

Sample Chapters from

Last Argument of Kings

Book three of *The First Law*

by Joe Abercrombie

Please note: to avoid spoilers (this being volume three of the series and all) this sample comprises chapters 2, 3 and 8, all set in The North...

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Being Chief

Cold night!' shouted the Dogman. 'Thought it was meant to be summer!' The three of 'em looked up. The nearest was an old man with grey hair and a face looked like it had seen some weather. Just past him was a younger man, missing his left arm above the elbow. The third was no more'n a boy, stood down the end of the quay and frowning out at the dark sea.

Dogman faked a nasty limp as he walked over, dragging one leg behind him and wincing like he was in pain. He shuffled under the lamp, dangling on its high pole with the warning bell beside it, and held up the jar so they could all see.

The old man grinned, and leaned his spear against the wall. 'Always cold, down by the water.' He came up, rubbing his hands together. 'Just as well we got you to keep us warm, eh?'

'Aye. Good luck all round.' Dogman pulled out the stopper and let it dangle, lifted one of the mugs and poured out a slosh.

'No need to be shy, eh, lad?'

'I guess there ain't at that.' Dogman sloshed out some more. The man with one arm had to set his spear down when he got handed his mug. The boy came up last, and looked Dogman over, wary.

The old one nudged him with an elbow. 'You sure your mother'd care for you drinking, boy?'

'Who cares what she'd say?' he growled, trying to make his high voice sound gruff.

Dogman handed him a mug. 'You're old enough to hold a spear, you're old enough to hold a cup, I reckon.'

'I'm old enough!' he snapped, snatching it out o' Dogman's hand, but he shuddered when he drank from it. Dogman remembered his first drink, feeling mighty sick and wondering what all the fuss was about, and he smiled to himself. The boy thought he was being laughed at, most likely. 'Who are you anyway?'

The old boy tutted. 'Don't mind him. He's still young enough to think that rudeness wins respect.'

“S’ alright,” said Dogman, pouring himself a mug then setting the jar down on the stones, taking time to think out what to say, make sure he didn’t make no mistakes. ‘My name’s Cregg.’ He’d known a man called Cregg once, got killed in a scrap up in the hills. Dogman hadn’t liked him much, and he’d no idea why that name came to mind, but one was about as good as another right then, he reckoned. He slapped his thigh. ‘Got poked in the leg up at Dunbrec and it ain’t healed right. Can’t march no more. Reckon my days at holding a line are over, so my chief sent me down here, to watch the water with you lot.’ He looked out at the sea, flapping and sparkling under the moon like a thing alive. ‘Can’t say I’m too sorry about it, though. Being honest, I had a skin full o’ fighting.’ That last bit was no lie, at least.

‘Know how you feel,’ said One-Arm, waving his stump in Dogman’s face. ‘How’re things up there?’

‘Alright. Union are still sat outside their own walls, trying everything to get in, and we’re on the other side o’ the river, waiting for ’em. Been that way for weeks.’

‘I heard some boys have gone over to the Union. I heard old Threetrees was up there, got killed in that battle.’

‘He was a great man, Rudd Threetrees,’ said the old boy, ‘great man.’

‘Aye.’ Dogman nodded. ‘That he was.’

‘Heard the Dogman took his place, though,’ said One-Arm.

‘That a fact?’

‘So I heard. Mean bastard, that. Huge big lad. They call him Dogman ’cause he bit some woman’s teats off one time.’

Dogman blinked. ‘Do they now? Well, I never saw him.’

‘I heard the Bloody-Nine was up there,’ whispered the boy, eyes big like he was talking about a ghost.

The other two snorted at him. ‘The Bloody-Nine’s dead, boy, and good riddance to that evil fucker.’ One-Arm shuddered. ‘Damn it but you get some fool notions!’

‘Just what I heard, is all.’

The old boy swilled down some more grog and smacked his lips. ‘Don’t much matter who’s where. Union’ll most likely get bored once they’ve got their fort

back. Get bored and go home, across the sea, and everything back to normal. None of 'em will be coming down here to Uffrith, anyway.'

'No,' said One-Arm happily. 'They'll not be coming here.'

'Then why we out here watching for 'em?' whined the boy.

The old man rolled his eyes, like he'd heard it ten times before and always made the same answer. 'Cause that's the task we been given, lad.'

'And once you got a task, you best do it right.' Dogman remembered Logen telling him the same thing, and Threetrees too. Both gone now, and back in the mud, but it was still as true as it ever was. 'Even if it's a dull task, or a dangerous, or a dark one. Even if it's a task you'd rather not do.' Damn it, but he needed to piss. Always did, at a time like this.

'True enough,' said the old man, smiling down into his mug. 'Things've got to get done.'

'That they do. Shame, though. You seem a nice enough set o' lads.' And the Dogman reached behind his back, just like he was scratching his arse.

'Shame?' The boy looked puzzled. 'How d'you mean a—'

That was when Dow came up behind him and cut his neck open.

Same moment, almost, Grim's dirty hand clamped down on One-Arm's mouth and the bloody point of a blade slid out the gap in his cloak. Dogman jumped forward and gave the old man three quick stabs in the ribs. He wheezed, and stumbled, eyes wide, mug still hanging from his hand, groggy drool spilling out his open mouth. Then he fell down.

The boy crawled a little way. He had one hand to his neck, trying to keep the blood in, the other reaching out towards the pole the warning bell was hung on. He had some bones, the Dogman reckoned, to be thinking of the bell with a slit throat, but he didn't drag himself more'n a stride before Dow stomped down hard on the back of his neck and squashed him flat.

Dogman winced as he heard the boy's neck bones crunch. He hadn't deserved to die like that, most likely. But that's what war is. A lot of folk getting killed that don't deserve it. The job had needed doing, and they'd done it, and were all three still alive. About as much as he could've hoped for from a piece of work like that, but somehow it still left a sour taste on him. He'd never found it easy, but it was harder than ever, now he was chief. Strange, how it's that much easier to kill folk

when you've got someone telling you to do it. Hard business, killing. Harder than you'd think.

Unless your name's Black Dow, of course. That bastard would kill a man as easy as he'd take a piss. That was what made him so damn good at it. Dogman watched him bend down, strip the cloak from One-Arm's limp body and pull it round his own shoulders, then roll the corpse off into the sea, careless as dumping rubbish.

'You got two arms,' said Grim, already with the old man's cloak on.

Dow looked down at himself. 'What're you saying exactly? I ain't cutting my arm off to make for a better disguise, y'idiot!'

