

SAMPLE CHAPTERS FROM

HALF A KING

By Joe Abercrombie

Sample Chapters from all of Joe Abercrombie's books
are available to download from www.joeabercrombie.com

Copyright © Joe Abercrombie 2014. All rights reserved.

For Grace

*Better gear
Than good sense
A traveller cannot carry*

From Hávamál, the Speech of the High One

I

THE BLACK CHAIR

1.

THE GREATER GOOD

There was a harsh gale blowing on the night Yarvi learned he was a king. Or half a king, at least.

A seeking wind, the Gettlanders called it, for it found out every chink and keyhole, moaning Mother Sea's dead chill into every dwelling, no matter how high the fires were banked or how close the folk were huddled.

It tore at the shutters in the narrow windows of Mother Gundring's chambers and rattled even the iron-bound door in its frame. It taunted the flames in the firepit and they spat and crackled in their anger, casting clawing shadows from the dried herbs hanging, throwing flickering light upon the root that Mother Gundring held up in her knobbled fingers.

'And this?'

It looked like nothing so much as a clod of dirt, but Yarvi had learned better. 'Black-tongue root.'

'And why might a minister reach for it, my prince?'

'A minister hopes they won't have to. Boiled in water it can't be seen or tasted, but is a most deadly poison.'

Mother Gundring tossed the root aside. 'Ministers must sometimes reach for dark things.'

'Ministers must find the lesser evil,' said Yarvi.

'And weigh the greater good. Five right from five.' Mother Gundring gave a single approving nod and Yarvi flushed with pride. The approval of Gettland's minister was not easily won. 'And the riddles on the test will be easier.'

'The test.' Yarvi rubbed nervously at the crooked palm of his bad hand with the thumb of his good.

'You will pass.'

'You can't be sure.'

'It is a minister's place always to doubt—'

'But always to seem certain,' he finished for her.

'See? I know you.' That was true. No one knew him better, even in his own family. Especially in his own family. 'I have never had a sharper pupil. You will pass at the first asking.'

'And I'll be Prince Yarvi no more.' All he felt at that thought was relief. 'I'll have no family and no birthright.'

'You will be Brother Yarvi, and your family will be the Ministry.' The firelight found the creases about Mother Gundring's eyes as she smiled. 'Your birthright will be the plants and the books and the soft word spoken. You will remember and advise, heal and speak truth, know the secret ways and smooth the path for Father Peace in every tongue. As I have tried to do. There is no nobler work, whatever nonsense the muscle-smothered fools spout in the training square.'

'The muscle-smothered fools are harder to ignore when you're in the square with them.'

'Huh.' She curled her tongue and spat into the fire. 'Once you pass the test you only need go there to tend a broken head when the play gets too rough. One day you will carry my staff.' She nodded towards the tapering length of studded and slotted elf-metal which leaned against the wall. 'One day you will sit beside the Black Chair, and be Father Yarvi.'

'Father Yarvi.' He squirmed on his stool at that thought. 'I lack the wisdom.' He meant he lacked the courage, but lacked the courage to admit it.

'Wisdom can be learned, my prince.'

He held his left hand, such as it was, up to the light. 'And hands? Can you teach those?'

'You may lack a hand, but the gods have given you rarer gifts.'

He snorted. 'My fine singing voice, you mean?'

'Why not? And a quick mind, and empathy, and strength. Only the kind of strength that makes a great minister, rather than a great king. You have been touched by Father Peace, Yarvi. Always remember: strong men are many, wise men are few.'

'No doubt why women make better ministers.'

‘And better tea, in general.’ Gundring slurped from the cup he brought her every evening, and nodded approval again. ‘But the making of tea is another of your mighty talents.’

‘Hero’s work indeed. Will you give me less flattery when I’ve turned from prince into minister?’

‘You will get such flattery as you deserve, and my foot in your arse the rest of the time.’

Yarvi sighed. ‘Some things never change.’

‘Now to history.’ Mother Gundring slid one of the books from its shelf, stones set into the gilded spine winking red and green.

‘Now? I have to be up with Mother Sun to feed your doves. I was hoping to get some sleep before—’

‘I’ll let you sleep when you’ve passed the test.’

‘No you won’t.’

‘You’re right, I won’t.’ She licked one finger, ancient paper crackling as she turned the pages. ‘Tell me, my prince, into how many splinters did the elves break God?’

‘Four hundred and nine. The four hundred Small Gods, the six Tall Gods, the first man and woman, and Death, who guards the Last Door. But isn’t this more the business of a prayer-weaver than a minister?’

Mother Gundring clicked her tongue. ‘All knowledge is the business of the minister, for only what is known can be controlled. Name the six Tall Gods.’

‘Mother Sea and Father Earth, Mother Sun and Father Moon, Mother War and—’

The door banged wide and that seeking wind tore through the chamber. The flames in the firepit jumped as Yarvi did, dancing distorted in the hundred hundred jars and bottles on the shelves. A figure blundered up the steps, setting the bunches of plants swinging like hanged men behind him.

It was Yarvi’s Uncle Odem, hair plastered to his pale face with the rain and his chest heaving. He stared at Yarvi, eyes wide, and opened his mouth but made no sound. One needed no gift of empathy to see he was weighed down by heavy news.

‘What is it?’ croaked Yarvi, his throat tight with fear.

His uncle dropped to his knees, hands on the greasy straw. He bowed his head, and spoke two words, low and raw.

'My king.'

And Yarvi knew his father and brother were dead.

2.

DUTY

They hardly looked dead.

Only very white, laid out on those chill slabs in that chill room with shrouds drawn up to their armpits and naked swords gleaming on their chests. Yarvi kept expecting his brother's mouth to twitch in sleep. His father's eyes to open, to meet his with that familiar scorn. But they did not. They never would again.

Death had opened the Last Door for them, and from that portal none return.

'How did it happen?' Yarvi heard his mother saying from the doorway. Her voice was steady as ever.

'Treachery, my queen,' murmured his Uncle Odem.

'I am queen no more.'

'Of course I am sorry, Laithlin.'

Yarvi reached out and gently touched his father's shoulder. So cold. He wondered when he last touched his father. Had he ever? He remembered well enough the last time they had spoken any words that mattered. Months before.

A man swings the scythe and the axe, his father had said. A man pulls the oar and makes fast the knot. Most of all a man holds the shield. A man holds the line. A man stands by his shoulder-man. What kind of man can do none of these things?

I didn't ask for half a hand, Yarvi had said, trapped where he so often found himself, on the barren ground between shame and fury.

I didn't ask for half a son.

And now King Uthrik was dead, and his King's Circle, hastily resized, was a weight on Yarvi's brow. A weight far heavier than that thin band of gold deserved to be.

'I asked you how they died,' his mother was saying.

'They went to speak peace with Grom-gil-Gorm.'

'There can be no peace with the damn Vanstermen,' came the deep voice of Hurik, his mother's Chosen Shield.

'There must be vengeance,' said Yarvi's mother.

His uncle tried to calm the storm. 'Surely time to grieve, first. The High King has forbidden open war until—'

'Vengeance!' Her voice was sharp as broken glass. 'Quick as lightning, hot as fire.'

Yarvi's eyes crawled to his brother's corpse. There was quick and hot, or had been. Strong-jawed, thick-necked, already the makings of a dark beard like their father's. As unlike Yarvi as it was possible to be. His brother had loved him, he supposed. A bruising love where every pat was just this side of a slap. The love one has for something always beneath you.

