his pocket, checking once again that the King's writ was safe beside it. *Damn thing.* The big document had been weighing heavily in his coat ever since the Arch Lector passed it to him. He pulled it out and turned it over in his hands, the gold leaf on the big red seal glittering in the harsh sunlight. *A single sheet of paper, yet worth more than gold. Priceless. With this, I speak with the King's own voice. I am the most powerful man in Dagoska, greater even than the Lord Governor himself. All must hear me and obey. As long as I can stay alive, that is.*

The voyage had not been a pleasant one. The ship was small and the Circle Sea had been rough on the way over. Glokta's own cabin was tiny, hot and close as an oven. *An oven swaying wildly all day and all night.* If he had not been trying to eat gruel with the bowl slopping crazily around, he had been vomiting back up

those small amounts he had actually managed to swallow. But at least below decks there was no chance of his useless leg giving way and dumping him over the side into the sea. *Yes, the voyage has hardly been pleasant.*

But now the voyage was over. The ship was already slipping up to its mooring in amongst the crowded wharves. The sailors were already struggling with the anchor, throwing ropes on to the dock. Now the gangplank was sliding across from ship to dusty shore.

'Right,' said Practical Severard. 'I'm going to get me a drink.'

'Make it a strong one, but see you catch up with me later. We'll have work to do tomorrow. Lots of work.'

Severard nodded, lanky hair swaying around his thin face. 'Oh, I live to serve.' *I'm not sure what you live for, but I doubt it's that.* He sauntered off, whistling tunelessly, clattered across the plank, down the wharf and off between the dusty brown buildings beyond.

Glokta eyed the narrow length of wood with not a little worry, worked his hand around the handle of his cane, tongued at his empty gums, building himself up to stepping on to it. *An act of selfless heroism indeed.* He wondered for a moment whether he would be wiser to crawl across on his stomach. *It would reduce the chance of a watery death, but it would hardly be appropriate, would it? The city's awe-inspiring Superior of the Inquisition, slithering into his new domain on his belly?*

'Need a hand?' Practical Vitari was looking at him sideways, leaning back on the ship's handrail, red hair sticking up off her head like the spines on a thistle. She seemed to have spent the entire journey basking in the open air like a lizard, quite unmoved by the reeling of the ship, enjoying the crushing heat every bit as much as Glokta despised it. It was hard to judge her expression beneath her black Practical's mask. *But it's a good bet she's smiling. No doubt she's already preparing her first report to the Arch Lector: 'The cripple spent most of the voyage below decks, puking. When we arrived at Dagoska he had to be hoisted ashore with the cargo. Already he has become a laughing stock...'*

'Of course not!' snapped Glokta, hobbling up onto the plank as though he took his life in his hands every morning. It wobbled alarmingly as he planted his right foot on it, and he became painfully aware of the grey-green water slapping at the

slimy stones of the quay a long drop below him. *Body found floating by the docks.*

..

But in the end he was able to shuffle across without incident, dragging his withered leg behind him. He felt an absurd pang of pride when he made it to the dusty stones of the docks and finally stood on dry land again. *Ridiculous. Anyone would think I'd beaten the Gurkish and saved the city already, rather than hobbled three strides.* To add insult to injury, now that he had become used to the constant lurching of the ship, the stillness of land was making his head spin and his stomach roll, and the rotten salt stink of the baking docks was very far from helping. He forced himself to swallow a mouthful of bitter spit, closed his eyes and turned his face towards the cloudless sky.

Hell, but it's hot. Glokta had forgotten how hot the South could be. Late in the year, and still the sun was blazing down, still he was running with sweat under his long black coat. *The garments of the Inquisition may be excellent for instilling terror in a suspect, but I fear they are poorly suited to a hot climate.*

Practical Frost was even worse off. The hulking albino had covered every exposed inch of his milky skin, even down to black gloves and a wide hat. He peered up at the brilliant sky, pink eyes narrowed with suspicion and misery, broad white face beaded with sweat around his black mask.

Vitari peered sidelong at the pair of them. 'You two really should get out more,' she muttered.

A man in Inquisitor's black was waiting at the end of the wharf, sticking close to the shade of a crumbling wall but still sweating generously. A tall, bony man with bulging eyes, his hooked nose red and peeling from sunburn. *The welcoming committee? Judging by its scale, I am scarcely welcome at all.*

'I am Harker, senior Inquisitor in the city.'