'He means keep it out o' sight.' Dogman watched Dow wipe out a mug with a dirty finger, pour himself a slug and knock it back. 'How can you drink at a time like this?' he asked, pulling the boy's bloody cloak off his corpse.

Dow shrugged as he poured himself another. 'Shame to waste it. And like you said. Cold night.' He broke a nasty grin. 'Damn it, but you can talk, Dogman. Name's Cregg.' He took a couple of limping steps. 'Stabbed in me arse up at Dunbrec! Where d'you get it from?' He slapped Grim's shoulder with the back of his hand. 'Fucking lovely, eh? They got a word for it, don't they? What's that word, now?'

'Plausible,' said Grim.

Dow's eyes lit up. 'Plausible. That's what y'are, Dogman. You're one plausible bastard. I swear, you could've told 'em you was Skarling Hoodless his own self and they'd have believed it. Don't know how you can keep a straight face!'

Dogman didn't feel too much like laughing. He didn't like looking at them two corpses, still laid out on the stones. Kept worrying that the boy'd get cold without his cloak. Damn fool thing to think about, given he was lying in a pool of his own blood a stride across.

'Never mind about that,' he grunted. 'Dump these two here and get over by the gate. Don't know when there'll be others coming.'

'Right y'are, chief, right y'are, whatever you say.' Dow heaved the two of them off into the water, then he unhooked the clapper from inside the bell and tossed that into the sea for good measure.

'Shame,' said Grim.

'What is?'

'Waste of a bell.'

Dow blinked at him. 'Waste of a bell, I swear! You got yourself a lot to say all of a sudden, and you know what? I think I liked you better before. Waste of a bell? You lost your mind, boy?'

Grim shrugged. 'Southerners might want one, when they get here.'

'They can fucking take a dive for the clapper then, can't they!' And Dow snatched up One-Arm's spear and strode over to the open gate, one hand stuffed inside his stolen cloak, grumbling to himself. 'Waste of a bell . . . by the fucking dead . . .'

The Dogman stretched up on his toes and unhooked the lamp, held it up, facing the sea, then he lifted one side of his cloak to cover it, brought it down again. Lifted it up, brought it down. One more time and he hooked it flickering back on the pole. Seemed a tiny little flame right then, to warm all their hopes at. A tiny little flame, to be seen all the way out there on the water, but the only one they had.

He was waiting all the time for the whole business to go wrong, for the clamour to go up in the town, for five dozen Carls to come pouring out that open gate and give the three o' them the killing they deserved. He was bursting to piss, thinking about it. But they didn't come. No sound but the empty bell creaking on its pole, the cold waves slapping on stone and wood. It was just the way they'd planned it.

The first boat came gliding out the darkness, Shivers grinning in the prow. A score of Carls were pressed into the boat behind him, working the oars real careful, white faces tensed up, teeth gritted with the effort of keeping quiet. Still, every click and clank of wood and metal set the Dogman's nerves to jumping.

Shivers and his boys hung some sacks of straw over the side as they brought the boat in close, stopping the wood scraping on the stones, all thought out the week before. They tossed up ropes and Dogman and Grim caught 'em, dragged the boat up tight and tied it off. Dogman looked over at Dow, leaning still and easy against the wall by the gate, and he shook his head gently, to say no one was moving in the town. Then Shivers was up the steps, smooth and quiet, squatting down in the darkness.

'Nice work, chief,' he whispered, smiling right across his face. 'Nice and neat.'

'There'll be time to slap each others' backs later. Get the rest o' them boats tied off.'

'Right y'are.' There were more boats coming now, more Carls, more sacks of straw. Shivers' boys pulled them in, started dragging men up onto the quay. All kinds of men who'd come over the last few weeks. Men who didn't care for Bethod's new way of doing things. Soon there was a good crowd of 'em down by the water. So many Dogman could hardly believe they weren't seen.

They formed up into groups, just the way they'd planned, each one with their own chief and their own task. A couple of the lads knew Uffrith and they'd made a plan of the place in the dirt, the way Threetrees used to. Dogman had every one of 'em learn it. He grinned when he thought of how much Black Dow had carped about that, but it was worth it now. He squatted by the gate, and they came past, one dark and silent group at a time.

Tul was first up, a dozen Carls behind him. 'Alright, Thunderhead,' said Dogman, 'you got the main gate.'

'Aye,' nodded Tul.

'Biggest task o' the lot, so try and get it done quiet.'

'Quiet, you got it.'

'Luck then, Tul.'

'Won't need it.' And the giant hurried off into the dark streets with his crew behind.

'Red Hat, you got the tower by the well and the walls beside.'

'That I have.'

'Shivers, you and your boys are keeping a watch on the town square.'

'Like the owl watches, chief.'

And so on, past they went, through the gate and into the dark streets, making no more noise than the wind off the sea and the waves on the dock, Dogman giving each crew their task and slapping 'em off on their way. Black Dow came up last, and a hard-looking set of men he had behind him.

'Dow, you got the headman's hall. Stack it up with some wood, like we said, but don't set fire to it, you hear? Don't kill anyone you don't have to. Not yet.'

'Not yet, fair enough.'

‘And Dow.’ He turned back. ‘Don’t go bothering any womenfolk either.’

‘What do you think I am?’ he asked, teeth gleaming in the darkness, ‘Some kind of an animal?’

And that was it done. There was just him and Grim, and a few others to watch the water. ‘Uh,’ said Grim, nodding his head slowly. That was high praise indeed from him.

Dogman pointed over at the pole. ‘Get us that bell, would you?’ he said. ‘Might have a use for it after all.’

By the dead, but it made a sound. Dogman had to half close his eyes, his whole arm trembling as he whacked at the bell with the handle of his knife. He didn’t feel too comfortable in amongst all those buildings, squashed in by walls and fences. He hadn’t spent much time in towns in his life, and what he had spent he hadn’t much enjoyed. Either burning things and causing mischief after a siege, or lying around in Bethod’s prisons, waiting to be killed.

He blinked round at the jumble of slate roofs, the walls of old grey stone, black wood, dirty grey render, all greasy with the thin rain. Seemed a strange way to live, sleeping in a box, waking all your days in the exact same spot. The idea alone made him restless, as though that bell hadn’t got him twitchy enough already. He cleared his throat and set it down on the cobbles beside him. Then he stood there waiting, one hand on the hilt of his sword in a way that he hoped meant business.