'Vengeance,' growled Hurik. 'The Vanstermen must be made to pay.'

'Damn the Vanstermen,' said Yarvi's mother. 'Our own people must be made to serve. They must be shown their new king has iron in him. Once they are happy on their knees you can make Mother Sea rise with your tears.'

Yarvi's uncle gave a heavy sigh. 'Vengeance, then. But is he ready, Laithlin? He has never been a fighter—'

'He must fight, ready or not!' snapped his mother. People had always talked around Yarvi as though he was deaf as well as crippled. It seemed his sudden rise to power had not cured them of the habit. 'Make preparations for a great raid.'

'Where shall we attack?' asked Hurik.

'All that matters is that we attack. Leave us.'

Yarvi heard the door closing and his mother's footsteps, soft across the cold floor.

'Stop crying,' she said. It was only then that Yarvi realized his eyes were swimming, and he wiped them, and sniffed, and was ashamed. Always he was ashamed

She gripped him by the shoulders. 'Stand tall, Yarvi.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, trying to puff out his chest the way his brother might have. Always he was sorry.

'You are a king, now.' She twisted his crooked cloak-buckle into place, tried to tame his pale blonde hair, close-clipped but always wild, and finally laid cool fingertips against his cheek. 'You must never be sorry. You must wear your father's sword, and lead a raid against the Vanstermen.'

Yarvi swallowed. The idea of going on a raid had always filled him with dread. To lead one?

Odem must have seen his horror. 'I will be your shoulder-man, my king, always beside you, my shield at the ready. However I can help you, I will.'

'My thanks,' mumbled Yarvi. All the help he wanted was to be sent to Skekenhouse to take the Minister's Test, to sit in the shadows rather than be thrust into the light. But that hope was dust now. Like badly-mixed mortar, his hopes were prone to crumble.

'You must make Grom-gil-Gorm suffer for this,' said his mother. 'Then you must marry your cousin.'

He could only stare into her iron-grey eyes. Stare a little upward as she was still taller than he. 'What?'

The soft touch became an irresistible grip about his jaw. 'Listen to me, Yarvi, and listen well. You are the king. This may not be what either of us wanted, but this is what we have. You hold all our hopes now, and you hold them at the brink of a precipice. You are not respected. You have few allies. You must bind our family together by marrying Odem's daughter Isriun, just as your brother was to do. We have spoken of it. It is agreed.'

Uncle Odem was quick to balance ice with warmth. 'Nothing would please me more than to stand as your marriage-father, my king, and see our families forever joined.'

Isriun's feelings were not mentioned, Yarvi noticed. No more than his. 'But...'

His mother's brow hardened. Her eyes narrowed. He had seen heroes tremble beneath that look, and Yarvi was no hero. 'I was betrothed to your Uncle Uthil, whose sword-work the warriors still whisper of. Your Uncle Uthil, who should have been king.' Her voice cracked as though the words were painful. 'When Mother Sea swallowed him and they raised his empty howe above the shore, I married your father in his place. I put aside my feelings and did my duty. So must you.'

Yarvi's eyes slid back to his brother's handsome corpse, wondering that she could plan so calmly with her dead husband and son laid out within arm's reach. 'You don't weep for them?'

A sudden spasm gripped his mother's face, all her carefully arranged beauty splitting, lips curling from her teeth and her eyes screwing up and the cords in her neck standing stark. For a terrible moment Yarvi did not know if she would beat him or break down in wailing sobs and could not say which scared him more. Then she took a ragged breath, pushed one loose strand of golden hair into its proper place, and was herself again.

'One of us at least must be a man.' And with that kingly gift she turned and swept from the room.

Yarvi clenched his fists. Or he clenched one, and squeezed the other thumb against the twisted stub of his one finger.

'Thanks for the encouragement, Mother.'

Always he was angry. As soon as it was too late to do him any good.

He heard his uncle step close, speaking with the soft voice one might use on a skittish foal. 'You know your mother loves you.'

'Do I?'

'She has to be strong. For you. For the land. For your father.'

Yarvi looked from his father's body to his uncle's face. So like, yet so unlike. 'Thank the gods you're here,' he said, the words rough in his throat. At least there was one member of his family who cared for him.

'I am sorry, Yarvi. I truly am.' Odem put his hand on Yarvi's shoulder, a glimmer of tears in his eyes. 'But Laithlin is right. We must do what is best for Gettland. We must put our feelings aside.'

Yarvi heaved up a sigh. 'I know.'

His feelings had been put aside ever since he could remember.

3.

A WAY TO WIN

'Keimdal, you will spar with the king.'

Yarvi had to smother a fool's giggle when he heard the master-at-arms apply the word to him. Probably the four score young warriors gathered opposite were all stifling their own laughter. Certainly they would be once they saw their new king fight. No doubt, by then, laughter would be the last thing on Yarvi's mind.

They were his subjects now, of course. His servants. His men, all sworn to die upon his whim. Yet they felt even more a row of scornful enemies than when he had faced them as a boy.

He still felt like a boy. More like a boy than ever.

'It will be my honour.' Keimdal did not look especially honoured as he stepped from his fellows and out into the training square, moving as easily in a coat of mail as a maiden in her shift. He took up a shield and wooden practice sword and made the air whistle with some fearsome swipes. He might have been less than a year older than Yarvi but he looked five: half a head taller, far thicker in the chest and shoulder and already boasting red stubble on his heavy jaw.

'Are you ready, my king?' muttered Odem in Yarvi's ear.

'Clearly not,' hissed Yarvi, but there was no escape. The King of Gettland must be a doting son to Mother War, however ill-suited he might be. He had to prove to the older warriors ranged around the square that he could be more than a one-handed embarrassment. He had to find a way to win. *There is always a way*, his mother used to tell him.

But despite his undoubted gifts of a quick mind, empathy, and a fine singing voice, he could not think of one.

Today the training square had been marked out on the beach, eight strides of sand on a side and a spear driven into the ground at each corner. Every day they found different ground for it – rocks, woods, bogs, Thorlby's narrow streets, even in the river – for a man of Gettland must be equally ready to fight wherever he stands. Or equally unready, in Yarvi's case.

But the battles around the Shattered Sea were fought most often on its ragged shore, so on the shore they practised most often, and Yarvi had taken enough mouthfuls of sand in his time to beach a longship. As Mother Sun sank behind the hills the veterans would be sparring up to their knees in the brine. But now the tide was out across flats streaked with mirror-puddles, and the only dampness came from the hard spray on the salt wind, and the sweat leaking from Yarvi at the unfamiliar weight of his mail.

Gods, how he hated his mail. How he hated Hunnan, the master-at-arms who had been for so many years his chief tormentor. How he loathed swords and shields, and detested the training square, and despised the warriors who made it their home. And most of all how he hated his own bad joke of a hand, which meant he could never be one of them.

‘Watch your footing, my king,’ murmured Odem.

‘My footing won’t be my problem,’ snapped Yarvi. ‘I have two feet, at least.’

For three years he had scarcely touched a sword, spending every waking hour in Mother Gundring’s chambers, studying the uses of plants and the tongues of far-off places. Learning the names of the Small Gods and taking such very special care over his penmanship. While he had been learning how to mend wounds these boys – these men, he realized with a sour taste in his mouth – had put all their efforts into learning how to make them.

Odem gave him a reassuring clap on the shoulder which nearly knocked him over. ‘Keep your shield up. Wait for your chance.’