'Until I arrived,' snapped Glokta. 'How many others have you?'

The Inquisitor frowned. 'Four Inquisitors and some twenty Practicals.'

'A small complement, to keep a city of this size free of treason.'

Harker's frown grew more surly yet. 'We've always managed.' *Oh, indeed. Apart from mislaying your Superior, of course. "This is your first visit to Dagoska?"*

'I have spent some time in the South.' *The best days of my life, and the worst. "I was in Gurkhul during the war. I saw Ulrioch." In ruins after we burned the*

city. 'And I was in Shaffa for two years.' *If you count the Emperor's Prisons. Two years in the boiling heat and the crushing darkness. Two years in hell.* 'But I have never been to Dagoska.'

'Huh,' snorted Harker, unimpressed. 'Your quarters are in the Citadel.' He nodded towards the great rock that loomed up over the city. *Of course they are. In the very highest part of the highest building, no doubt.* 'I'll show you the way. Lord Governor Vurms and his council will be keen to meet their new Superior.' He turned with a look of some bitterness. *Feel you should have got the job yourself, eh? I'm delighted to disappoint you.*

Harker set off into the city at a brisk pace, Practical Frost trudging along beside him, heavy shoulders hunched around his thick neck, sticking to every trace of shade as though the sun were shooting tiny darts at him. Vitari zig-zagged across the dusty street as if it was a dance-floor, peering through windows and down narrow side-streets. Glokta shuffled along doggedly behind, his left leg already starting to burn with the effort.

'The cripple shuffled only three strides into the city before he fell on his face, and had to be carried the rest of the way by stretcher, squealing like a half-slaughtered pig and begging for water, while the very citizens he was sent to terrify watched, dumbstruck...'

He curled his lips back and dug his remaining teeth into his empty gums, forced himself to keep pace with the others, the handle of his cane cutting into his palm, his spine giving an agonising click with every step.

'This is the Lower City,' grumbled Harker over his shoulder, 'where the native population are housed.'

A giant, boiling, dusty, stinking slum. The buildings were mean and badly maintained: rickety shacks of one storey, leaning piles of half-baked mud bricks. The people were all dark-skinned, poorly dressed, hungry-looking. A bony woman peered out at them from a doorway. An old man with one leg hobbled past on bent crutches. Down a narrow alley ragged children darted between piles of refuse. The air was heavy with the stink of rot and bad sewers. *Or no sewers at all.* Flies buzzed everywhere. Fat, angry flies. *The only creatures prospering here.*

'If I'd known it was such a charming place,' observed Glokta, 'I'd have come sooner. Seems the Dagoskans have done well from joining the Union, eh?'

Harker did not recognise the irony. ‘They have indeed. During the short time the Gurkish controlled the city, they took many of the leading citizens as slaves. Now, under the Union, they are truly free to work and live as they please.’

‘Truly free, eh?’ *So this is what freedom looks like.* Glokta watched a group of sullen natives crowding round a stall poorly stocked with half-rotten fruit and flyblown offal.

‘Well, mostly.’ Harker frowned. ‘The Inquisition had to weed out a few troublemakers when we first arrived. Then, three years ago, the ungrateful swine mounted a rebellion.’ *After we gave them the freedom to live like animals in their own city? Shocking.* ‘We got the better of them, of course, but they caused no end of damage. After that they were barred from keeping weapons, or entering the Upper City, where most of the whites live. Since then, things have been quiet. It only goes to show that a firm hand is most effective when it comes to dealing with these primitives.’

‘They built some impressive defences, for primitives.’

A high wall cut through the city before them, casting a long shadow over the squalid buildings of the slum. There was a wide pit in front, freshly dug and lined with sharpened stakes. A narrow bridge led across to a tall gate, set between looming towers. The heavy doors were open, but a dozen men stood before them: sweating Union soldiers in steel caps and studded leather coats, harsh sun glinting on their swords and spears.

‘A well-guarded gate,’ mused Vitari. ‘Considering that it’s inside the city.’

Harker frowned. ‘Since the rebellion, natives have only been allowed within the Upper City if they have a permit.’

