

SAMPLE CHAPTERS FROM

HALF A WAR

By Joe Abercrombie

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THE FALL

'We have lost,' said King Fynn, staring into his ale.

As she looked out at the empty hall, Skara knew there was no denying it. Last summer, the gathered heroes had threatened to lift the roof-beams with their bloodthirsty boasting, their songs of glory, their promises of victory over the High King's rabble.

As men so often do, they had proved fiercer talkers than fighters. After an idle, inglorious, and unprofitable few months they had slunk away one by one, leaving a handful of the luckless lurking about the great firepit, its flames guttering as low as the fortunes of Throvenland. Where once the many-columned Forest had thronged with warriors, now it was peopled with shadows. Crowded with disappointments.

They had lost. And they had not even fought a battle.

Mother Kyre, of course, saw it differently. 'We have come to terms, my king,' she corrected, nibbling at her meat as primly as an old mare at a hay-bale.

'Terms?' Skara stabbed furiously at her own uneaten food. 'My father died to hold Bail's Point, and you've given its key to Grandmother Wexen without a blow struck. You've promised the High King's warriors free passage across our land! What do you think "lost" would look like?'

Mother Kyre turned her gaze on Skara with the usual infuriating calmness. 'Your grandfather dead in his howe, the women of Yaletoft weeping over the corpses of their sons, this hall made ashes and you, princess, wearing a slave's collar shackled to the High King's chair. *That* is what I think "lost" would look like. Which is why I say *come to terms*.'

Stripped of his pride, King Fynn sagged like a sail without a mast. Skara had always thought her grandfather as unconquerable as Father Earth. She could not bear to see him like this. Or perhaps she could not bear to see how childish her belief in him had been.

She watched him swill down more ale, and belch, and toss his gilded cup aside to be refilled. 'What do you say, Blue Jenner?'

'In such royal company as this, my king, as little as I can.'

Blue Jenner was a shifty old beggar, more raider than trader, his face as crudely chiselled, weathered and cracked as an old prow-beast. Had Skara been in charge he would not have been allowed on her docks, let alone at her high table.

Mother Kyre, of course, saw it differently. 'A captain is like a king, but of a ship rather than a country. Your experience might benefit Princess Skara.'

The indignity of it. 'A lesson in politics from a pirate,' Skara muttered to herself, 'and not even a successful one.'

'Don't mumble. How many hours have I spent teaching you the proper way for a princess to speak? For a queen to speak?' Mother Kyre raised her chin and made her voice echo effortlessly from the rafters. 'If you judge your thoughts worth hearing, pronounce them proudly, push them to every corner of the chamber, fill the hall with your hopes and desires and make every listener share them! If you are ashamed of your thoughts, better to leave a silence. A smile costs nothing. You were saying?'

'Well . . .' Blue Jenner scratched at the few grey hairs still clinging to his weather-spotted scalp, evidently a place unknown to combs. 'Grandmother Wexen's crushed the rebellion in the Lowlands.'

'With the help of this dog of hers, Bright Yilling, who worships no god but Death.' Skara's grandfather snatched up his cup while the thrall was still pouring, ale spilling across the table. 'They say he lined the road to Skekenhouse with hanged men.'

'The High King's eyes turn north,' Jenner went on. 'He's keen to bring Uthil and Grom-gil-Gorm to heel and Throvenland . . .'

'Is in the way,' finished Mother Kyre. 'Don't slouch, Skara, it is unseemly.'

Skara scowled, but she wriggled her shoulders up the chair a little anyway, closer to the board-stiff, neck-stretched, horribly unnatural pose the minister approved of. *Sit as if you have a knife to your throat*, she always said. *The role of a princess is not to be comfortable.*

'I'm a man used to living free, and I'm no lover of Grandmother Wexen, or her One God, or her taxes, or her rules.' Blue Jenner rubbed mournfully at his lopsided jaw. 'But when Mother Sea whips up the storm, a captain does what he

must to save what he can. Freedom's worth nothing to the dead. Pride's worth little even to the living.'

'Wise words.' Mother Kyre wagged her finger at Skara. 'The beaten can win tomorrow. The dead have lost forever.'

'Wisdom and cowardice can be hard to tell apart,' snapped Skara.

The minister clenched her jaw. 'I swear I taught you wiser manners than to insult a guest. Nobility is shown not by the respect one is given by the highest, but the respect one gives to the lowly. Words are weapons. They should be handled with proper care.'

Jenner waved any suggestion of offence gently away. 'No doubt Princess Skara has the right of it. I've known many men far braver'n me.' He gave a sad smile, displaying a crooked set of teeth with several gaps. 'And seen most buried, one by one.'

'Bravery and long life rarely make good bedfellows,' said the king, draining his cup again.

'Kings and ale pair up no better,' said Skara.