Yarvi snorted. If they waited for his chance they would be here until the tide drowned them all. His shield was lashed tight about his withered forearm with a sorry mass of strapping, and he clung to the handle with his thumb and one stub of finger, arm already burning to the shoulder from the effort of letting the damn thing dangle.

‘Our king has been away from the square for some time,’ called Master Hunnan, and worked his mouth as though the words were bitter. ‘Go gently today.’

‘I’ll try not to hurt him too badly!’ shouted Yarvi.

There was some laughter, but he thought it had an edge of scorn. Jokes are a poor substitute in a fight for strong sinews and a shield-hand. He looked into

Keimdal's eyes, and saw his easy confidence, and tried to tell himself that strong men are many and wise men few. Even in his own skull the thought rang hollow.

Master Hunnan did not smile. No joke was funny, no child lovable, no woman beautiful enough to bend those iron lips. He only gave Yarvi that same long stare he always used to have, as full of quiet contempt for him whether prince or king. 'Begin!' he barked.

If quickness was a mercy, it was a merciful bout indeed.

The first blow crashed on Yarvi's shield, tore the handle from his feeble grip so that the rim caught him in the mouth and sent him stumbling. He managed by some shred of instinct to parry the next so that it glanced from his shoulder and numbed his arm, but he never even saw the third, only felt the sharp pain as his ankle was swept from under him and he crashed down on his back, all his breath wheezing out like the air from a split bellows.

He lay blinking for a moment. They still told tales of his Uncle Uthil's matchless performances in the square. It seemed his own might live just as long in the memory. Alas, for very different reasons.

Keimdal thrust his wooden sword into the sand and offered his hand. 'My king.' Far better disguised than it used to be, but Yarvi thought there was a mocking curl to the corner of his mouth.

'You've got better,' Yarvi forced through his clenched teeth, twisting his crippled hand free of the useless shield-straps so Keimdal had no choice but to grasp it to pull him to his feet.

'As have you, my king.' Yarvi could see Keimdal's disgust as he touched the twisted thing, and made sure to give him a parting tickle with the stub of his finger. A petty gesture, perhaps, but the weak must thrive on small revenges.

'I've got worse,' muttered Yarvi as Keimdal walked back to his peers. 'If you can believe it.'

He caught sight of a girl's face among the younger students. Thirteen years old, maybe, fierce-eyed, dark hair flicking around her sharp cheeks. Probably Yarvi should have been grateful Hunnan had not picked her to give him his beating. Perhaps that would be next in the procession of humiliations.

The master-at-arms gave a scornful shake of his head as he turned away and the anger surged up in Yarvi, bitter as a winter tide. His brother might have inherited all their father's strength, but he had got his full share of the rage.

'Shall we have another bout?' he snapped across the square.

Keimdal's brows went up, then he shrugged his broad shoulders and hefted his sword and shield. 'If you command.'

'Oh, I do.'

A grumbling passed around the older men and Hunnan frowned even harder. Must they endure more of this demeaning farce? If their king was embarrassed they were embarrassed, and in Yarvi they could see embarrassments enough to crowd the rest of their days.

He felt his uncle gently take his arm. 'My king,' he murmured, soft and soothing. Always he was soft and soothing as a breeze on a summer day. 'Perhaps you should not exert yourself too much—'

'You're right, of course,' said Yarvi. *A fool is his anger's slave*, Mother Gundring once told him. *The wise man's anger is his tool*. 'Hurik. You stand for me.'

There was a silence as all eyes turned to the queen's Chosen Shield, sitting huge and silent on the carved stool that marked him out among Gettland's most honoured warriors, the great scar down his cheek becoming a white streak where it touched his beard.

'My king,' he rumbled as he stood and worked one arm through the tangled strapping of the fallen shield. Yarvi handed him his training sword. It looked like a toy in Hurik's great, scarred fist. You could hear his footsteps as he took his place opposite Keimdal, suddenly looking very much his sixteen years. Hurik crouched, twisting his boots into the sand, then bared his teeth and made a fighting growl, deep and throbbing, louder and louder until the square seemed to shake with it, and Yarvi saw Keimdal's eyes wide with doubt and fear, just as he had always dreamed of seeing them.

'Begin,' he said.

This bout was over quicker even than the last, but no one could have called it merciful.

To give Keimdal his due, he leapt in bravely enough, but Hurik caught the blow on his sword, wooden blades scraping, then darted in quick as a snake despite his size and kicked Keimdal's feet away. The lad whooped as he fell, but only until Hurik's shield rim caught him above the eye with a hollow ping and knocked him half senseless. Hurik frowned as he stepped forward, planted his boot on Keimdal's sword hand and ground it under his heel. Keimdal groaned, one half of his grimace plastered with sand, the other blood-streaked from the gash on his forehead.

The girls might not have agreed, but Yarvi thought he had never looked better.

He swept the warriors with a glare, then. The kind his mother gave a slave who displeased her. 'One to me,' he said, and he stepped over Keimdal's fallen sword as he strode from the square, choosing a path that forced Master Hunnan to shuffle awkwardly aside.

'That was ungenerous, my king,' said Uncle Odem, falling into step at his shoulder. 'But not unfunny.'

'I'm glad I made you laugh,' grunted Yarvi.

'Much more than that, you made me proud.'

Yarvi glanced sideways and saw his uncle looking back, calm and even. Always he was calm and even as fresh-fallen snow.

'Glorious victories make fine songs, Yarvi, but inglorious ones are no worse once the bards are done with them. Glorious defeats, meanwhile, are just defeats.'

'On the battlefield there are no rules,' said Yarvi, remembering something his father told him once when he was drunk and bored with shouting at his dogs.

'Exactly.' Odem put his strong hand on Yarvi's shoulder, and Yarvi wondered how much happier his life might have been had his uncle been his father. 'A king must win. The rest is dust.'

4.

BETWEEN GODS AND MEN

'...Mother Sun and Father Moon, shine your gold and silver lights upon this union between Yarvi, son of Laithlin, and Isriun, daughter of Odem...'

The towering statues of the six Tall Gods glowered down with pitiless garnet eyes. Above them, in niches ringing the dome of the ceiling, the amber figures of the small gods gleamed. All judging Yarvi's worth and no doubt finding him as horribly wanting as he did himself.

He curled up his withered hand and tried to work it further into his sleeve. Everyone in the Godshall knew well enough what he had on the end of his arm. Or what he hadn't.

Yet still he tried to hide it.

'Mother Sea and Father Earth, grant them your harvests and your bounty, send them good weatherluck and good weaponluck...'

In the centre of the hall the Black Chair stood upon its dais. It was an elf-relic from the time before the Breaking of God, forged by unknown arts from a single piece of black metal, impossibly delicate and impossibly strong, and countless years had left not a single scratch upon it.

Seat of kings, between gods and men. Far too high for such a wretched thing as Yarvi to sit in. He felt unworthy even to look upon it.

'Mother War and Father Peace, grant them the strength to face whatever Fate brings...'

He had expected to be a minister. To give up wife and children with hardly a thought. Kissing the aged cheek of Grandmother Wexen when he passed the test was the closest he had hoped to come to romance. Now he was to share his life, such as it was, with a girl he hardly knew.

Isriun's palm was clammy against his, sacred cloth wrapped about their clasped hands to make a clumsy bundle. They gripped each other, and were tied together, and pressed together by the wishes of their parents, and bound

together by the needs of Gettland, and still it felt as if there was an unbridgeable chasm between them.

‘Oh, He Who Sprouts the Seed, grant them healthy issue...’