Some flapping footfalls came from down a street and a little girl ran out into the square. Her jaw dropped open when she saw them standing there, a dozen men all bearded and armed, Tul Duru in their midst. Probably she never saw a man half so big. She turned around sharp to run the other way, almost slipping over on the slick cobbles. Then she saw Dow sitting on a pile of wood just behind her, leaning back easy against the wall, his drawn sword on his knees, and she froze stone still.

‘That’s alright, girl,’ growled Dow. ‘You can stay where y’are.’

There were more of ‘em coming now, hurrying down into the square from all around, all getting that same shocked look when they saw Dogman and his lads stood waiting. Women and boys, mostly, and a couple of old men. Dragged out o’ their beds by the bell and still half asleep, eyes red and faces puffy, clothes

tangled, armed with whatever was to hand. A boy with a butcher's cleaver. An old man all stooped over with a sword looked even older than he was. A girl at the front with a pitch fork and a lot of messy dark hair, had a look on her face reminded Dogman of Shari. Hard and thoughtful, the way she used to look at him before they started lying together. Dogman frowned down at her dirty bare feet, hoping that he wouldn't have to kill her.

Getting 'em good and scared would be the best way to get things done quick and easy. So Dogman tried to talk like someone to be feared, rather than someone who was shitting himself. Like Logen might've talked. Or maybe that was more fear than was needful. Like Threetrees, then. Tough but fair, wanting what was best for everyone.

'The headman among you?' he growled.

'I'm him,' croaked the old man with the sword, his face all slack with shock at finding a score of well-armed strangers standing in the middle of his town square. 'Brass is my name. Who the hell might you be?'

'I'm the Dogman, and this here is Harding Grim, and the big lad is Tul Duru Thunderhead.' Some eyes went wide, some folk muttered to each other. Seemed they'd heard the names before. 'We're here with five hundred Carls and last night we took your city off you.' A few gasps and squeals at that. It was closer to two hundred, but there was no point telling 'em so. They might've got the notion that fighting was a good idea and he'd no wish to end up stabbing a woman, or getting stabbed by one either. 'There's plenty more of us, round about, and your guards are all trussed up, those we didn't have to kill. Some o' my boys, and you ought to know I'm talking of Black Dow—'

'That's me.' Dow flashed his nasty grin, and a few folk shuffled fearfully away from him like they'd been told hell itself was sat there.

'... Well, they were for putting the torch straight to your houses and getting some killing done. Do things like we used to with the Bloody-Nine in charge, you take my meaning?' Some child in amongst the rest started to cry a bit, a wet kind of snuffling. The boy stared round him, cleaver wobbling in his hand, the dark-haired girl blinked and clung on tighter to her pitch-fork. They got the gist, alright. 'But I thought I'd give you a fair chance to give up, being as the town's full with womenfolk and children and all the rest. My score's with Bethod, not with

you people. The Union want to use this place as a port, bring in men and supplies and whatever. They'll be here inside an hour, in their ships. A lot of 'em. It's happening with or without your say so. I guess my point is we can do this the bloody way, if that's the way you want it. The dead know we've had the practice. Or you can give up your weapons, if you've got 'em, and we can all get along, nice and . . . what's the word for it?

'Civilised,' said Grim.

'Aye. Civilised. What d'you say?'

The old man fingered his sword, looking like he'd rather have leant on it than swung it, and he stared up at the walls, where a few of the Carls were looking down, and his shoulders slumped. 'Looks like you got us cold. The Dogman, eh? I always heard you was a clever bastard. No one much left here to fight you, anyway. Bethod took every man could hold a spear and a shield at once.' He looked round at the sorry crowd behind him. 'Will you leave the women be?'

'We'll leave 'em be.'

'Those that want to be left be,' said Dow, leering at the girl with the pitchfork.

'We'll leave 'em be,' growled Dogman, giving him a hard look. 'I'll see to it.'

'Well then,' wheezed the old man, shuffling up and wincing as he knelt and dropped his rusty blade at Dogman's feet. 'You're a better man than Bethod, far as I'm concerned. I suppose I ought to be thanking you for your mercy, if you keep your word.'

'Uh.' Dogman didn't feel too merciful. He doubted the old boy he'd killed on the dock would be thanking him, or the one-armed man stabbed through from behind, or the lad with the cut throat who'd had his whole life stolen.

One by one the rest of the crowd came forward, and one by one the weapons, if you could call 'em that, got dropped in a heap. A pile of old rusty tools and junk. The boy came up last and let his cleaver clatter down with the rest, gave a scared look at Black Dow, then hurried back to the others and clung to the dark-haired girl's hand.

They stood there, in a wide-eyed huddle, and Dogman could almost smell their fear. They were waiting for Dow and his Carls to set to hacking 'em down where they stood. They were waiting to get herded in a house and locked in and

the place set fire to. Dogman had seen all that before. So he didn't blame 'em one bit as they all crowded together like sheep pressed up in a field in winter. He'd have done the same.

'Alright!' he barked. 'That's it! Back to your houses, or whatever. Union'll be here before midday, and it'd be better if the streets were empty.'

They blinked at Dogman, and at Tul, and at Black Dow, and at each other. They swallowed and trembled, and muttered their thanks to the dead. They broke up, slowly, and spread out, and went off their own ways. Alive, to everyone's great relief.

'Nicely done, chief,' said Tul in Dogman's ear. 'Threetrees himself couldn't have done it no better.'

Dow sidled up from the other side. 'About the women, though, if you're asking my opinion—'

'I'm not,' said Dogman.

'Have you seen my son?' There was one woman who wasn't going home. She was coming up from one man to another, half-tears in her eyes and her face all wild from worry. The Dogman put his head down and looked the other way. 'My son, he was on guard, down by the water! You seen him?' She tugged at Dogman's coat, her voice cracked and wet-sounding. 'Please, where's my son?'

'You think I know where everyone's at?' he snapped in her weepy face. He strode away like he had a load of important stuff to do, and all the while he was thinking – you're a coward, Dogman, you're a bastard bloody coward. Some hero, pulling a neat trick on a bunch of women, and children, and old men.

It ain't easy, being chief.

This Noble Business

The great moat had been drained early in the siege, leaving behind a wide ditch full of black mud. At the far end of the bridge across it four soldiers worked by a cart, dragging corpses to the bank and rolling them flopping down to the bottom. The corpses of the last defenders, gashed and burned, spattered with blood and dirt. Wild men, from past the River Crinna far to the east, tangle-haired and bearded. Their limp bodies seemed pitifully withered after three months sealed up behind the walls of Dunbrec, pitifully starved. Scarcely human. It was hard for West to take much joy in the victory over such sorry creatures as these.