'I have nothing left but ale, granddaughter. My warriors have abandoned me. My allies have deserted me. They swore fair-weather oaths, oak-firm while Mother Sun shone, prone to wilt when the clouds gather.'

That was no secret. Day after day Skara had watched the docks, eager to see how many ships the Iron King Uthil of Gettland would bring, how many warriors would accompany the famous Grom-gil-Gorm of Vansterland. Day after day, as the leaves budded, then the leaves cast dappled shade, then the leaves turned brown and fell. They never came.

'Loyalty is common in dogs but rare in men,' observed Mother Kyre. 'A plan that relies on loyalty is worse than none at all.'

'What then?' asked Skara. 'A plan that relies on cowardice?'

Old, her grandfather looked as he turned to her with misty eyes and brewer's breath. Old and beaten. 'You have always been brave, Skara. Braver than I. No doubt the blood of Bail flows in your veins.'

'Your blood too, my king! You always told me only half a war is fought with swords. The other half is fought here.' And Skara pressed one fingertip into the side of her head, so hard it hurt.

'You have always been clever, Skara. Cleverer than I. The gods know you can talk the birds down from the sky when it pleases you. Fight that half of the war, then. Give me the deep cunning that can turn back the High King's armies and save our land and our people from Bright Yilling's sword. That can spare me from the shame of Grandmother Wexen's terms.'

Skara looked down at the straw-covered floor, face burning. 'I wish I could.' But she was a girl seventeen winters old and, Bail's blood or no, her head held no hero's answers. 'I'm sorry, Grandfather.'

'So am I, child.' King Fynn slumped back and beckoned for more ale. 'So am I.'

'Skara.'

She was snatched from troubled dreams and into darkness, Mother Kyre's face ghostly in the light of one flickering candle.

'Skara, get up.'

She fumbled back the furs, clumsy with sleep. Strange sounds outside. Shouting and laughter.

She rubbed her eyes. 'What is it?'

'You must go with Blue Jenner.'

Skara saw the trader then, lurking in the doorway of her bedchamber. A black figure, shaggy-headed, eyes turned to the floor.

'What?'

Mother Kyre pulled her up by her arm. 'You must go *now*.'

Skara was about to argue. As she always argued. Then she saw the minister's expression and it made her obey without a word spoken. She had never seen Mother Kyre afraid before.

It did not sound like laughter any more, outside. Crying. Wild voices. 'What's happening?' she managed to croak.

'I made a terrible mistake.' Mother Kyre's eyes darted to the door and back. 'I trusted Grandmother Wexen.' She twisted the gold ring from Skara's arm. The one Bail the Builder once wore into battle, its ruby glistening dark as new-spilled

blood in the candlelight. 'This is for you.' She held it out to Blue Jenner. 'If you swear to see her safe to Thorlby.'

The raider's eyes flickered guiltily up as he took it. 'I swear it. A sun-oath and a moon-oath.'

Mother Kyre clutched painfully hard at both of Skara's hands. 'Whatever happens, you must live. That is your duty now. You must live and you must lead. You must fight for Throvenland. You must stand for her people if . . . if there is no one else.'

Skara's throat was so tight with fear she could hardly speak. 'Fight? But—'

'I have taught you how. I have tried to. Words are weapons.' The minister wiped tears from Skara's face that she had not even realized she had cried. 'Your grandfather was right, you are brave and you are clever. But now you must be strong. You are a child no longer. Always remember, the blood of Bail flows in your veins. Now go.'

Skara padded barefoot through the darkness at Blue Jenner's heels, shivering in her shift, Mother Kyre's lessons so deep-rooted that even fearing for her life she worried over whether she was properly dressed. Flames beyond the narrow windows cast stabbing shadows across the straw-scattered floor. She heard panicked shouts. A dog barking, suddenly cut off. A heavy thudding as of a tree being felled.

As of axes at the door.

They stole into the guest-room, where warriors had slept shoulder to shoulder a few months before. Now there was only Blue Jenner's threadbare blanket.

'What's happening?' she whispered, hardly recognizing her own voice it came so thin and cracked.

'Bright Yilling has come with his Companions,' said Jenner, 'to settle Grandmother Wexen's debts. Yaletoft is already burning. I'm sorry, princess.'

Skara flinched as he slid something around her neck. A collar of twisted silver wire, a fine chain clinking faintly. The kind the Ingling girl who used to bind her hair had worn.

'Am I a slave?' she whispered, as Jenner buckled the other end about his wrist.

'You must seem to be.'

Skara shrank back at a crash outside, the clash of metal, and Jenner pressed her against the wall. He blew his candle out and dropped them into darkness. She saw him draw a knife, Father Moon glinting on its edge.

Howls now, beyond the door, high and horrible, the bellows of beasts not the voices of men. Skara squeezed her eyes shut, tears stinging the lids, and prayed. Mumbling, stuttering, meaningless prayers. Prayers to every god and none.