Yarvi knew what every guest was thinking. *Not crippled issue. Not one-handed issue.* He stole a glance sideways at this small, slight, yellow-haired girl who should have been his brother’s wife. She looked scared and slightly sick. But who wouldn’t, being forced to marry half a man?

This was everyone’s second best. A day of celebration mourned by all. A tragic compromise.

‘Oh, She Who Guards the Locks, keep safe their household...’

Only Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver was enjoying himself. He had spun one ponderous blessing for Isriun at her betrothal to Yarvi’s brother and now – to his delight if not hers – got the chance to construct a second. His voice droned on, exhorting Tall Gods and Small Gods to grant fertility in their fields, and obedience in their slaves, and no one would have been surprised by a plea for regularity in their bowels next. Yarvi hunched his shoulders, swamped by one of the heavy furs his father used to wear, dreading the magnitude of Brinyolf’s blessing at the wedding itself.

‘Oh, She of the Ewer, pour prosperity upon this royal couple, upon their parents and their subjects, and upon all of Gettland!’

The prayer-weaver stepped back, smug as a new parent, his chin vanishing into the roll of fat beneath it.

‘I shall be brief,’ said Mother Gundring, with the slightest knowing glance at Yarvi. He spluttered on a stifled laugh, then caught his mother’s eye upon him, cold as the winter sea, and had no need to stifle another.

‘A kingdom stands upon two pillars,’ spoke the old minister. ‘We already have a strong king.’ No one laughed. Admirable self control. ‘Soon, gods willing, we will have a strong queen also.’ Yarvi saw Isriun’s pale throat flutter as she swallowed.

Mother Gundring beckoned forward Yarvi’s mother and his Uncle Odem, the one person who looked happy to be in attendance, to give their blessing by placing their hands upon the bundle. Then with an effort she lifted high her staff,

tubes and rods of the same elf-metal as the Black Chair gleaming, and called out, 'They are promised!'

So it was done. Isriun was not asked for an opinion on the matter, and neither was Yarvi. It seemed there was little interest in the opinions of kings. Certainly not of this one. The audience, a hundred strong or more, served up restrained applause. The men – heads of some of Gettland's greatest families, sword-hilts and cloak-buckles set with gold – beat approval on broad chests with heavy fists. On the other side of the hall the women – hair glistening with fresh oil and their household keys hung on best jewel-lusted chains – tapped fingers politely in their scented palms.

Mother Gundring unwrapped the sacred cloth and Yarvi snatched free his good hand, sticky-pink and tingling. His uncle seized him by the shoulders and said into his ear, 'Well done!', though Yarvi had done nothing but stand there and sing some promises he hardly understood.

The guests filed out, and Brinyolf closed the doors of the hall with an echoing clap, leaving Yarvi and Isriun alone with the gods, the Black Chair, the weight of their uncertain future, and an ocean of awkward silence.

Isriun rubbed gently at the hand that had held Yarvi's, and looked at the floor. He looked at the floor too, not that there was anything so very interesting down there. He cleared his throat. He shifted his sword belt. It still hung strangely on him. He felt as if it always would. 'I'm sorry,' he said, at last.

She looked up, one eye shining in the heavy darkness. 'Why are you sorry?' Then she remembered to add uncertainly, 'my king?'

He almost said *That you'll have half a man for a husband*, but settled for, 'That you're passed around my family like a feast-day cup.'

'On feast-day, everyone's happy to get the cup.' She gave a bitter little smile. 'I'm the one who should be sorry. Imagine me a queen.' And she snorted as though there never was a more foolish joke.

'Imagine me a king.'

'You are a king.'

He blinked at that. He had been so fixed on his shortcomings it had never occurred she might be fixed on her own. That thought, as the misery of others often can, made him feel just a little better.

'You manage your father's household.' He looked down at the golden key hanging on her chest. 'That's no small task.'

'But a queen manages the business of a country! Everyone says your mother has a high art at it. Laithlin, the Golden Queen!' She spoke the name like a magic spell. 'They say she's owed a thousand thousand favours, that a debt to her is a matter for pride. They say her word is valued higher than gold among merchants, because gold may go down in worth but her word never does. They say some traders of the far north have given up praying to the gods and worship her instead.' She spoke faster and faster, and chewed at her nails, and tugged at one thin hand with the other, eyes opening very wide. 'There's a rumour she lays silver eggs.'

Yarvi had to laugh. 'I'm reasonably sure that one's false.'

'But she's raised granaries and had channels dug and brought more earth under the plough so there'll never again be a famine that forces folk to draw lots to see who must find new homes across the sea.' Isriun's shoulders drifted up as she spoke until they were hunched about her ears. 'And people flock to Thorlby from across the world to trade, so the city's tripled in size and split its walls and your mother's built new walls and split them again.'

'True, but—'

'I've heard she has a mighty scheme to stamp every coin of one weight, and these coins will pass through all the lands about the Shattered Sea, so that every trade will be made with her face, and make her richer even than the High King in Skekenhouse! How will ...I?' Isriun's shoulders slumped and she flicked at the key on her chest and set it swinging by its chain. 'How can the likes of *me*—'

'There's always a way.' Yarvi caught Isriun's hand in his before she could get her vanishing nails to her teeth again. 'My mother will help you. She's your aunt, isn't she?'

'*She'll help me?*' Instead of pulling her hand away she drew him closer by it. 'Your father may have been a great warrior but I rather think he was your less fearsome parent.'

Yarvi smiled, but he did not deny it. 'You were luckier. My uncle's always as calm as still water.'

Isriun glanced nervously towards the door. 'You don't know my father like I do.'

'Then ...I'll help you.' He had held her hand half the morning and it could have been a dead fish in his clammy palm. Now it felt like something else entirely – strong, and cool, and very much alive. 'Isn't that the point of a marriage?'

'Not just that.' She seemed suddenly very close, taper-light reflected in the corners of her eyes, teeth shining between parted lips.

There was a smell to her, not sweet and not sour, he could not name it. Faint, but it made his heart jump.

He did not know if he should close his eyes, then she did, so he did, and their noses bumped awkwardly.

Her breath tickled at his cheek and made his skin flush hot. Frighteningly hot.

Her lips just barely brushed his and he broke away with all the dignity of a startled rabbit, caught his leg on his sword and nearly fell over it.

'Sorry,' she said, shrinking back and staring at the floor.

'It's me who should be sorry.' For a king Yarvi spent a great deal of his time apologizing. 'I'm the sorriest man in Gettland. No doubt my brother gave you a better kiss. More practice ... I suppose.'

'All your brother did was talk about the battles he'd win,' she muttered at her feet.

'No danger of that with me.' He could not have said why he did it – to shock her, or as revenge for the failed kiss, or simply to be honest – but he held up his crooked hand, shaking his sleeve free so it was between them in all its ugliness.

He expected her to flinch, to pale, to step away, but she only looked thoughtfully at it. 'Does it hurt?'

'Not really ... sometimes.'

She reached out, then, sliding her fingers around his knobbled knuckles and pressing at the crooked palm with her thumb while the breath stopped in his throat. No one had ever touched that hand as if it was just a hand. A piece of flesh with feelings like any other.

'I heard you beat Keimdal in the square even so,' she said.

'I only gave the order. I learned a long time ago that I'm not much good at fair fights.'

'A warrior fights,' she said, looking him in the eye. 'A king commands.' And with a grin she drew him up the dais. He went uneasily, for even though this was his hall, with every step he felt more like a trespasser.