‘Seems a shame,’ muttered Jalenhorn, ‘after they fought so bravely. To end like that.’

West watched another ragged corpse slither down the bank and into the tangled heap of muddy limbs. ‘This is how most sieges end. Especially for the brave. They’ll be buried down there in the muck, then the moat will be flooded again. The waters of the Whiteflow will surge over them, and their bravery, or lack of it, will have meant nothing.’

The fortress of Dunbrec loomed over the two officers as they crossed the bridge, black outlines of walls and towers like great, stark holes in the heavy white sky. A few ragged birds circled above. A couple more croaked from the scarred battlements.

It had taken General Kroy’s men a month to make this same journey, bloodily repulsed time and again, and to finally break through the heavy doors under a steady rain of arrows, stones, and boiling water. Another week of claustrophobic slaughter to force the dozen strides down the tunnel beyond, to burst through the second gate with axe and fire and finally seize control of the outer wall. Every advantage had lain with the defenders. The place had been most carefully designed to ensure that it was so.

And once they had made it through the gatehouse, their problems were only just beginning. The inner wall was twice the height and thickness of the outer,

dominating its walkways at every point. There had been no shelter from missiles from the six monstrous towers.

To conquer that second wall Kroy's men had tried every strategy in the manual of siege. They had worked with pick and crowbar, but the masonry was five strides thick at the base. They had made an effort at a mine but the ground was waterlogged outside the fortress and solid Angland rock beneath. They had bombarded the place with catapults, but scarcely scratched the mighty bastions. They had come with scaling ladders, again and again, in waves and in parties, by surprise at night or brazenly in the day, and in the darkness and the light the straggling lines of Union wounded had shuffled away from their failed attempts, the dead dragged solemnly behind. They had finally tried reasoning with the wild defenders, through the medium of a Northern translator, and the unfortunate man had been pelted with night soil.

It had been pure fortune, in the end. After studying the movements of the guards, one enterprising sergeant had tried his luck with a grapple under cover of night. He had climbed up and a dozen other brave men had followed him. They took the defenders by surprise, killed several of them and seized the gatehouse. The whole effort took ten minutes and cost one Union life. It was a fitting irony, to West's mind, that having tried every roundabout method and been bloodily repulsed, the Union army had finally entered the inner fortress by its open front gate.

A soldier was bent over near that archway now, being noisily sick onto the stained flagstones. West passed him with some foreboding, the sound of his clicking boot heels echoing around the long tunnel, and emerged into the wide courtyard at the centre of the fortress. It was a regular hexagon, echoing the shape of the inner and outer walls, all part of the perfectly symmetrical design. West doubted that the architects would have approved, however, of the state in which the Northmen had left the place.

A long wooden building at one side of the yard, perhaps a stables, had caught fire in the attack and was now reduced to a mass of charred beams, the embers still glowing. Those clearing away the mess had too much work outside the walls, and the ground was still scattered with fallen weapons and tangled corpses. The Union dead had been stretched out in rows near one corner and covered up with

blankets. The Northmen lay in every attitude, on their faces or on their backs, curled up or stretched out where they fell. Beneath the bodies the stone flags were deeply scored, and not just with the random damage of a three-month siege. A great circle had been chiselled from the rock, and other circles within it, strange marks and symbols laid out in an intricate design. West did not care for its look in the least. Worse still, he was becoming aware of a repulsive stench to the place, more pungent even than the tang of burned wood.

‘What ever is that smell?’ muttered Jalenhorm, putting one hand over his mouth.

A sergeant nearby overheard him. ‘Seems that our Northern friends chose to decorate the place.’ He pointed up above their heads, and West followed the gauntleted finger with his eyes.

They were so decayed that it took him a moment to realise he was looking at the remains of men. They had been nailed, spread-eagled, to the inside walls of each of the towers, high above the lean-to buildings round the courtyard. Rotting offal hung down from their bellies, crawling with flies. Cut with the Bloody Cross, as the Northmen would say. Tattered shreds of brightly-coloured Union uniforms were still vaguely visible, fluttering in the breeze among the masses of putrefying flesh.

Clearly they had been hanging there some time. Since before the siege began, certainly. Perhaps since the fortress first fell to the Northmen. Corpses of the original defenders, nailed there, rotting, for all those months. Three appeared to be without their heads. The companion pieces, perhaps, to those three gifts that had been sent to Marshal Burr all that time ago. West found himself wondering, pointlessly, whether any of them had been alive when they were nailed up. Spit rushed into his mouth, the sound of flies buzzing seeming suddenly, sickeningly loud.

Jalenhorm had gone pale as a ghost. He did not say anything. He did not have to. ‘What happened here?’ muttered West through his gritted teeth, as much to himself as anything.

‘Well, sir, we think they were hoping to get help.’ The sergeant grinned at him, clearly possessed of a very strong stomach. ‘Help from some unfriendly

gods, we've been guessing. Seems that no one was listening down below though, eh?'

West frowned at the ragged markings on the ground. 'Get rid of them! Tear up the flags and replace them if you have to.' His eyes strayed to the decaying cadavers above, and he felt his stomach give a painful squeeze. 'And offer a ten-mark bounty to the man with guts enough to climb up there and cut those corpses down.'

'Ten marks, sir? Bring me over that ladder!'

West turned and strode out through the open gates of the fortress of Dunbrec, holding his breath and hoping like hell that he never had occasion to visit the place again. He knew that he would be back, though. If only in his dreams.

Briefings with Poulder and Kroy were more than enough to sicken the healthiest of men, and Lord Marshal Burr was by no means in that category. The commander of His Majesty's armies in England was as pitifully shrunken as the defenders of Dunbrec had been, his simple uniform hanging loose around him while his pale skin seemed stretched too tight over the bones. In a dozen short weeks he had aged as many years. His hand shook, his lip trembled, he could not stand for long, and could not ride at all. From time to time he would grimace and shiver as though he was racked by unseen pangs. West hardly knew how he was able to carry on, but carry on he did, fourteen hours a day and more. He attended to his duties with all his old diligence. Only now they seemed to eat him up, piece by piece.

Burr frowned grimly up at the great map of the border region, his hands resting on his belly. The Whiteflow was a winding blue line down the middle, Dunbrec a black hexagon marked in swirly script. On its left, the Union. On its right, the North. 'So,' he croaked, then coughed and cleared his throat, 'The fortress is back in our hands.'

General Kroy gave a stiff nod. 'It is.'

'Finally,' observed Poulder under his breath. The two generals still appeared to regard Bethod and his Northmen as a minor distraction from the real enemy; each other.