‘And who holds a permit?’ asked Glokta.

‘Some skilled craftsmen and so forth, still employed by the Guild of Spicers, but mostly servants who work in the Upper City and the Citadel. Many of the Union citizens who live here have native servants, some have several.’

‘Surely the natives are citizens of the Union also?’

Harker curled his lip. ‘If you say so, Superior, but they can’t be trusted, and that’s a fact. They don’t think like us.’

‘Really?’ *If they think at all it will be an improvement on this savage.*

‘They’re all scum, these browns. Gurkish, Dagoskan, all the same. Killers and thieves, the lot of them. Best thing to do is to push them down and keep them down.’ Harker scowled out at the baking slum. ‘If a thing smells like shit, and is the colour of shit, the chances are it is shit.’ He turned and stalked off across the bridge.

‘What a charming and enlightened man,’ murmured Vitari. *You read my mind.*

It was a different world beyond the gates. Stately domes, elegant towers, mosaics of coloured glass and pillars of white marble shone in the blazing sun. The streets were wide and clean, the residences well maintained. There were even a few thirsty-looking palms in the neat squares. The people here were sleek, well dressed, and white-skinned. *Aside from a great deal of sunburn.* A few dark faces moved among them, keeping well out of the way, eyes on the ground. *Those lucky enough to be allowed to serve? They must be glad that we in the Union would not tolerate such a thing as slavery.*

Over everything Glokta could hear a rattling din, like a battle in the distance. It grew louder as he dragged his aching leg through the Upper City, and reached a furious pitch as they emerged into a wide square, packed from one edge to the other with a bewildering throng. There were people of Midderland, and Gurkhul, and Styria, narrow-eyed natives of Suljuk, yellow-haired citizens of the Old Empire, bearded Northmen even, far from home.

‘Merchants,’ grunted Harker. *All the merchants in the world, it looks like.* They crowded round stalls laden with produce, great scales for the weighing of materials, blackboards with chalked-in goods and prices. They bellowed, borrowed and bartered in a multitude of different languages, threw up their hands in strange gestures, shoved and tugged and pointed at one another. They sniffed at boxes of spice and sticks of incense, fingered at bolts of cloth and planks of rare wood, squeezed at fruits, bit at coins, peered through eye-glasses at flashing gemstones. Here and there a native porter stumbled through the crowds, stooped double under a massive load.

‘The Spicers take a cut of everything,’ muttered Harker, shoving impatiently through the chattering press.

'That must be a great deal,' said Vitari under her breath. *A very great deal, I should imagine. Enough to defy the Gurkish. Enough to keep a whole city prisoner. People will kill for much, much less.*

Glokta grimaced and snarled his way across the square, jolted and barged and painfully shoved at every limping step. It was only when they finally emerged from the crowds at the far side that he realised they were standing in the very shadow of a vast and graceful building, rising arch upon arch, dome upon dome, high over the crowds. Delicate spires at each corner soared into the air, slender and frail.

'Magnificent,' muttered Glokta, stretching out his aching back and squinting up, the pure white stone almost painful to look at in the afternoon glare. 'Seeing this, one could almost believe in God.' *If one didn't know better.*

'Huh,' sneered Harker. 'The natives used to pray here in their thousands, poisoning the air with their damn chanting and superstition, until the rebellion was put down, of course.'

'And now?'

'Superior Davoust declared it off limits to them. Like everything else in the Upper City. Now the Spicers use it as an extension to the marketplace, buying and selling and so on.'

'Huh.' *How very appropriate. A temple to the making of money. Our own little religion.*

'I believe some bank uses part of it for their offices, as well.'

'A bank? Which one?'

'The Spicers run that side of things,' snapped Harker impatiently. 'Valint and something, is it?'

'Balk. Valint and Balk.' *So some old acquaintances are here before me, eh? I should have known. Those bastards are everywhere. Everywhere there's money.* He peered round at the swarming marketplace. *And there's a lot of money here.*

The way grew steeper as they began to climb the great rock, the streets built onto shelves cut out from the dry hillside. Glokta laboured on through the heat, stooped over his cane, biting his lip against the pain in his leg, thirsty as a dog and with sweat leaking out through every pore. Harker made no effort to slow as Glokta toiled along behind him. *And I'll be damned if I'm going to ask him to.*

'Above us is the Citadel.' The Inquisitor waved his hand at the mass of sheer-walled buildings, domes and towers clinging to the very top of the brown rock, high above the city. 'It was once the seat of the native King, but now it serves as Dagoska's administrative centre, and accommodates some of the most important citizens. The Spicers' guildhall is inside, and the city's House of Questions.'