It is easy to be brave when the Last Door seems tiny for its distance, a far-off thing for other folk to worry about. Now she felt Death's chill breath on her neck and it froze the courage in her. How freely she had talked of cowardice the night before. Now she understood what it was.

A last long shriek, then silence almost worse than the noise had been. She felt herself drawn forward, Jenner's breath stale on her cheek.

'We have to go.'

'I'm scared,' she breathed.

'So am I. But if we face 'em boldly we might talk our way free. If they find us hiding...'

You can only conquer your fears by facing them, her grandfather used to say. *Hide from them, and they conquer you.* Jenner eased the door creaking open and Skara forced herself through after him, her knees trembling so badly they were nearly knocking together.

Her bare foot slid in something wet. A dead man sat beside the door, the straw all about him black with blood.

Borid, his name. A warrior who had served her father. He had carried Skara on his shoulders when she was little, so she could reach the peaches in the orchard under the walls of Bail's Point.

Her stinging eyes crept towards the sound of voices. Over broken weapons and cloven shields. Over more corpses, hunched, sprawled, spreadeagled among the carved columns after which her grandfather's hall was called the Forest.

Figures were gathered in the light of the guttering firepit. Storied warriors, mail and weapons and ring-money gleaming with the colours of fire, their great shadows stretching out across the floor towards her.

Mother Kyre stood among them, and Skara's grandfather too, ill-fitting mail hastily dragged on, grey hair still wild from his bed. Smiling blandly upon his two prisoners was a slender warrior with a soft, handsome face, as careless as a child's, a space about him where even these other killers dared not tread.

Bright Yilling, who worshipped no god but Death.

His voice echoed jauntily in the vastness of the hall. 'I was hoping to pay my respects to Princess Skara.'

'She has gone to her cousin Laithlin,' said Mother Kyre. The same voice that had calmly lectured, corrected, chastised Skara every day of her life, but with an unfamiliar warble of terror in it now. 'Where you will never reach her.'

'Oh, we will reach her there,' said one of Yilling's warriors, a huge man with a neck like a bull's.

'Soon enough, Mother Kyre, soon enough,' said another with a tall spear and a horn at his belt.

'King Uthil will come,' she said. 'He will burn your ships and drive you back into the sea.'

'How will he burn my ships when they are safe behind the great chains at Bail's Point?' asked Yilling. 'The chains you gave me the key to.'

'Grom-gil-Gorm will come,' she said, but her voice had faded almost to a whisper.

'I hope it will be so.' Yilling reached out with both hands and ever so gently eased Mother Kyre's hair back over her shoulders. 'But he will come too late for you.' He drew a sword, a great diamond in a golden claw for a pommel, mirror-steel flashing so bright in the darkness it left a white smear across Skara's sight.

'Death waits for us all.' King Fynn took a long breath through his nose, and proudly drew himself up. A glimpse of the man he used to be. He looked about the hall and, through the columns, caught Skara's eye, and it seemed to her he gave the slightest smile. Then he dropped to his knees. 'Today you kill a king.'

Yilling shrugged. 'Kings and peasants. We all look the same to Death.'

He stabbed Skara's grandfather where his neck met his shoulder, blade darting in to the hilt and back out, quick and deadly as lightning falls. King Fynn made only a dry squeak he died so fast, and toppled face forward into the firepit. Skara stood frozen, her breath held fast, her mind held fast.

Mother Kyre stared down at her master's corpse. 'Grandmother Wexen gave me her promise,' she stammered out.

Pit pat, pit pat, the blood dripped from the point of Yilling's sword. 'Promises only bind the weak.'

He spun, neat as a dancer, steel flickering in the shadows. There was a black gout and Mother Kyre's head clonked across the floor, her body dropping as though it had no bones in it at all.

Skara gave a shuddering gasp. It had to be a nightmare. A fever-trick. She wanted to lie down. Her eyelids fluttered, her body sagged, but Blue Jenner's hand was around her arm, painfully tight.

'You're a slave,' he hissed, giving her a stiff shake. 'You say nothing. You understand nothing.'

She tried to still her whimpering breath as light footsteps tapped across the floor towards them. Far away, someone had started screaming, and would not stop.

'Well, well,' came Bright Yilling's soft voice. 'This pair does not belong.'

'No, lord. My name is Blue Jenner.' Skara could not comprehend how he could sound so friendly, firm and reasonable. If she had opened her mouth all that would have come out were slobbering sobs. 'I'm a trader carrying the High King's licence, lately returned up the Divine River. We were heading for Skekenhouse, blown off course in a gale.'

'You must have been fast friends with King Fynn, to be a guest in his hall.'

'A wise trader is friendly with everyone, lord.'

'You are sweating, Blue Jenner.'

'Honestly, you terrify me.'