'The Black Chair,' he muttered as they reached it.

'Your chair,' said Isriun, and to his horror she reached out and swept her fingertips down the perfect metal of the arm with a hiss that made Yarvi's skin prickle. 'Hard to believe it's the oldest thing here. Made by the hands of elves before the Breaking of the World.'

'You're interested in the elves?' he squeaked, terrified she might make him touch it or, more awful yet, sit in it, and desperate for a distraction.

'I've read every book Mother Gundring has about them,' she said.

Yarvi blinked. 'You read?'

'I once trained to be a minister. I was Mother Gundring's apprentice, before you. Bound for a life of books, and plants, and soft words spoken.'

'She never said so.' It seemed they had more in common than he had imagined.

'I was promised to your brother, and that was the end of it. We must do what's best for Gettland.'

They gave much the same sigh at much the same time. 'So everyone tells me,' said Yarvi. 'We've both lost the Ministry.'

'But gained each other. And we've gained this.' Her eyes shone as she gave the perfect curve of the Black Chair's arm one last stroke. 'No mean wedding present.' Her light fingertips slipped from the metal and onto the back of his hand, and he found that he very much liked having them there. 'We were meant to discuss when we'll be married.'

'As soon as I get back,' he said, voice slightly hoarse.

She gave his withered hand one last squeeze then let it fall. 'I'll expect a better kiss after your victory, my king.'

As he watched her walk away Yarvi was almost glad neither one of them had joined the Ministry. 'I'll try not to trip over my sword!' he called as she reached the doorway.

She smiled at him over her shoulder as she slipped through, the daylight setting a glow in her hair. Then the doors shut softly behind her. Leaving Yarvi marooned on the dais, in the midst of all that silent space, his doubts suddenly looming even higher than the Tall Gods above. It took a fearsome effort to turn his head back towards the Black Chair.

Could he truly sit in it, between gods and men? He, who could hardly bring himself to touch it with his crippled joke of a hand? He made himself reach out, his breath coming shallow. Made himself lay his one trembling fingertip upon the metal.

Very cold and very hard. Just as a king must be.

Just as Yarvi's father used to be, sitting there with the King's Circle on his furrowed brow. His scarred hands gripping the arms, the pommel of his sword never far out of reach. The sword that hung at Yarvi's belt now, dragging at him with its unfamiliar weight.

I didn't ask for half a son.

And Yarvi shrank from the empty chair with even less dignity than when his father still sat in it. Not towards the doors of the Godshall and the waiting crowd beyond, but away towards the statue of Father Peace, pressing himself to the stone and working his fingers into the crack beside the giant leg of the patron god of ministers. In silence the hidden door sprang open, and like a thief fleeing the scene of his crime Yarvi slipped into the blackness beyond.

The citadel was full of secret ways, but nowhere so riddled as the Godshall. Passages passed under its floor, inside its walls, within its very dome. Ministers of old had used them to show the will of the gods with the odd little miracle – feathers fluttering down, or smoke rising behind the statues. Once blood had been dripped on Gettland's reluctant warriors as the king called for war.

The passageways were dark and full of sounds, but Yarvi had no fear of them. These tunnels had long been his domain. He had hidden from his father's blazing anger in the darkness. From his brother's crushing love. From his mother's chill disappointment. He could find his way from one end of the citadel to the other without once stepping into the light.

Here he knew all the ways, as any good minister should.

Here he was safe.

5.

DOVES

The dovecote was perched in the top of one of the citadel's highest towers, streaked inside and out with centuries of droppings, and through its many windows a chill wind blew.

As Mother Gundring's apprentice, feeding the doves had been Yarvi's task. Feeding them, and teaching them the messages they were to speak, and watching them clatter into the sky to take news, and offers, and threats to other ministers about the Shattered Sea.

From the many cages ranked around the walls they looked down on him now, the doves, and one great bronze-feathered eagle which must have brought a message from the High King in Skekenhouse. The one person in the lands around the Shattered Sea who had the right to make requests of Yarvi now. Yet here he sat against the dropping-speckled wall, picking at the nail on his shrivelled hand, buried beneath a howe of demands he could never fulfil.

He had always been weak, but he never felt truly powerless until they made him a king.

He heard shuffling feet on the steps and Mother Gundring ducked through the low doorway, breathing hard.

'I thought you'd never get here,' said Yarvi.

'My king,' replied the old minister once she had the breath. 'You were expected before the Godshall.'

'Aren't the tunnels meant for a king's escape?'

'From armed enemies. From your family, your subjects, not to mention your bride-to-be, less so.' She peered up at the domed ceiling, at the gods painted there as birds, taking to a brilliant sky. 'Were you planning to fly away?'

'To Catalia, perhaps, or the land of the Alyuks, or up the Divine River to Kalyiv.' Yarvi shrugged. 'But I don't have two good hands, never mind two good wings.'

Mother Gundring nodded. 'In the end, we must all be what we are.'

'And what am I?'

'The King of Gettland.'

He swallowed then, knowing how disappointed she must be. How disappointed he was himself. In the songs great kings rarely crawled off to hide from their own people. He caught sight of the eagle as he looked away, huge and serene in its cage.

'Grandmother Wexen has sent a message?'

'A message,' echoed one of the doves in its scratching mockery of a voice. 'A message. A message.'

Mother Gundring frowned up at the eagle, still as a stuffed trophy. 'It came from Skekenhouse five days ago. Grandmother Wexen sent to ask when you would arrive for your test.'

Yarvi remembered the one time he had seen the First of Ministers, a few years before when the High King had visited Thorlby. The High King had seemed a grim and grasping old man, offended by everything. Yarvi's mother had been obliged to soothe him when someone did not bow in quite the manner he liked. Yarvi's brother had laughed that such a feeble little wisp-haired man should rule the Shattered Sea, but his laughter died when he saw the number of warriors that followed him. Yarvi's father had raged because the High King took gifts and gave none. Mother Gundring had clicked her tongue and said, *The wealthier a man is, the more he craves wealth.*

Grandmother Wexen had scarcely left her proper place at the High King's side, ever smiling like a kindly grandparent. When Yarvi knelt before her she had looked at his crippled hand, and leaned down to murmur, *My prince, have you considered joining the Ministry?* And for a moment he had seen a hungry brightness in her eye which scared him more than all the High King's frowning warriors.

'So much interest from the First of Ministers?' he muttered, swallowing an aftertaste of that day's fear.

Mother Gundring shrugged. 'It is rare to have a prince of royal blood join the Ministry.'

'No doubt she'll be as disappointed as everyone else that I've taken the Black Chair instead.'

'Grandmother Wexen is wise enough to make the best of what the gods serve her. As must we all.'

Yarvi's eyes slid across the rest of the cages, seeking a distraction. Pitiless though they were, the eyes of the birds were easier to bear than those of his disappointed subjects.

'Which dove brought the message from Grom-gil-Gorm?'

'I sent it back to Vansterland. To his minister, Mother Scaer, carrying your father's agreement to a parley.'

'Where was the meeting to be?'

'On the border, near the town of Amwend. Your father never reached the place.'

'He was ambushed in Gettland?'

'So it appears.'

'It does not seem like my father, to be so keen to end a war.'

'War,' croaked one of the doves. 'End a war.'

Mother Gundring frowned at the grey-spattered floor. 'I counselled him to go. The High King has asked for all swords to be sheathed until his new temple to the One God is completed. I never suspected even a savage like Grom-gil-Gorm would betray the sacred word given.' She made a fist, as though she would strike herself, then slowly let it uncurl. 'It is a minister's task to smooth the way for Father Peace.'