'Quite a view,' murmured Vitari.

Glokta turned and shaded his eyes with his hand. Dagoska was spread out before them, almost an island. The Upper City sloped away, neat grids of neat houses with long, straight roads in between, speckled with yellow palms and wide squares. On the far side of its long, curving wall lay the dusty brown jumble of the slums. Looming over them in the distance, shimmering in the haze, Glokta could see the mighty land walls, blocking the one narrow neck of rock that joined the city to the mainland, the blue sea on one side and the blue harbour on the other. *The strongest defences in the world, so they say. I wonder if we shall be putting that proud boast to the test before too long?*

'Superior Glokta?' Harker cleared his throat. 'The Lord Governor and his council will be waiting.'

'They can wait a little longer, then. I am curious to know what progress you have made in investigating the disappearance of Superior Davoust.' *It would be most unfortunate if the new Superior were to suffer the same fate, after all.*

Harker frowned. 'Well . . . some progress. I have no doubt the natives are responsible. They never stop plotting. Despite the measures Davoust took after the rebellion, many of them still refuse to learn their place.'

'I stand amazed.'

'It is all too true, believe me. Three Dagoskan servants were present in the Superior's chambers on the night he disappeared. I have been questioning them.'

'And what have you discovered?'

'Nothing yet, unfortunately. They have proved exceedingly stubborn.'

'Then let us question them together.'

'Together?' Harker licked his lips. 'I wasn't aware that you would want to question them yourself, Superior.'

'Now you are.'

One would have thought it would be cooler, deep within the rock. But it was every bit as hot as outside in the baking streets, without the mercy of the slightest breeze. The corridor was silent, dead, and stuffy as a tomb. Vitari's torch cast flickering shadows into the corners, and the darkness closed in fast behind them.

Harker paused beside an iron-bound door, mopped fat beads of sweat from his face. 'I must warn you, Superior, it was necessary to be quite . . . firm with them. A firm hand is the best thing, you know.'

'Oh, I can be quite firm myself, when the situation demands it. I am not easily shocked.'

'Good, good.' The key turned in the lock, the door swung open, and a foul smell washed out into the corridor. *A blocked latrine and a rotten rubbish heap rolled into one.* The cell beyond was tiny, windowless, the ceiling almost too low to stand. The heat was crushing, the stench was appalling. It reminded Glokta of another cell. Further south, in Shaffa. Deep beneath the Emperor's palace. *A cell in which I gasped away two years, squealing in the blackness, scratching at the walls, crawling in my own filth.* His eye had begun to twitch, and he wiped it carefully with his finger.

One prisoner lay stretched out, his face to the wall, skin black with bruises, both legs broken. Another hung from the ceiling by his wrists, knees brushing the floor, head hanging limp, back whipped raw. Vitari stooped and prodded at one of them with her finger. 'Dead,' she said simply. She crossed to the other. 'And this one. Dead a good while.'

The flickering light fell across a third prisoner. This one was alive. *Just.* She was chained by hands and feet, face hollow with hunger, lips cracked with thirst, clutching filthy, bloodstained rags to her. Her heels scraped at the floor as she tried to push herself further back into the corner, gibbering faintly in Kantic, one hand across her face to ward off the light. *I remember. The only thing worse than the darkness is when the light comes. The questions always come with it.*

Glokta frowned, his twitching eyes moving from the two broken corpses to the cowering girl, his head spinning from the effort, and the heat, and the stink. 'Well this is very cosy. What have they told you?'

Harker had his hand over his nose and mouth as he stepped reluctantly into the cell, Frost looming just over his shoulder. 'Nothing yet, but I—'

'You'll get nothing from these two, now, that's sure. I hope they signed confessions.'

'Well . . . not exactly. Superior Davoust was never that interested in confessions from the browns, we just, you know . . .'

'You couldn't even keep them alive long enough to confess?'