'A wise trader indeed.' Skara felt a gentle touch under her chin and her head was tipped back. She looked into the face of the man who had just murdered the two people who had raised her from a child, his bland smile still spotted with their blood, close enough that she could count the dusting of freckles across his nose.

Yilling pushed his plump lips out and made a high, clean whistle. 'And a trader in fine goods too.' He brushed one hand through her hair, wound a strand

of it around his long fingers, pushed it out of her face so that his thumb tip brushed her cheek.

You must live. You must lead. She smothered her fear. Smothered her hate. Forced her face dead. A thrall's face, showing nothing.

'Would you trade this to me, trader?' asked Yilling. 'For your life, maybe?'

'Happily, lord,' said Blue Jenner. Skara had known Mother Kyre was a fool to trust this rogue. She took a breath to curse him and his gnarled fingers dug tighter into her arm. 'But I cannot.'

'In my experience, and I have much and very bloody . . .' Bright Yilling raised his red sword and let it rest against his cheek as a girl might her favourite doll, the diamond pommel on fire with sparks of red and orange and yellow. 'One sharp blade severs a whole rope of cannots.'

The lump on Jenner's grizzled throat bobbed as he swallowed. 'She isn't mine to sell. She's a gift. From Prince Varoslaf of Kalyiv to the High King.'

'Ack.' Yilling slowly let his sword fall, leaving a long red smear down his face. 'I hear Varoslaf is a man a wise man fears.'

'He has precious little sense of humour, it's true.'

'As a man's power swells, his good humour shrivels.' Yilling frowned towards the trail of bloody footprints he had left between the columns. Between the corpses. 'The High King is much the same. It would not be prudent to snaffle a gift between those two.'

'My very thought all the way from Kalyiv,' said Jenner.

Bright Yilling snapped his fingers as loudly as a whipcrack, eyes suddenly bright with boyish enthusiasm. 'Here is my thought! We will toss a coin. Heads, you can take this pretty thing on to Skekenhouse and let her wash the High King's feet. Tails, I kill you and make better use of her.' He slapped Jenner on the shoulder. 'What do you say, my new friend?'

'I say Grandmother Wexen may take this ill,' said Jenner.

'She takes everything ill.' Yilling smiled wide, the smooth skin about his eyes crinkling with friendly creases. 'But I bend to the will of one woman only. Not Grandmother Wexen, nor Mother Sea, nor Mother Sun, nor even Mother War.' He flicked a coin high in the hallowed spaces of the Forest, gold flashing. 'Only Death.'

He snatched it from the shadows. 'King or peasant, high or low, strong or weak, wise or foolish. Death waits for us all.' And he opened his hand, the coin glinting in his palm.

'Huh.' Blue Jenner peered down at it, eyebrows high. 'Guess she can wait a little longer for me.'

They hurried away through the wreckage of Yaletoft, flaming straw fluttering on the hot wind, the night boiling over with screaming and pleading and weeping. Skara kept her eyes on the ground like a good slave should, no one now to tell her not to slouch, her fear thawing slowly into guilt.

They sprang aboard Jenner's ship and pushed off, the crew muttering prayers of thanks to Father Peace that they had been spared from the carnage, oars creaking out a steady rhythm as they slid between the boats of the raiders and out to sea. Skara slumped among the cargo, the guilt pooling slowly into sorrow as she watched the flames take King Fynn's beautiful hall and her past life with it, the great carved gable showing black against the fire, then falling in a fountain of whirling sparks.

The burning of all she had known dwindled away, Yaletoft a speckling of flame in the dark distance, sailcloth snapping as Jenner ordered the ship turned north, towards Gettland. Skara stood and looked behind them, into the past, the tears drying on her face as her sorrow froze into a cold, hard, iron weight of fury.

'I'll see Throvenland free,' she whispered, clenching her fists. 'And my grandfather's hall rebuilt, and Bright Yilling's carcass left for the crows.'

'For now, let's stick to seeing you alive, princess.' Jenner took the thrall collar from her neck, then wrapped his cloak around her shivering shoulders.

She looked up at him, rubbing gently at the marks the silver wire had left. 'I misjudged you, Blue Jenner.'

'Your judgment's shrewd. I've done far worse than you thought I might.'

'Why risk your life for mine, then?'

He seemed to think a moment, scratching at his jaw. Then he shrugged. 'Because there's no changing yesterday. Only tomorrow.' He pressed something

into her hand. Bail's armring, the ruby gleaming bloody in the moonlight.
'Reckon this is yours.'

NO PEACE

‘When will they be here?’

Father Yarvi sat slumped against a tree with his legs crossed and an ancient-looking book propped on his knees. He might almost have seemed asleep had his eyes not been flickering over the writing beneath heavy lids. ‘I am a minister, Koll,’ he murmured, ‘not a seer.’