'But had my father no men with him? Had he—'

'My king.' Mother Gundring looked at him from under her brows. 'We must go down.'

Yarvi swallowed, his stomach seeming to jump up his throat and wash his mouth with sour spit. 'I'm not ready.'

'No one ever is. Your father was not.'

Yarvi made a sound then, half a laugh, half a sob, and wiped tears on the back of his crooked hand. 'Did my father weep after he was betrothed to my mother?'

'In fact, he did,' said Mother Gundring. 'For several years. She, on the other hand...'

And Yarvi gurgled up a laugh despite himself. 'My mother's even meaner with her tears than her gold.' He looked up at the woman who had been his

teacher, would now be his minister, that face full of kindly lines, the bright eyes filled with concern, and found he had whispered, 'You've been like a mother to me.'

'And you like a son to me. I am sorry, Yarvi. I am sorry for everything but ... this is the greater good.'

'The lesser evil.' Yarvi fussed at his stub of a finger, and blinked up at the birds. The many doves, and the one great eagle. 'Who will feed them now?'

'I will find someone.' And Mother Gundring offered her bony hand to help him up. 'My king.'

6.

PROMISES

It was a great affair.

Many powerful families in the far reaches of Gettland would be angered that news of King Uthrik's death had barely reached them before he was burned, denying them the chance to have their importance noted at an event that would live so long in the memory.

No doubt the all-powerful High King on his high chair in Skekenhouse, not to mention the all-knowing Grandmother Wexen at his elbow, would be far from delighted that they received no invitation, as Mother Gundring was keen to point out. But Yarvi's mother forced through her clenched teeth, 'Their anger is dust to me.' Laithlin might have been queen no longer but no other word would fit her, and Hurik still hovered huge and silent at her shoulder, sworn forever to her service. Once she spoke it was a thing already done.

The procession passed from the Godshall through the yard of the citadel, grass littered with the sites of Yarvi's many failures, under the limbs of the great cedar his brother used to mock him for being unable to climb.

Yarvi went at the fore, of course, his mother overshadowing him in every sense at his shoulder and Mother Gundring struggling to keep up behind, bent over her staff. Uncle Odem led the king's household, warriors and women in their best. Slaves came behind, collars rattling and their eyes on the ground where they belonged.

Yarvi glanced up nervously as they passed through the one entrance tunnel, saw the bottom edge of the Screaming Gate gleam in the darkness, ready to drop and seal the citadel against any enemy. It was said to have been let fall only once, and that long before he was born, but still he swallowed as he always did when he passed beneath it. A mountain's weight of polished copper hanging by a single pin tended to rattle the nerves.

Especially when you were about to burn half your family.

'You're doing well,' Yarvi's uncle whispered in his ear.

'I am walking.'

'You are walking like a king.'

'I am a king and I am walking. How could it be otherwise?'

Odem smiled at that. 'Well said. My king.'

Over his uncle's shoulder Yarvi caught Isriun smiling at him too, the torch she carried setting a gleam to her eyes and the chain about her neck. Soon the key to the treasury of Gettland would hang upon it, and she would be queen. *His* queen, and the thought gave him hope amidst his fears like a spark in the darkness.

They all carried torches, a snake of lights through the gathering gloom, though the wind had snatched out half the flames by the time the procession passed through the city's gates and onto the bare hillside.

The king's own ship, the best in Thorlby's crowded harbour, twenty oars upon a side and its high prow and tail carved as finely as anything in the Godshall, was dragged by honoured warriors to the chosen place among the dunes, keel grinding out a snaking trench in the sand. The same ship in which King Uthrik had sailed across the Shattered Sea on his famous raid to Sagenmark. The same ship which had wallowed low in the water with slaves and plunder when he returned in triumph.

On its deck they laid the pale bodies of the king and his heir upon a bier of fine swords, for Uthrik's fame as a warrior had stood second only to his dead brother Uthil's. All Yarvi could think was how that showed great warriors die no better than other men.

And usually sooner.

Rich offerings were placed about the dead in the manner the prayer-weaver judged the gods would most appreciate. Weapons and armour the king had won in battle. Armrings of gold, coins of silver. Treasures heaped glittering. Yarvi put a jewelled cup in his brother's fists, and his mother put a cloak of white fur over the dead king's shoulders, and placed one hand upon his chest, and stood looking down, her jaw clenched tight, until Yarvi said, 'Mother?'

She turned without a word and led him to the chairs on the hillside, the sea wind catching the brown grass and setting it thrashing about their feet. Yarvi squirmed for a comfortable position in that hard, high seat, his mother

motionless on his right with Hurik a huge shadow behind her, Mother Gundring perched on a stool at his left hand, her staff clutched in one bony fist, the twisted elf-metal alive with reflected flames from the rustling torches.

Yarvi sat between his two mothers. One who believed in him. One who had given birth to him.

Mother Gundring leaned close then and said softly, 'I am sorry, my king. This is not what I wanted for you.'

Yarvi could show no weakness now. 'We must make the best of what fate serves us,' he said. 'Even kings.'

'Especially kings,' grated out his mother, and gave the signal.

Two dozen horses were led onto the ship, hooves clattering at the timbers, and slaughtered so their blood washed the deck. All agreed Death would show King Uthrik and his son through the Last Door with respect, and they would be acknowledged great among the dead.

Uncle Odem stepped out before the ranks of battle-ready warriors massed upon the sand, a torch in one hand. With his silvered mail and winged helm and red cloak snapping he looked like a son, and brother, and uncle of kings indeed. He nodded solemnly to Yarvi, and Yarvi nodded back, and he felt his mother clutch his right hand and squeeze it hard.

Odem set the torch to the pitch-soaked kindling. The flames licked about the ship and in a moment it was all ablaze, a sorrowful moan drawn from the crowds – from the honoured and wealthy upon the high terraces before the walls of Thorlby, the crafters and merchants below them, the foreigners and peasants below them, the beggars and slaves scattered in whatever crevices the wind allowed them, each person in the place the gods had reckoned proper.

And Yarvi had to swallow, because he realized of a sudden that his father would never come back and he truly would have to be king, from now until he was burned himself.

He sat there, cold and sickly, a drawn sword across his knees, as Father Moon showed himself and his children the stars came out, and the flames of the burning ship, and the burning goods, and his burning family lit up the faces of the hundred hundred mourners. As scattered lights showed in the stone buildings of the city, and the wattle hovels huddled outside the walls, and in the towers of the

citadel upon the hill. His citadel, although to him it had always had the look of a prison.

It took a hero's struggle to stay awake. He had barely slept last night, or any night since they put the King's Circle on him. The shadows in the cold depths of his father's yawning bedchamber seemed crowded with fears, and by ancient tradition there was no door he could bolt since the King of Gettland is one with the land and the people and must hide nothing from them.

Secrets, and bedroom doors, were luxuries reserved for luckier folk than kings.

A queue of proud men in their war-gear and proud women with keys polished, some of them sore trouble to King Uthrik while he lived, filed past Yarvi and his mother to wring their hands, and press gaudy grave gifts on them, and speak in swollen terms of the dead lord's high deeds. They lamented that Gettland would never see his like again, then remembered themselves and bowed and mouthed 'my king' while behind their smiles no doubt they wondered how it might be made to profit them to have this one-handed weakling in the Black Chair.