Harker looked sullen. *Like a child unfairly punished by his schoolmaster.* 'There's still the girl,' he snapped.

Glokta looked down at her, licking at the space where his front teeth used to be. *There is no method here. No purpose. Brutality, for it's own sake. I might almost be sickened, had I eaten anything today.* 'How old is she?'

'Fourteen, perhaps, Superior, but I fail to see the relevance.'

'The relevance, Inquisitor Harker, is that conspiracies are rarely led by fourteen-year-old girls.'

'I thought it best to be thorough.'

'Thorough? Did you even ask them any questions?'

'Well, I—'

Glokta's cane cracked Harker cleanly across the face. The sudden movement caused a stab of agony in Glokta's side, and he stumbled on his weak leg and had to grab at Frost's arm for support. The Inquisitor gave a squeal of pain and shock, tumbled against the wall and slid into the filth on the cell floor.

'You're not an Inquisitor!' hissed Glokta, 'you're a fucking butcher! Look at the state of this place! And you've killed two of our witnesses! What use are they now, fool?' Glokta leaned forward. 'Unless that was your intention, eh? Perhaps Davoust was killed by a jealous underling? An underling who wanted to silence the witnesses, eh, Harker? Perhaps I should start my investigations with the Inquisition itself!'

Practical Frost loomed over Harker as he struggled to get up, and he shrank back down against the wall, blood starting to dribble from his nose. 'No! No, please! It was an accident! I didn't mean to kill them! I just wanted to know what happened!'

'An accident? You're a traitor or an utter incompetent, and I've no use for either one!' He leaned down even lower, ignoring the pain shooting up his back, his lips curling away to show his toothless smile. 'I understand a firm hand is

most effective when dealing with primitives, Inquisitor. You will find there are no firmer hands than mine. Not anywhere. Get this worm out of my sight!’

Frost seized hold of Harker by his coat and hauled him bodily through the filth towards the door. ‘Wait!’ he wailed, clutching at the door frame, ‘please! You can’t do this!’ His cries faded down the corridor.

Vitari had a faint smile around her eyes, as though she had rather enjoyed the scene. ‘What about this mess?’

‘Get it cleaned up.’ Glokta leaned against the wall, his side still pulsing with pain, wiped sweat from his face with a trembling hand. ‘Wash it down. Bury these bodies.’

Vitari nodded towards the one survivor. ‘What about her?’

‘Give her a bath. Clothes. Food. Let her go.’

‘Hardly worth giving her a bath if she’s going back to the Lower City.’

She has a point there. ‘Alright! She was Davoust’s servant, she can be mine. Put her back to work!’ he shouted over his shoulder, already hobbling for the door. He had to get out. He could hardly breathe in there.

‘I am sorry to disappoint you all, but the walls are far from impregnable, not in their present poor condition . . .’ The speaker trailed off as Glokta shuffled through the door into the meeting chamber of Dagoska’s ruling council.

It was as unlike the cell below as it was possible for a room to be. *It is, in fact, the most beautiful room I ever saw.* Every inch of wall and ceiling was carved in the most minute detail: geometric patterns of frightening intricacy wound round scenes from Kantic legends in life-size, all painted in glittering gold and silver, vivid red and blue. The floor was a mosaic of wondrous complexity, the long table was inlaid with swirls of dark wood and chips of bright ivory, polished to a high sheen. The tall windows offered a spectacular view over the dusty brown expanse of the city, and the sparkling bay beyond.

The woman who rose to greet Glokta as he entered did not seem out of place in the magnificent surroundings. *Not in the slightest.*

‘I am Carlot dan Eider,’ she said, smiling easily and holding her hands out to him as though to an old friend, ‘Magister of the Guild of Spicers.’

Glokta was impressed, he had to admit. *If only by her stomach. Not even the slightest sign of horror. She greets me as though I were not a disfigured, twitching,*

twisted ruin. She greets me as though I looked as fine as she does. She wore a long gown in the style of the South: blue silk, trimmed with silver, it shimmered around her in the cool breeze through the high windows. Jewels of daunting value flashed on her fingers, on her wrists, round her throat. Glokta detected a strange scent as she came closer. Sweet. Like the spice that has made her so very rich, perhaps. The effect was far from wasted on him. I am still a man, after all. Just less so than I used to be.