Kroy bristled, his staff muttering around him like a flock of angry crows. 'Dunbrec was designed by the Union's foremost military architects, and no expense was spared in its construction! Capturing it has been no mean task!'

'Of course, of course,' growled Burr, doing his best to mount a diversion. 'Damned difficult place to take. Do we have any notion of how the Northmen managed it?'

'None survived to tell us what trickery they employed, sir. They fought, without exception, to the death. The last few barricaded themselves in the stables and set fire to the structure.'

Burr glanced at West, and slowly shook his head. 'How can one understand such an enemy? What is the condition of the fortress now?'

'The moat was drained, the outer gatehouse partly destroyed, considerable damage done to the inner wall. The defenders tore down some buildings for wood to burn and stones to throw and left the rest in . . .' Kroy worked his lips as though struggling to find the words. 'A very poor condition. Repairs will take some weeks.'

'Huh.' Burr rubbed unhappily at his stomach. 'The Closed Council are anxious that we cross the Whiteflow into the North as soon as possible, and take the fight to the enemy. Positive news for the restless populace, and so on.'

'The capture of Uffrith,' leaped in Poulder, with a grin of towering smugness, 'has left our position far stronger. We have gained at a stroke one of the best ports in the North, perfectly situated to supply our forces as we push into enemy territory. Before, everything had to come the length of Angland by cart, over bad roads in bad weather. Now we can bring in supplies and reinforcements by ship and almost straight to the front! And the whole thing managed without a single casualty!'

West was not about to allow him to steal the credit for that. 'Absolutely,' he droned in an emotionless monotone. 'Our northern allies have once again proved invaluable.'

Poulder's red-jacketed staff frowned and grumbled. 'They played a part,' the General was forced to admit.

‘Their leader, the Dogman, came to us with the original plan, executed it himself using his own men, and delivered the town to you, its gates open and its people compliant. That was my understanding.’

Poulder frowned angrily across at Kroy, who was now allowing himself the very thinnest of smiles. ‘My men are in possession of the city and are already building up a stockpile of supplies! We have outflanked the enemy and forced him to fall back towards Carleon! That, Colonel West, is surely the issue here, and not precisely who did what!’

‘Indeed!’ cut in Burr, waving one big hand. ‘You have both done great services for your country. But we must now look forward to future successes. General Kroy, arrange for work parties to be left behind to complete the repairs to Dunbrec, and a regiment of levies to man the defences. With a commander that knows his business, please. It would be embarrassing, to say the least, if we were to lose the fortress for a second time.’

‘There will be no mistake,’ snarled Kroy at Poulder, ‘you can depend on it.’

‘The rest of the army can cross the Whiteflow and form up on the far bank. Then we can begin to press east and northward, towards Carleon, using the harbour at Uffrith to bring in our supplies. We have driven the enemy out of Angland. Now we must press forward and grind Bethod to his knees.’ And the Marshal twisted a heavy fist into his palm by way of demonstration.

‘My division will be across the river by tomorrow evening,’ hissed Poulder at Kroy, ‘and in good order!’

Burr grimaced. ‘We must move carefully, whatever the Closed Council say. The last time a Union army crossed the Whiteflow was when King Casamir invaded the North. I need hardly remind you that he was forced to withdraw in some disarray. Bethod has caught us out before, and will only grow stronger as he falls back into his own territory. We must work together. This is not a competition, gentlemen.’

The two generals immediately competed with each other to be the one to agree most. West gave a long sigh, and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

Ghosts

Uffrith didn't look much like it used to. Of course, the last time Logen had seen the place had been years ago, at night, after the siege. Crowds of Bethod's Carls wandering the streets – shouting, and singing, and drinking. Looking for folk to rob and rape, setting fire to anything that would hold a flame. Logen remembered lying in that room after he'd beaten Threetrees, crying and gurgling at the pain all through him. He remembered scowling out the window and seeing the glow from the flames, listening to the screams over the town, wishing he was out there making mischief and wondering if he'd ever stand up again.

It was different now, with the Union in charge, but it wasn't so very much more organised. The grey harbour was choked with ships too big for the wharves. Soldiers swarmed through the narrow streets, dropping gear all over. Carts and mules and horses, all loaded down and piled up, tried to shove a way through the press. Wounded limped on crutches down towards the docks, or were carried on stretchers through the spotting drizzle, bloody bandages stared at wide-eyed by the fresh-faced lads going the other way. Here and there, looking greatly puzzled at this mighty flood of strange people sweeping through their town, some Northerner was standing in a doorway. Women mostly, and children, and old men.

Logen walked fast up the sloping streets, pushing through the crowds with his head down and his hood up. He kept his fists bunched at his sides, so no one would see the stump of his missing finger. He kept the sword that Bayaz had given him wrapped up in a blanket on his back, under his pack, where it wouldn't make anyone nervous. All the same, his shoulders prickled every step of the way. He was waiting to hear someone shout, 'It's the Bloody-Nine!' He was waiting for folk to start running, screaming, pelting him with rubbish, faces all stamped with horror.

But no one did. One more figure that didn't belong was nothing to look at in all that damp chaos, and if anyone might have known him here, they weren't looking for him. Most likely they'd all heard he went back to the mud, far away,

and were good and glad about it too. Still, there was no point staying longer than he had to. He strode up to a Union officer who looked as if he might be in charge of something, pushed his hood back and tried to put a smile on his face.

He got a scornful look for his trouble. 'We've no work for you, if that's what you're looking for.'

'You don't have my kind of work.' Logen held out the letter that Bayaz had given him.

The man unfolded it and looked it over. He frowned and read it again. Then he looked doubtfully up at Logen, mouth working. 'Well then. I see.' He pointed towards a crowd of young men, standing nervous and uncertain a few strides away, huddled miserably together as the rain started to thicken up. 'There's a convoy of reinforcements leaving for the front this afternoon. You can travel with us.'

'Fair enough.' They didn't look like they'd be much reinforcement, those scared-seeming lads, but that didn't matter to him. He didn't much care who he travelled with, as long as they were pointed at Bethod.

The trees clattered by on either side of the road – dim green and black, full of shadows. Full of surprises, maybe. It was a tough way to travel. Tough on the hands from clinging to the rail all the way, even tougher on the arse from bouncing and jolting on that hard seat. But they were getting there, gradually, and Logen reckoned that was the main thing.

There were more carts behind, spread out in a slow line along the road, loaded down with men, food, clothes, weapons, and all the stuff you need to make a war. Each one had a lamp lit, hanging up near the front, so there was a trail of bobbing lights in the dull dusk, down into the valley and up the far slope, marking out the path of the road they'd followed through the woods.