Only the occasional hiss passed between Yarvi and his mother. 'Sit up. You are a king. Do not apologize. You are a king. Straighten your cloak-buckle. You are a king. You *are* a king. You are a *king*.' As if she was trying to convince him, and herself, and the world of it against all the evidence.

Surely the Shattered Sea had never seen so cunning a merchant, but he doubted even she could sell this.

They sat until the flames sank to a flickering, and the dragon-carved keel sagged into whirling embers, and the first muddy smear of dawn touched the clouds, glittering on the copper dome of the Godshall and setting the sea-birds calling. Then his mother clapped her hands and the slaves with clinking collar-chains began to dig the earth over the still-smouldering pyre, raising a great howe that would stand tall beside that of Yarvi's uncle Uthil, swallowed in a storm, and his grandfather Brevaer, and his great-grandfather Angulf Clovenfoot. On down the coast marched the grassy humps until they were lost among the dunes, diminishing into the fog of time before She Who Writes entrusted woman

with the gift of letters, and ministers trapped the names of the dead in their high books.

Then Mother Sun showed her blinding face and put fire upon the water. The tide would soon be draining, carrying with it the many ships drawn up upon the sand, sharp-tailed so they could slip away as swiftly as they arrived, ready to sweep the warriors to Vansterland to rip their vengeance from Grom-gil-Gorm.

Uncle Odem climbed the hill with fist firm on sword's hilt and his easy smile traded for a warrior's frown.

'It is time,' he said.

So Yarvi stood, and stepped past his uncle, and held high his borrowed sword, swallowing his fears and roaring into the wind as loud as he could. 'I, Yarvi, son of Uthrik and Laithlin, King of Gettland, swear an oath! I swear a sun-oath and a moon-oath. I swear it before She Who Judges, and He Who Remembers, and She Who Makes Fast the Knot. Let my brother and my father and my ancestors buried here bear witness. Let He Who Watches and She Who Writes bear witness. Let all of you bear witness. Let it be a chain upon me and a goad within me. I will be revenged upon the killers of my father and my brother. This I swear!'

The gathered warriors clashed the bearded heads of their axes against their helmets, and their fists against their painted shields, and their boots against Father Earth in grim approval.

Yarvi's uncle frowned. 'That is a heavy oath, my king.'

'I may be half a man,' said Yarvi, struggling to get his sword back into its sheepskin-lined sheath. 'But I can swear a whole oath. The men appreciated it, at least.'

'These are men of Gettland,' said Hurik. 'They appreciate deeds.'

'I thought it was a fine oath.' Isriun stood near, yellow hair streaming in the wind. 'A kingly oath.'

Yarvi found he was very glad to see her there. He wished no one else had been, then he could have kissed her again, and probably made a better effort at it. But all he could do was smile, and half-raise his half-hand in an awkward farewell.

There would be time for kisses when they next met.

'My king.' It seemed even Mother Gundring's eyes, forever dry in any smoke or dust or weather, held tears. 'May the gods send you fine weatherluck, and even better weaponluck.'

'Don't worry, my minister,' he said, 'there's always the chance I'll survive.'

His true mother shed no tears. All she did was fasten his twisted cloak-buckle yet again and say, 'Stand like a king, Yarvi. Speak like a king. Fight like a king.'

'I am a king,' he said, however much of a lie it felt, and he forced through his tightened throat, 'I'll make you proud,' even though he had never known how.

But he looked back, as he walked with his uncle's gently steering hand upon his shoulder, the soldiers forming snakes of glimmering steel as they filed towards the water, and he saw his mother clutch Hurik by his mail and drag him close, strong man though he was.

'Watch over my son, Hurik,' he heard her say in a choking voice. 'He is all I have.'

Then the Golden Queen was gone with her guards and attendants and her many slaves towards the city, and Yarvi was striding through the colourless dawn towards the ships, their masts a swaying forest against the bruising sky. Trying to walk the way his father used to, eager for the fight, even though he was weak-kneed, and sore-throated, and red-eyed, and his heart was crowded with doubts. He could still smell the smoke.

He left Father Peace to weep among the ashes, and hastened to the iron embrace of Mother War.

7.

MAN'S WORK

Each wave born of Mother Sea would lift him, roll him, tug his sodden clothes, make him twitch and stir as if struggling to rise. Each wave hissed back out would drag the body down the beach and leave it grounded, tangled hair stuck with froth and sand, limp as the knots of seaweed on the shingle.

Yarvi stared at him, wondering who he was. Or had been. Boy or man? Had he died running or fought bravely?

What was the difference now?

The keel ground against sand, the deck shuddered, Yarvi stumbled and had to clutch at Hurik's arm to steady himself. With a clunk and clatter the men shipped their oars, unhooked their shields, and sprang over the ship's sides into the surf, sullen at being last to land, too late for any glory or plunder worth the taking. Crewing the king's ship would have been a high honour in King Uthrik's reign.

No honour at all in King Yarvi's.

Some men took the prow-rope and hauled the ship past the floating corpse and higher up the beach, others unslung their weapons and hurried towards the town of Amwend. It was already burning.

Yarvi chewed at his lip as he made ready to clamber over the side with some shred of kingly composure, but the handle of his gilded shield twisted in his weakling's grip, tangled with his cloak and nearly dumped him face-first in the brine.

'Gods damn this thing!' Yarvi tugged the straps loose, dragged the shield from his withered arm and flung it away among the sea-chests the men sat on while they rowed.

'My king,' said Keimdal. 'You should keep your shield. It's not safe—'

'You've fought me. You know what my shield's worth. If someone comes at me I can't stop with sword alone I'm better off running. I'll run faster without my shield.'

‘But, my king—’

‘He is king,’ rumbled Hurik, pushing his thick fingers through his white-streaked beard. ‘If he says we all put aside our shields, it must be so.’

‘Those with two good hands are welcome to theirs,’ said Yarvi, slithering into the surf, cursing as another cold wave soaked him to the waist.

Where sand gave way to grass some new-made slaves were roped together, waiting to be herded aboard one of the ships. They were hunched and soot-smearred, wide eyes full of fear or pain or disbelief at what had surged from the sea and stolen their lives. Beside them, a group of Yarvi’s warriors diced for their clothes.

‘Your Uncle Odem asks for you, my king,’ said one, then got up frowning and kicked a sobbing old man onto his face.

‘Where?’ asked Yarvi, his tongue sticking in his mouth, it was suddenly so dry.

‘On top of the holdfast.’ The man pointed up towards a drystone tower on a sheer rock above the town, waves angry about its base on one side, a frothing inlet on the other.

‘They didn’t close the gates?’ asked Keimdal.

‘They did, but three of the headman’s sons were left in the town, and Odem slit one’s throat and said he’d kill the next if the gate wasn’t opened.’

‘It was,’ said one of the other warriors, then chuckled as his number came up. ‘New socks!’

Yarvi blinked. He had never thought of his smiling uncle as a ruthless man. But Odem had sprouted from the same seed as Yarvi’s father, whose rages he still carried the marks of, and their drowned brother Uthil, at the memory of whose peerless swordsmanship old warriors in the training square still came over dewy-eyed. Sometimes calm waters hide fierce currents, after all.

‘A curse on you!’

A woman had tottered from the line of slaves as far as the ropes would allow, bloody hair plastered against one side of her face.

‘Bastard king of a bastard country, may Mother Sea swallow—’

One of the warriors cuffed her to the ground.

'Cut her tongue out,' said another, jerking her back by her hair while a third drew a knife.