‘I must apologise for my attire, but Kantic garments are so much more comfortable in the heat. I have become quite accustomed to them during my years here.’

Her apologising for her appearance is like a genius apologising for his stupidity. ‘Don’t mention it.’ Glokta bowed as low as he could, given the uselessness of his leg and the sharp pain in his back. ‘Superior Glokta, at your service.’

‘We are most glad to have you with us. We have all been greatly concerned since the disappearance of your predecessor, Superior Davoust.’ *Some of you, I expect, have been less concerned than others.*

‘I hope to shed some light on the matter.’

‘We all hope that you will.’ She took Glokta’s elbow with an effortless confidence. ‘Please allow me to make the introductions.’

Glokta refused to be moved. ‘Thank you, Magister, but I believe I can make my own.’ He shuffled across to the table under his own power, such as it was. ‘You must be General Vissbruck, charged with the city’s defence.’ The General was in his middle forties, running slightly to baldness, sweating abundantly in an elaborate uniform, buttoned all the way to the neck in spite of the heat. *I remember you. You were in Gurkhul, in the war. A Major in the King’s Own, and well known for being an ass. It seems you have done well, at least, as asses generally do.*

‘A pleasure,’ said Vissbruck, scarcely even glancing up from his documents.

‘It always is, to renew an old acquaintance.’

‘We’ve met?’

‘We fought together in Gurkhul.’

'We did?' A spasm of shock ran over Vissbruck's sweaty face. 'You're . . . *that* Glokta?'

'I am indeed, as you say, *that* Glokta.'

The General blinked. 'Er, well, er . . . how have you been?'

'In very great pain, thank you for asking, but I see that you have prospered, and that is a tremendous consolation.' Vissbruck blinked, but Glokta did not give him time to reply. 'And this must be Lord Governor Vurms. A positive honour, your Grace.'

The old man was a caricature of decrepitude, shrunken into his great robes of state like a withered plum in its furry skin. His hands seemed to shiver even in the heat, his head was shiny bald aside from a few white wisps. He squinted up at Glokta through weak and rheumy eyes.

'What did he say?' The Lord Governor stared about him in confusion. 'Who is this man?'

General Vissbruck leaned across, so close his lips almost brushed the old man's ear. 'Superior Glokta, your Grace! The replacement for Davoust!'

'Glokta? Glokta? Where the hell is Davoust anyway?' No one bothered to reply.

'I am Korsten dan Vurms.' The Lord Governor's son spoke his own name as though it was a magic spell, offered his hand to Glokta as though it was a priceless gift. He was blond-haired and handsome, spread out carelessly in his chair, a well-tanned glow of health about him, as lithe and athletic as his father was ancient and wizened. *I despise him already.*

'I understand that you were once quite the swordsman.' Vurms looked Glokta up and down with a mocking smile. 'I fence myself, and there's really no one here to challenge me. Perhaps we might have a bout?' *I'd love to, you little bastard. If I still had my leg I'd give you a bout of the shits before I was done.*

'I did fence but, alas, I had to give it up. Ill health.' Glokta leered back a toothless smile of his own. 'I daresay I could still give you a few pointers, though, if you're keen to improve.' Vurms frowned at that, but Glokta had already moved on. 'You must be Haddish Kahdia.'

The Haddish was a tall, slender man with a long neck and tired eyes. He wore a simple white robe, a plain white turban wound about his head. *He looks no*

more prosperous than any of the other natives down in the Lower City, and yet there is a certain dignity about him.

'I am Kahdia, and I have been chosen by the people of Dagoska to speak for them. But I no longer call myself Haddish. A priest without a temple is no priest at all.'

'Must we still hear about the temple?' whined Vurms.

'I am afraid you must, while I sit on this council.' He looked back at Glokta. 'So there is a new Inquisitor in the city? A new devil. A new bringer of death. Your comings and goings are of no interest to me, torturer.'