Koll frowned up at the offerings about the glade. Headless birds and drained jars of ale and bundles of bones swinging on twine. A dog, a cow, four sheep, all dangling head-down from rune-carved branches, flies busy at their slit throats.

There was a man too. A thrall, by the chafe marks on his neck, a ring of runes written clumsily on his back, his knuckles brushing the bloody ground. A fine sacrifice to He Who Sprouts the Seed from some rich woman eager for a child.

Koll didn’t much care for holy places. They made him feel he was being watched. He liked to think he was an honest fellow, but everyone has their secrets. Everyone has their doubts.

‘What’s the book?’ he asked.

‘A treatise on elf-relics written two hundred years ago by Sister Slodd of Reerskoft.’

‘More forbidden knowledge, eh?’

‘From a time when the Ministry was fixed on gathering wisdom, rather than suppressing it.’

‘Only what is known can be controlled,’ muttered Koll.

‘And all knowledge, like all power, can be dangerous in the wrong hands. It is the use it is put to that counts.’ And Father Yarvi licked the tip of the one twisted finger on his withered left hand and used it to turn the page.

Koll frowned off into the still forest. ‘Did we have to come so early?’

‘The battle is usually won by the side that gets there first.’

‘I thought we came to talk peace?’

‘Talk of peace is the minister’s battlefield.’

Koll gave a sigh that made his lips flap. He perched himself on a stump at the edge of the clearing, a cautious distance from any of the offerings, slipped out his knife and the chunk of ash-wood he'd already roughly shaped. She Who Strikes the Anvil, hammer high. A gift for Rin, when he got back to Thorlby. If he got back, rather than ending up dangling from a tree in this glade himself. He flapped his lips again.

'The gods have given you many gifts,' murmured Father Yarvi, without looking up from his book. 'Deft hands and sharp wits. A lovely shock of sandy hair. A slightly over-ready sense of humour. But do you wish to be a great minister, and stand at the shoulder of kings?'

Koll swallowed. 'You know I do, Father Yarvi. More than anything.'

'Then you have many things to learn, and the first is patience. Focus your moth of a mind and one day you could change the world, just as your mother wanted you to.'

Koll jerked at the thong around his neck, felt the weights strung on it click together under his shirt. The weights his mother Safrit used to wear as a storekeeper, trusted to measure fairly. *Be brave, Koll. Be the best man you can be.*

'Gods, I still miss her,' he muttered.

'So do I. Now still yourself, and attend to what I do.'

Koll let the weights drop. 'My eyes are rooted to you, Father Yarvi.'

'Close them.' The minister snapped his book shut and stood, brushing the dead leaves from the back of his coat. 'And listen.'

Footsteps, coming towards them through the forest. Koll slipped the carving away but kept the knife out, point up his sleeve. Well-chosen words will solve most problems but, in Koll's experience, well-sharpened steel was a fine thing for tackling the others.

A woman stepped from the trees, dressed in minister's black. Her fire-red hair was shaved at the sides, runes tattooed into the skin around her ears, the rest combed with fat into a spiky fin. Her face was hard, made harder yet by the muscles bunching as she chewed on dreamer's bark, lips blotchy at the edges with the purple stain of it.

'You are early, Mother Adwyn.'

'Not as early as you, Father Yarvi.'

'Mother Gundring always told me it was poor manners to come second to a meeting.'

'I hope you will forgive my rudeness, then.'

'That depends on the words you bring from Grandmother Wexen.'

Mother Adwyn raised her chin. 'Your master, King Uthil, and his ally, Grom-gil-Gorm, have broken their oaths to the High King. They have slapped aside his hand of friendship and drawn their swords against him.'

'His hand of friendship weighed heavily upon us,' said Yarvi. 'Two years since we shook it off we find we all breathe easier. Two years, and the High King has taken no towns, has won no battles—'

'And what battles have Uthil and Gorm fought? Unless you count the ones they fight daily against each other?' Adwyn spat juice out of the corner of her mouth and Koll fiddled uneasily at a loose thread on his sleeve. She struck close to the mark with that. 'You have enjoyed good luck, Father Yarvi, for the High King's eye has been on this rebellion in the Lowlands. A rebellion I hear you had a hand in raising.'

Yarvi blinked, all innocence. 'Can I make men rise up hundreds of miles away? Am I a magician?'

'Some say you are, but magic, or luck, or deep-cunning will change nothing now. The rebellion is crushed. Bright Yilling duelled Hokon's three sons and one by one he cut them down. His swordwork is without equal.'

Father Yarvi peered at the one fingernail on his withered hand, as if to check it looked well. 'King Uthil might disagree. He would have beaten these brothers all at once.'

Mother Adwyn ignored his bluster. 'Bright Yilling is a new kind of man, with new ways. He put the oath-breakers to the sword and his Companions burned their halls with their families inside.'