'No!' shouted Yarvi. The men frowned at him. If their king's honour was questioned so was theirs, and mercy would not do as an explanation. 'She'll fetch a better price with her tongue.' And Yarvi turned away, shoulders chafing under the weight of his mail, and struggled on towards the holdfast.

'You are your mother's son, my king,' said Hurik.

'Who else's would I be?'

His father's eyes and his brother's used to glow as they told tales of past raids, of great deeds done and grand prizes taken, while Yarvi lurked in the shadows at the foot of the table and wished he could have taken a man's part in the man's work. But here was the truth of it, and a place on a raid did not seem enviable now.

The fighting was over, if there had been any worthy of the name, but still it seemed Yarvi laboured through a nightmare, sweating in his mail and chewing at the inside of his mouth and startling at sounds. Screams and laughter, figures darting through the wriggling haze of fires, smoke scratching at his throat. Crows pecked and circled and cawed their triumph. Theirs was the victory, most of all. Mother War, Mother of Crows, who gathers the dead and makes the open hand a fist, would dance today, while Father Peace hid his face and wept. Here, near the shiftless border between Vansterland and Gettland, Father Peace wept often.

The tower of the holdfast loomed black above them, the noise of waves crashing on both sides of its foundations loud below.

'Stop,' said Yarvi, breathing hard, head spinning, face tickling with sweat. 'Help me out of my mail.'

'My king,' frothed Keimdal, 'I must object!'

'Object if you please. Then do as I tell you.'

'It's my duty to keep you safe—'

'Then imagine your dishonour when I die of too much sweating halfway up this tower! Undo the buckles, Hurik.'

'My king.' They stripped his mail shirt off and Hurik threw it over one great shoulder.

'Lead on,' Yarvi snapped at Keimdal, struggling to fasten his father's clumsy golden cloak-buckle with his useless lump of a hand, too big and too heavy for him by far and the hinge all stiff as—

He was stopped dead by the sight that greeted them beyond the open gates.

'Here is a harvest,' said Hurik.

The narrow space in front of the tower was scattered with bodies. So many that Yarvi had to search for patches of ground between to put his feet. There were women there, and children. Flies buzzed, and he felt the sickness rising, and fought it down.

He was a king, after all, and a king rejoices in the corpses of his enemies.

One of his uncle's warriors sat beside the entrance to the tower, cleaning his axe as calmly as he might have beside the training square at home.

'Where is Odem?' Yarvi muttered at him.

The man gave a squint-eyed grin and pointed upwards. 'Above, my king.'

Yarvi ducked past, breath echoing in the stairway, feet scraping on the stones, swallowing his surging spit.

On the battlefield, his father used to say, there are no rules.

Up, and up in the fizzing darkness, Hurik and Keimdal toiling behind him. He paused at a narrow window to feel the wind on his burning face, saw water crash on rock at the bottom of a sheer drop and pushed down his fear.

Stand like a king, his mother had told him. Speak like a king. Fight like a king.

There was a platform at the top, propped on timbers, a wooden parapet about the edge no taller than Yarvi's thigh. Low enough to bring the giddy sickness flooding back when he saw how high they had climbed, Father Earth and Mother Sea spread out small around them, the forests of Vansterland stretching off into the haze of distance.

Yarvi's Uncle Odem stood calmly watching Amwend burn, columns of smoke smudging the slate-grey sky, the tiny warriors bent to the business of destruction, the little ships lined up where surf met shingle to collect the bloody harvest. A dozen of his most seasoned men were around him, and kneeling in their midst a prisoner in a fine yellow robe, bound and gagged, his face swollen with bruises and his long hair clotted with blood.

'A good day's work!' called Odem, smiling at Yarvi over his shoulder. 'We have taken two hundred slaves, and livestock, and plunder, and burned one of Grom-gil-Gorm's towns.'

'What of Gorm himself?' asked Yarvi, trying to catch his breath after the climb and – since standing and fighting had never been his strengths – at least speak like a king.

Odem sucked sourly at his teeth. 'The Breaker of Swords will be on his way, eh, Hurik?'

'Doubtless.' Hurik stepped from the stairway and straightened to all his considerable height. 'Battle draws that old bear surely as it draws the flies.'

'We must round up the men and be back at sea within the hour,' said Odem.

'We're leaving?' asked Keimdal. 'Already?'

Yarvi found he was angry. Tired, and sick, and angry at his own weakness and his uncle's ruthlessness and the world that was this way. 'Is this our vengeance, Odem?' He waved his good hand towards the burning town. 'On women and children and old farmers?'

His uncle's voice was gentle, as it always was. Gentle as spring rain. 'Vengeance is taken piece by piece. But you need not worry about that now.'

'Did I not swear an oath?' growled Yarvi. For the last two days he had been prickling whenever someone used the words *my king*. Now he found he prickled even more when they did not.

'You swore. I heard it, and thought it too heavy an oath for you to carry.' Odem gestured at the kneeling prisoner, grunting into his gag. 'But he will free you of its weight.'

'Who is he?'

'The headman of Amwend. He is the one who killed you.'

Yarvi blinked. 'What?'

'I tried to stop him. But the coward had a hidden blade.' Odem held up his hand and there was a dagger in it. A long dagger with a pommel of black jet. In spite of the heat of the climb Yarvi felt suddenly very cold, from the soles of his feet to the roots of his hair.

'It shall be my greatest regret that I moved too late to save my much-loved nephew.' And carelessly as cutting a joint of meat Odem stabbed the headman

between his neck and his shoulder and kicked him onto his face, blood welling across the rooftop.

'What do you mean?' Yarvi's words came shrill and broken and he was suddenly aware how many of his uncle's men were about him, all armed, all armoured.

As Odem stepped calmly, so calmly towards him he stepped back, stepped back on shaky knees to nowhere but the low parapet and the high drop beyond.

'I remember the night you were born.' His uncle's voice was cold and level as ice on a winter lake. 'Your father raged at the gods over that thing you have for a hand. You've always made me, smile, though. You would have been a fine jester.' Odem raised his brows, and sighed. 'But is my daughter really to have a one-handed weakling for a husband? Is Gettland really to have half a king? A crippled puppet dangling on his mother's string? No, nephew, I ... think ... *not*.'

Keimdal snatched Yarvi's arm and dragged him back, metal scraping as he drew his sword. 'Get behind me, my—'

Blood splattered in Yarvi's face and half-blinded him. Keimdal fell to his knees, spitting and gurgling, clutching at his throat, black leaking between his fingers. Yarvi stared sideways and saw Hurik frowning back, a drawn knife in his hand, the blade slick with Keimdal's blood. He let Yarvi's mail drop jingling to the floor.

'We must do what is best for Gettland,' said Odem. 'Kill him.'

Yarvi tottered away, his jaw dropping wide, and Hurik snatched a fistful of his cloak.

With a ping his father's heavy golden buckle sprang open. Suddenly released, Yarvi reeled back.

The parapet caught him hard in the knees and, breath whooping, he tumbled over it.

Rock and water and sky spun about him, and down plummeted the King of Gettland, and down, and the water struck him as a hammer strikes iron.

And Mother Sea took him in her cold embrace.

Half a King is the brand new fantasy novel by Joe Abercrombie – author of six fantasy novels for adult readers – and will be published by DelRey in the US and HarperCollins in the UK in July 2014.

For more information on *Half a King* – and its sequels, *Half the World* and *Half a War* - and to download sample chapters from all of Joe Abercrombie's books, visit www.joeabercrombie.com.