Logen turned and looked at the Union boys, gathered up in a clump near the front of the cart. Nine of them, all jolting and swaying about together with the jumping of the axles, and all keeping as well clear of him as they could.

'You seen scars like that on a man before?' one muttered, not guessing he could speak their tongue.

'Who is he anyway?'

'Dunno. A Northman, I guess.'

'I can see he's a Northman, idiot. I mean what's he doing here with us?'

'Maybe he's a scout.'

'Big bastard for a scout, ain't he?'

Logen grinned to himself as he watched the trees roll past. He felt the cool breeze on his face, smelled the mist, the earth, the cold, wet, air. He never would have thought he'd be happy to be back in the North, but he was. It was good, after all that time a stranger, to be in a place where he knew the rules.

They camped out on the road, the ten of them. One group out of many, strung out through the woods, each one clustered close to their cart. Nine lads on one side of a big fire, a pot of stew bubbling over the top of it and giving off a fine-smelling steam. Logen watched them stirring it, talking to each other about home, and what was coming, and how long they'd be out there.

After a while one of them started spooning the food out into bowls and handing them round. He looked over at Logen, once he was done with the rest, then served up one more. He edged over like he was coming at a wolf's cage.

'Er . . .' He held the bowl out at arm's length. 'Stew?' He opened his mouth up wide and pointed into it with his free hand.

'Thanks, friend,' said Logen as he took the bowl, 'but I know where to put it.'

The lads all stared at him, a row of worried-looking faces, lit up flickering yellow on the far side of the fire, more suspicious than ever at him speaking their language. 'You talk common? You kept that quiet, didn't you?'

'Best to seem less than you are, in my experience.'

'If you say so,' said the lad who'd given him the bowl. 'What's your name, then?'

Logen wondered for a moment if he should make up a lie. Some nothing name that no one could have heard of. But he was who he was, and sooner or later someone would know him. That, and he'd never been much at lying. 'Logen Ninefingers, they call me.'

The lads looked blank. They'd never heard of him, and why would they have? A bunch of farmers' sons from far away, in the sunny Union. They looked like they barely knew their own names.

'What are you here for?' one of them asked him.

‘Same as you. I’m here to kill.’ The boys looked a bit nervy at that. ‘Not you, don’t worry. I’ve got some scores to settle.’ He nodded off up the road. ‘With Bethod.’

The lads exchanged some glances, then one of them shrugged. ‘Well. Long as you’re on our side, I guess.’ He got up and dragged a bottle out of his pack. ‘You want a drink?’

‘Well, now.’ Logen grinned and held out his cup. ‘I’ve never yet said no to that.’ He knocked it down in one, smacked his lips as he felt it warming his gullet. The lad poured him another. ‘Thanks. Best not give me too much, though.’

‘Why?’ he asked. ‘Will you kill us then?’

‘Kill you? If you’re lucky.’

‘And if we’re not?’

Logen grinned over his mug. ‘I’ll sing.’

The lad cracked a smile at that, and one of his mates started laughing. Next moment an arrow hissed into his side and he coughed blood down his shirt, the bottle dropping on the grass, wine gurgling out in the dark. Another boy had a shaft sticking in his thigh. He sat there, frozen, staring down at it. ‘Where did that . . .’ Then everyone was shouting, fumbling for weapons or throwing themselves flat on their faces. A couple more arrows whizzed over, one clattering into the fire and sending up a shower of sparks.

Logen threw his stew away, snatched up his sword and started running. He blundered into one of the boys on the way and knocked him on his face, slipped and slid, righted himself and ran full tilt for the trees where the arrow came from. It was run right at them, or run away, and he made the choice without thinking. Sometimes it doesn’t matter too much what choice you make, as long as you make it quick and stick to it. Logen saw one of the archers as he rushed up close, a flash of his pale skin in the darkness as he reached for another arrow. He pulled the Maker’s sword from its tattered sheath and let go a fighting roar.

The bowman could’ve got his arrow away before Logen was on him, most likely, but it would’ve been a close thing, and in the end he didn’t have the bones to stand there waiting. Not many men can weigh their choices properly while death comes racing up at them. He dropped the bow too late and turned to run, and Logen hacked him in the back before he got more than a stride or two,

knocked him screaming into the bushes. He dragged himself round face up, all tangled in the brush, screeching and fumbling for a knife. Logen lifted the sword to finish the job. Then blood sprayed out of the archer's mouth and he trembled, fell back and was quiet.

'Still alive,' Logen mouthed to himself, squatting down low beside the corpse, straining into the darkness. It would probably have been better for all concerned if he'd run the other way, but it was a bit late for that. Probably have been better if he'd stayed in Adua, but it was a bit late for that too.

'Bloody North,' he cursed in a whisper. If he let these bastards go they'd be making mischief all the way to the front and Logen wouldn't get a wink of sleep for worrying, aside from the good chance of an arrow in his face. Better odds coming for them, than waiting for them to come to him. A lesson he'd learned from hard experience.

He could hear the rest of the ambush crashing away through the brush and he set out after them, fist clenched tight round the grip of his sword. He felt his way between the trunks, keeping his distance. The light of the fire and the noise of the Union boys shouting dwindled behind him until he was deep in the woods, smelling of pines and wet earth, only the sound of men's hurrying feet to guide him. He made himself part of the forest, the way he had in the old days. It wasn't so hard to do. The knack came right back as though he'd been creeping in the trees every night for years. Voices echoed through the night, and Logen pressed himself still and silent up behind a pine-trunk, listening.

'Where's Dirty-Nose?'

There was a pause. 'Dead, I reckon.'

'Dead? How?'

'They had someone with 'em, Crow. Some big fucker.' Crow. Logen knew the name. Knew the voice too, now that he heard it. A Named Man who'd fought for Littlebone. You couldn't have called them friends, him and Logen, but they'd known each other. They'd been close together in the line at Carleon, fighting side by side. And now here they were again with no more than a few strides between them, more than willing to kill each other. Strange, the turns fate can take. Fighting with a man and fighting against him are only a whisker apart. Far closer together than not fighting at all.

'Northman, was he?' came Crow's voice.

'Might've been. Whoever it was he knew his business. Came up real quick. I didn't have time to get a shaft away.'

'Bastard! We ain't letting that pass. We'll camp out here and follow 'em tomorrow. Might be we'll get him then, this big one.'

'Oh aye, we'll fucking get him. Don't you worry about that none. I'll cut his neck for him, the bastard.'