'Burned families.' Koll swallowed. 'There's progress.'

'Perhaps you have not heard what Bright Yilling did next?'

'I hear he's quite a dancer,' said Koll. 'Did he dance?'

'Oh, yes. Across the straits to Yaletoft where he paid the faithless King Fynn a visit.'

Silence then, and a breeze rustled the leaves, made the offerings creak and sent a twitchy shiver up Koll's neck. Mother Adwyn's chewing made a gentle squelch, squelch as she smiled.

'Ah. So your jester can spin no laughs from that. Yaletoft lies in ruins, and King Fynn's hall in ashes, and his warriors are scattered to the winds.'

Yarvi gave the slightest frown. 'What of the king himself?'

'On the other side of the Last Door, with his minister. Their deaths were written the moment you tricked them into your little alliance of the doomed.'

'On the battlefield,' murmured Father Yarvi, 'there are no rules. New ways indeed.'

'Bright Yilling is already spreading fire across Throvenland, preparing the way for the High King's army. An army more numerous than the grains of sand on the beach. The greatest army that has marched since the elves made war on God. Before midsummer they will be at the gates of Thorlby.'

'The future is a land wrapped in fog, Mother Adwyn. It may yet surprise us all.'

'One does not have to be a prophet to see what comes.' She drew out a scroll and dragged it open, the paper scrawled with densely-written runes. 'Grandmother Wexen will name you and Queen Laithlin sorcerers and traitors. The Ministry will declare this paper money of hers elf-magic, and any who use it outcast and outlaw.'

Koll started as he heard a twig snap somewhere in the brush.

'You shall be cut from the world, and so shall Uthil and Gorm and any who stand with them.'

And now the men appeared. Men of Yutmark from their square cloak buckles and their long shields. Koll counted six, and heard two more at least behind him, and forced himself not to turn.

'Drawn swords?' asked Father Yarvi. 'On the sacred ground of Father Peace?'

'We pray to the One God,' growled their captain, a warrior with a gold-chased helmet. 'To us, this is just dirt.'

Koll looked across the sharp faces and the sharp blades pointed at him, palm slippery around the grip of his hidden knife.

'Here is a pretty fix,' he squeaked.

Mother Adwyn let the scroll fall. 'But even now, even after your plotting and your treachery, Grandmother Wexen would offer peace.' Dappled shade slid across her face as she raised her eyes towards heaven. 'The One God is truly a forgiving god.'

Father Yarvi snorted. Koll could hardly believe how fearless he seemed. 'I daresay her forgiveness has a price, though?'

'The statues of the Tall Gods shall all be broken and the One God worshipped throughout the Shattered Sea,' said Adwyn. 'Every Vansterman and Gettlander shall pay a yearly tithe to the Ministry. King Uthil and King Gorm will lay their swords at the feet of the High King in Skekenhouse, beg forgiveness and swear new oaths.'

'The old ones did not stick.'

'That is why you, Mother Scaer, and the young Prince Druin will remain as hostages.'

'HmMMMMM,' Father Yarvi lifted his withered finger to tap at his chin. 'It's a lovely offer, but summer in Skekenhouse can be a little sticky.'

An arrow flickered past Koll's face, so close he felt the wind of it on his cheek. It took the leader of the warriors silently in the shoulder, just above the rim of his shield.

More shafts flitted from the woods. A man screamed. Another clutched at an arrow in his face. Koll sprang at Father Yarvi and dragged him down behind the thick bole of a sacred tree. He glimpsed a warrior charging towards them, sword high. Then Dosduvoi stepped out, huge as a house, and with a swing of his great axe snatched the man from his feet and sent him tumbling away in a shower of dead leaves.

Shadows writhed, stabbing, hacking, knocking at the offerings and setting them swinging. A few bloody moments and Mother Adwyn's men had joined King Fynn on the other side of the Last Door. Their captain was on his knees, wheezing, six arrows lodged in his mail. He tried to stand using his sword as a crutch, but the red strength was leaking from him.

Fror slipped into the clearing. One hand gripped his heavy axe. With the other he gently undid the buckle on the captain's gold-trimmed helmet. It was a fine one, and would fetch a fine price.

'You will be sorry for this,' breathed the captain, blood on his lips and his grey hair stuck to his sweating forehead.

Fror slowly nodded. 'I am sorry already.' And he struck the captain on the crown and knocked him over with his arms spread wide.

'You can let me up now,' said Father Yarvi, patting Koll on the side. He realized he'd covered the minister with his body as a mother might her baby in a storm.

'You couldn't tell me the plan?' he asked, scrambling up.

'You cannot give away what you do not know.'

'You don't trust me to act a part?'

'Trust is like glass,' said Rulf, swinging his great horn bow over his shoulder and helping Yarvi up with one broad hand. 'Lovely, but only a fool rests lots of weight on it.'