Glokta smiled. *Confessing his hatred for the Inquisition without even seeing my instruments. But then his people can hardly be expected to have much love for the Union, they're little better than slaves in their own city. Could he be our traitor?*

Or him? General Vissbruck seemed every inch a loyal military man, a man whose sense of duty was too strong, and whose imagination was too weak, for intrigue. *But few men become Generals without looking to their own profit, without oiling the wheels, without keeping some secrets.*

Or him? Korsten dan Vurms was sneering at Glokta as though at a badly-cleaned latrine he had to use. *I've seen his like a thousand times, the arrogant whelp. The Lord Governor's own son, perhaps, but it's plain enough he has no loyalty to anyone beyond himself.*

Or her? Magister Eider was all comely smiles and politeness, but her eyes were hard as diamonds. *Judging me like a merchant judges an ignorant customer. There's more to her than fine manners and a weakness for foreign tailoring. Far more.*

Or him? Even the old Lord Governor seemed suspect now. *Are his eyes and ears as bad as he claims? Or is there a hint of play-acting in his squinting, his demands to know what's going on? Does he already know more than anyone?*

Glokta turned and limped towards the window, leaned against the beautifully carved pillar beside it and peered out at the astonishing view, the evening sun still warm on his face. He could already feel the council members shifting restlessly, keen to be rid of him. *I wonder how long before they order the cripple out of their beautiful room? I do not trust a one of them. Not a one. He smirked to himself. Precisely as it should be.*

It was Korsten dan Vurms who lost patience first. 'Superior Glokta,' he snapped. 'We appreciate your thoroughness in presenting yourself here, but I am sure you have urgent business to attend to. We certainly do.'

'Of course.' Glokta hobbled back to the table with exaggerated slowness as if he were leaving the room. Then he slid out a chair and lowered himself into it, wincing at the pain in his leg. 'I will try to keep my comments to a minimum, at least to begin with.'

'What?' said Vissbruck.

'Who is this fellow?' demanded the Lord Governor, craning forwards and squinting with his weak eyes. 'What is going on here?'

His son was more direct. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?' he demanded. 'Are you mad?' Haddish Kahdia began to chuckle softly to himself. At Glokta, or at the rage of the others, it was impossible to say.

'Please, gentlemen, please.' Magister Eider spoke softly, patiently. 'The Superior has only just arrived, and is perhaps ignorant of how we conduct business in Dagoska. You must understand that your predecessor did not attend these meetings. We have been governing this city successfully for several years, and—'

'The Closed Council disagrees.' Glokta held up the King's writ between two fingers. He let everyone look at it for a moment, making sure they could see the heavy seal of red and gold, then he flicked it across the table.

The others stared over suspiciously as Carlot dan Eider picked up the document, unfolded it and started to read. She frowned, then raised one well-plucked eyebrow. 'It seems that we are the ignorant ones.'

'Let me see that!' Korsten dan Vurms snatched the paper out of her hands and started to read it. 'It can't be,' he muttered. 'It can't be!'

'I'm afraid that it is.' Glokta treated the assembly to his toothless leer. 'Arch Lector Sult is most concerned. He has asked me to look into the disappearance of Superior Davoust, and also to examine the city's defences. To examine them carefully, and to ensure that the Gurkish stay on the other side of them. He has instructed me to use whatever measures I deem necessary.' He gave a significant pause. 'Whatever . . . measures.'

‘What is that?’ grumbled the Lord Governor. ‘I demand to know what is going on!’

Vissbruck had the paper now. ‘The King’s writ,’ he breathed, mopping his sweaty forehead on the back of his sleeve, ‘signed by all twelve chairs on the Closed Council. It grants full powers!’ He laid it down gently on the inlaid table-top, as though worried it might suddenly burst into flames. ‘This is—’

‘We all know what it is.’ Magister Eider was watching Glokta thoughtfully, one fingertip stroking her smooth cheek. *Like a merchant who suddenly becomes aware that her supposedly ignorant customer has fleeced her, and not the other way around.* ‘It seems Superior Glokta will be taking charge.’

‘I would hardly say taking charge, but I will be attending all further meetings of this council. You should consider that the first of a very great number of changes.’ Glokta gave a comfortable sigh as he settled into his beautiful chair, stretching out his aching leg, resting his aching back. Almost comfortable. He glanced across the frowning faces of the city’s ruling council. *Except, of course, that one of these charming people is most likely a dangerous traitor. A traitor who has already arranged the disappearance of one Superior, and may very well now be considering the removal of a second . . .*

Glokta cleared his throat. ‘Now then, General Vissbruck, what were you saying as I arrived? Something about the walls?’