'Good for you. 'Til then you can keep an eye open for him while the rest of us catch some sleep. Might be the anger'll keep you awake this time, eh?'

'Aye, chief. Right y'are.'

Logen sat and watched, catching glimpses through the trees as four of them spread out their blankets and rolled up to sleep. The fifth took his place, back to the others, and looked out the way they'd come, sitting guard. Logen waited, and he heard one begin to snore. Some rain started up, and it tapped and trickled on the branches of the pines. After a while it spattered into his hair, into his clothes, ran down his face and fell to the wet earth, drip, drip, drip. Logen sat, still and silent as a stone.

It can be a fearsome weapon, patience. One that few men ever learn to use. A hard thing, to keep your mind on killing once you're out of danger and your blood's cooled off. But Logen had always had the trick of it. So he sat and let the slow time sneak by, and thought about long ago, until the moon was high, and there was pale light washing down between the trees with the tickling rain. Pale light enough for him to see his tasks by.

He uncurled his legs and started moving, working his way between the tree trunks, planting his feet nice and gentle in the brush. The rain was his ally, patter and trickle masking the soft sounds his boots made as he circled round behind the guard.

He slid out a knife, wet blade glinting once in the patchy moonlight, and he padded out from the trees and through their camp. Between the sleeping men, close enough to touch them. Close as a brother. The guard sniffed and shifted unhappily, dragging his wet blanket round his shoulders, all beaded up with twinkling rain drops. Logen stopped and waited, looked down at the pale face of

one of the sleepers, turned sideways, eyes closed and mouth wide open, breath making faint smoke in the clammy night.

The guard was still now, and Logen slipped up close behind him, holding his breath. He reached out with his left hand, fingers working in the misty air, feeling for the moment. He reached out with his right hand, fist clenched tight round the hard grip of his knife. He felt his lips curling back from his gritted teeth. Now was the time, and when the time comes, you strike with no backward glances.

Logen reached round and clamped his hand tight over the guard's mouth, cut his throat quick and hard, deep enough that he felt the blade scraping on his neck bones. He jerked and struggled for a moment, but Logen held him tight, tight as a lover, and he made no more than a quiet gurgle. Logen felt blood over his hands, hot and sticky. He didn't worry yet about the others. If one of them woke all they'd see would be the outline of one man in the darkness, and that was all they were expecting.

It wasn't long before the guard went limp, and Logen laid him down gently on his side, head flopping. Four shapes lay there under their wet blankets, helpless. Maybe there'd been a time when Logen would've had to work himself up to a job like this. When he'd have had to think about why it was the right thing to do. But if there had been, it was long gone. Up in the North, the time you spend thinking will be the time you get killed in. All they were now were four tasks to get done.

He crept up to the first, lifted his bloody knife, overhand, and stabbed him clean in the heart right through his coat, hand pressed over his mouth. He died quieter than he slept. Logen came up on the second one, ready to do the same. His boot clattered into something metal. Water flask, maybe. Whatever it was, it made quite the racket. The sleeping man's eyes worked open, he started to lift himself up. Logen rammed the knife in his gut and dragged at it, slitting his belly open. He made a kind of a wheeze, mouth and eyes wide, clutching at Logen's arm.

'Eh?' The third one sat straight up and staring. Logen tore his hand free and heaved his sword out. 'Wha' the—' The man lifted his arm up, on an instinct, and the dull blade took his hand off at the wrist and chopped deep into his skull, sending black spots of blood showering into the wet air and knocking him down on his back.

But that gave the last of them time enough to roll out of his blanket and grab up an axe. Now he stood hunched over, hands spread out, fighting ready like a man who'd had plenty of practice at it. Crow. Logen could hear his breath hissing, see it smoking in the rain.

'You should've started wi' me!' he hissed.

Logen couldn't deny it. He'd been concentrating on getting them all killed, and hadn't paid much mind to the order. Still, it was a bit late to worry now. He shrugged. 'Start or finish, ain't too much difference.'

'We'll see.' Crow weighed his axe in the misty air, shifting around, looking for an opening. Logen stood still and caught his breath, the sword hanging down by his side, the grip cold and wet in his clenched fist. He'd never been much of a one for moving until it was time. 'Best tell me your name, while you still got breath in you. I like to know who I've killed.'

'You already know me, Crow.' Logen held his other hand up, and he let the fingers spread out, and the moonlight glinted black on his bloody hand, and on the bloody stump of his missing finger. 'We were side by side in the line at Carleon. Never thought you'd all forget me so soon. But things don't often turn out the way we expect, eh?'

He'd stopped moving now, had Crow. Logen couldn't see more than a gleam of his eyes in the dark, but he could tell the doubt and the fear in the way he stood. 'No,' he whispered, shaking his head in the darkness. 'Can't be! Ninesingers is dead!'

'That so?' Logen took a deep breath and pushed it out, slow, into the wet night. 'Reckon I must be his ghost.'

They'd dug some sort of a hole to squat in, the Union lads, sacks and boxes up on the sides as a rampart. Logen could see the odd face moving over the top, staring off into the trees, the dull light from the guttering fire glinting on an arrow head or a spear tip. Dug in, watching for another ambush. If they'd been nervy before, they were most likely shitting themselves now. Probably one of them would get scared and shoot him as soon as he made himself known. Damn Union bows had a trigger that went off at a touch, once they were drawn. Would have been just about his luck, to get killed over nothing in the middle of nowhere, and by his

own side too, but he didn't have much of a choice. Not unless he wanted to walk up to the front.

So he cleared his throat and called out. 'Now no one shoot or anything!' A string went and a bolt thudded into a tree a couple of strides to his left. Logen hunched down against the wet earth. 'No one shoot, I said!'

'Who's out there?'

'It's me, Ninefingers!' Silence. 'The Northman who was on the cart!'

A long pause, and some whispering. 'Alright! But come out slow, and keep your hands where we can see them!'

'Fair enough!' He straightened up and crept out from the trees, hands held high. 'Just don't shoot me, eh? That's your end of the deal!'

He walked across the ground towards the fire, arms spread out, wincing at the thought of getting a bolt in his chest any minute. He recognised the faces of the lads from before, them and the officer who had charge of the supply column. A couple of them followed him with their bows as he stepped slowly over the makeshift parapet and down into the trench. It had been dug along in front of the fire, but not that well, and there was a big puddle in the bottom.

'Where the hell did you get to?' demanded the officer angrily.

'Tracking them that ambushed us tonight.'

'Did you catch 'em?' one of the boys asked.