Hardened warriors of Gettland and Vansterland had surrounded the clearing on every side, and Mother Adwyn cut a lonely figure in their midst. Koll almost felt sorry for her, but he knew it would do neither of them the least good.

'It seems my treachery was better than yours,' said Yarvi. 'Twice, now, your mistress has tried to cut me from the world, yet here I stand.'

'Treachery is what you are known for, spider.' Mother Adwyn spat purple bark-juice at his feet. 'What of your sacred ground of Father Peace?'

Yarvi shrugged. 'Oh, he is a forgiving god. But it may be wise to hang you from these trees and slit your throat as an offering, just in case.'

'Do it, then,' she hissed.

'Mercy shows more power than murder. Go back to Grandmother Wexen. Thank her for the information you have given me, it will be useful.' He gestured towards the dead men, already being trussed by the feet to be hung from the branches of the sacred grove. 'Thank her for these rich offerings to the Tall Gods, no doubt they will appreciate them.'

Father Yarvi jerked close to her, lips curled back, and Mother Adwyn's mask slipped, and Koll saw her fear. 'But tell the First of Minsters I piss on her offer! I swore an oath to be avenged on the killers of my father. A sun-oath and a moon-oath. Tell Grandmother Wexen that while she and I both live, there will be no peace.'

NEVER BLOODY ENOUGH

'I'll kill you, you half-haired bitch!' snarled Raith, spraying spit as he went for her. Rakki caught his left arm and Soryorn his right and between them they managed to wrestle him back. They'd had plenty of practice at it, after all.

Thorn Bathu didn't move. Unless you counted the jaw muscles clenching on the shaved side of her head.

'Let's all just calm down,' said her husband, Brand, waving his open palms like a shepherd trying to still a nervous flock. 'We're meant to be allies, aren't we?' He was a big, strong cow of a man, no edge to him at all. 'Let's just . . . just stand in the light a moment.'

Raith let everyone know how much he thought of that idea by twisting far enough free of his brother to spit in Brand's face. He missed, sadly, but the point was made.

Thorn curled her lip. 'Reckon this dog needs putting down.'

Everyone's got their sore spots, and that tickled Raith's. He went limp, let his head drop sideways, showing his teeth in a lazy grin as his eyes drifted across to Brand. 'Maybe I'll kill this coward wife of yours instead?'

He'd always had a trick for starting fights, and wasn't half bad at finishing them either, but nothing could've made him ready for how fast Thorn came at him.

'You're dead, you milk-haired bastard!'

Raith jerked away, near-dragging his brother and Soryorn down in a shocked tangle together on the dockside. Took three Gettlanders to drag her off – the sour old master-at-arms, Hunnan, the bald old helmsman, Rulf, and Brand with his scarred forearm wrapped around her neck. All strong men, straining at the effort, and even then her stray fist landed a good cuff on the top of Raith's head.

'Peace!' snarled Brand as he struggled to wrestle his thrashing wife back. 'For the gods' sake, peace!'

But no one was in the mood. There were others growling insults now, Gettlanders and Vanstermen both. Raith saw knuckles white on sword hilts,

heard the scrape as Soryorn eased his knife free of its sheath. He could smell the violence coming, far worse than he'd planned on. But there's violence for you. It rarely keeps to the patch you mark out for it. Wouldn't be violence if it did.

Raith bared his teeth – half-snarl, half-smile – the fire coming up in his chest, the breath ripping hot at his throat, every muscle tensing.

Could've been a battle for the songs right then on the rain-damp docks of Thorlby if Grom-gil-Gorm hadn't come shoving through the angry press like a huge bull through a crowd of bleating goats.

'Enough!' roared the King of Vansterland. 'What shameful pecking of little birds is this?'

The hubbub died. Raith shook off his brother, grinning his wolf's grin, and Thorn tore free of her husband, growling curses. No doubt Brand had an uncomfortable night ahead, but it had all worked out well enough to Raith's mind. He'd come to fight, after all, and wasn't too bothered who with.

The glaring Gettlanders shifted to let King Uthil through, his drawn sword cradled in his arm. Raith hated him, of course. A good Vansterman had to hate the King of Gettland. But otherwise he seemed very much a man to admire, hard and grey as an iron bar and every bit as unbending, renowned for many victories and few words, a mad brightness to his sunken eyes that said he had only a cold space where the gods usually put a man's mercy.

'I am disappointed, Thorn Bathu,' he grated out in a voice rough as millstones. 'I expected better from you.'

'I'm all regret, my king,' she growled out, glaring daggers at Raith, and then at Brand, who winced like daggers from his wife was far from a novelty.

'I expected no better.' Grom-gil-Gorm raised one black brow at Raith. 'But at least hoped for it.'

'We should let 'em insult us, my king?' snapped Raith.

'A little insult must be suffered if one is to maintain an alliance,' came Mother Scaer's dry voice.

'And our alliance is a ship on stormy seas,' said Father Yarvi, with that honeyed smile of his that cried out for a headbutt. 'Sink it with squabbling and we surely all will drown alone.'

Raith growled at that. He hated ministers and their two-tongued talk of Father Peace and greater good. To his mind there was no problem you couldn't best solve by putting your fist through it.

'A Vansterman never forgets an insult.' Gorm wedged his thumbs among the knives bristling from his belt. 'But I have a thirst upon me, and since we are the guests. . .' He drew himself up, the chain made from the pommels of his beaten enemies shifting as his great chest swelled. 'I, Grom-gil-Gorm, Breaker of Swords and Maker of Orphans, King of Vansterland and favourite son of Mother War . . . will go second into the city.'

His warriors grumbled bitterly. An hour they'd wasted arguing over who'd go first and now the battle was lost. Their king would take the place of less honour, so they'd have less honour and, gods, they were prickly over their honour.

'A wise choice,' said Uthil, narrowing his eyes. 'But expect no gifts for making it.'

'The wolf needs no gifts from the sheep,' said Gorm, glowering back. King Uthil's closest warriors swaggered past, gilded cloak-buckles and sword-hilts and ring-money gleaming, swollen to new heights of undeserved arrogance, and Raith showed his teeth and spat at their feet.

'A dog indeed,' sneered Hunnan, and Raith would've sprung on the old bastard and knocked his brains out on the docks if Rakki hadn't hugged him tight and crooned, 'Calm, brother, calm,' in his ear.

'Blue Jenner! Here's a surprise!'

Raith frowned over his shoulder and saw Father Yarvi drawn aside by some old sailor with a brine-pickled face.

'A welcome one, I hope,' said Jenner, clasping hands with Rulf like they were old oarmates.

'That depends,' said the minister. 'Have you come to take Queen Laithlin's gold?'

'I try to take any gold that's offered.' Jenner glanced around like he was about to show off some secret treasure. 'But I've a better reason for being here.'

'Better than gold?' asked Rulf, grinning. 'You've changed.'

'Far better.' Jenner guided someone forward who'd been hidden at his back, and it was like someone stabbed Raith right through his skull and all the fight drained out.

She was small and slight, swamped by a weatherstained cloak. Her hair was a wild tangle, a cloud of dark curls that twitched and shifted in the salt breeze. Her skin was pale, and chapped pink round her nostrils, and the bones in her cheeks showed so fine and sharp it seemed they might snap at a harsh word.

She looked straight at Raith with big eyes dark and green as Mother Sea on a storm-day. She didn't smile. She didn't speak. Sad and solemn she seemed, and full of secrets, and every hair on Raith stood up. No axe-blow to the head could have knocked him quite so senseless as that one glimpse of her.

For a moment Father Yarvi's mouth hung foolishly open. Then he shut it with a snap. 'Rulf, take Blue Jenner and his guest to Queen Laithlin. Now.'

'You were ready to do murder over who went first, now you don't want to go at all?' Rakki was staring at him, and Raith realized Gorm's men were strutting in after the Gettlanders, all puffed up near to bursting to make up for going second.

'Who was that girl?' Raith croaked out, feeling giddy as a sleeper jerked from an ale-dream.

'Since when were you interested in girls?'

'Since I saw this one.' He blinked into the crowd, hoping to prove to both of them he hadn't imagined her, but she was gone.

'Must've been quite a beauty to draw your eye from a quarrel.'

'Like nothing I ever saw.'

'Forgive me, brother, but when it comes to women you haven't seen much. You're the fighter, remember?' Rakki grinned as he heaved up Grom-gil-Gorm's great black shield. 'I'm the lover.'

'As you never tire of telling me.' Raith shouldered the king's heavy sword and made to follow his brother into Thorlby. Until he felt his master's weighty hand holding him back.

'You have disappointed me, Raith.' The Breaker of Swords drew him close. 'This place is full of bad enemies to have, but I fear in Queen Laithlin's Chosen Shield you have picked the very worst.'

Raith scowled. 'She doesn't scare me, my king.'

Gorm slapped him sharply across the face. Well, a slap to Gorm. To Raith it was like being hit with an oar. He staggered but the king caught him and dragged him closer still. 'What wounds me is not that you tried to hurt her, but that you failed.' He cuffed him the other way and Raith's mouth turned salty with blood. 'I do not want a dog that yaps. I want a dog that uses its teeth. I want a killer.' And he slapped Raith a third time and left him dizzy. 'I fear you have a grain of mercy left in you, Raith. Crush it, before it crushes you.'

Gorm gave Raith's head a parting scratch. The sort a father gives a son. Or perhaps a huntsman gives his hound. 'You can never be bloody enough for my taste, boy. You know that.'