'That I did.'

'And?'

'Dead.' Logen nodded at the puddle in the bottom of the hole. 'So you needn't sleep in the water tonight. Any of that stew left?'

'How many were there?' snapped the officer.

Logen poked around the embers of the fire, but the pot was empty. Just his luck, again. 'Five.'

'You, on your own, against five?'

'There were six to begin with, but I killed one at the start. He's in the trees over there somewhere.' Logen dug a heel of bread out of his pack and rubbed it round the inside of the pot, trying to get a bit of meat grease on there, at least. 'I waited until they were sleeping, so I only had to fight one of 'em, face to face. Always been lucky that way, I guess.' He didn't feel that lucky. Looking at his

hand in the firelight, it was still stained with blood. Dark blood under his fingernails, dried into the lines in his palm. 'Always been lucky.'

The officer hardly looked convinced. 'How do we know that you aren't one of them? That you weren't spying on us? That they aren't waiting out there now, for you to give them a signal when we're vulnerable?'

'You've been vulnerable the whole way,' snorted Logen. 'But it's a fair question. I thought you might ask it.' He pulled the canvas bag out from his belt. 'That's why I brought you this.' The officer frowned as he reached out for it, shook it open, peered suspiciously inside. He swallowed. 'Like I said, there were five. So you got ten thumbs in there. That satisfy you?'

The officer looked more sick than satisfied, but he nodded, lips squeezed together, and held the bag back out to him at arm's length.

Logen shook his head. 'Keep it. It's a finger I'm missing. I got all the thumbs I need.'

The cart lurched to a stop. For the last mile or two they'd moved at a crawl. Now the road, if you could use the word about a sea of mud, was choked up with floundering men. They squelched their way from one near solid spot to another, flowing through the thin rain between the press of mired carts and unhappy horses, the stacks of crates and barrels, the ill-pitched tents. Logen watched a group of filth-caked lads straining at a wagon stuck up to its axles in the muck, without much success. It was like seeing an army sink slowly into a bog. A vast shipwreck, on land.

Logen's travelling companions were down to seven now, hunched and gaunt, looking mighty tired from sleepless nights and bad weather on the trail. One dead, one sent back to Uffrith already with an arrow in his leg. Not the best start to their time in the North, but Logen doubted it would get any better from here on. He clambered down off the back of the cart, boots sinking into the well-rutted mud, arched his back and stretched his aching legs out, dragged his pack down.

'Luck, then,' he said to the lads. None of them spoke. They'd hardly said a word to him since the night of the ambush. Most likely that whole business with the thumbs had got them worried. But if that was the worst they saw while they were up here they'd have done alright, Logen reckoned. He shrugged and turned away, started floundering through the muck.

Just up ahead the officer from the supply column was being dealt a talking-to by a tall, grim-looking man in a red uniform, seemed like the closest thing they had in all this mess to someone in charge. It took Logen a minute to recognise him. They'd sat together at a feast, in very different surroundings, and they'd talked of war. He looked older, leaner, tougher, now. He had a hard frown on his face and a lot of hard grey in his wet hair, but he grinned when he saw Logen standing there, and walked up to him with his hand out.

'By the dead,' he said in good Northern, 'but fate can play some tricks. I know you.'

'Likewise.'

'Ninefingers, wasn't it?'

'That's right. And you're West. From England.'

'That I am. Sorry I can't give you a better welcome, but the army only got up here a day or two ago and, as you can see, things aren't quite in order yet. Not there, idiot!' he roared at a driver trying to get his cart between two others, the space between them nowhere near wide enough. 'Do you have such a thing as summer in this bloody country?'

'You're looking at it. Didn't you see winter?'

'Huh. You've a point there. What brings you up here, anyway?'

Logen handed West the letter. He hunched over to shield it from the rain and read it, frowning.

'Signed by Lord Chamberlain Hoff, eh?'

'That a good thing?'

West pursed his lips as he handed the letter back. 'I suppose that depends. It means you've got some powerful friends. Or some powerful enemies.'

'Bit of both, maybe.'

West grinned. 'I find they go together. You've come to fight?'

'That I have.'

'Good. We can always use a man with experience.' He watched the recruits clambering down off the carts and gave a long sigh. 'We've still got far too many here without. You should go up and join the rest of the Northmen.'

'You've got Northmen with you?'

'We have, and more coming over every day. Seems that a lot of them aren't too happy with the way their King has been leading them. About his deal with the Shanka in particular.'

'Deal? With the Shanka?' Logen frowned. He'd never have thought that even Bethod would stoop that low, but it was hardly the first time he'd been disappointed. 'He's got Flatheads fighting with him?'

'He certainly does. He's got Flatheads, and we've got Northmen. It's a strange world, alright.'

'That it surely is,' said Logen, shaking his head. 'How many do you have?'

'About three hundred, I'd say, at last count, though they don't take too well to being counted.'

'Reckon I'll make it three hundred and one, then, if you'll have me.'

'They're camped up there, on the left wing,' and he pointed towards the dark outline of trees against the evening sky.

'Right enough. Who's the chief?'

'Fellow called the Dogman.'

Logen stared at him for a long moment. 'Called the what?'

'Dogman. You know him?'

'You could say that,' whispered Logen, a smile spreading right across his face. 'You could say that.'

Dusk was pressing on fast and night was pressing in fast behind, and they'd just got the long fire burning as Logen walked up. He could see the shapes of the Carls taking their places down each side of it, heads and shoulders cut out black against the flames. He could hear their voices and their laughter, loud in the still evening now the rain had stopped.

It had been a long time since he heard a crowd of men all speaking Northern, and it sounded strange in his ears, even if it was his own tongue. It brought back some ugly memories. Crowds of men shouting at him, shouting for him. Crowds charging into battle, cheering their victories, mourning their dead. He could smell meat cooking from somewhere. A sweet, rich smell that tickled his nose and made his gut grumble.

There was a torch set up on a pole by the path, and a bored-looking lad stood underneath it with a spear, frowning at Logen as he walked up. Must've drawn

the short straw, to be on guard while the others were eating, and he didn't look too happy about it.

'What d'you want?' he growled.

'You got the Dogman here?'

'Aye, what of it?'

'I'll need to speak to him.'

'Will you, now?'

Another man walked up, well past his prime, with a shock of grey hair and a leathery face. 'What we got here?'

'New recruit,' grumbled the lad. 'Wants to see the chief.'

The old man squinted at Logen, frowning. 'Do I know you, friend?'

Logen lifted up his face so the torchlight fell across it. Better to look a man in the eye, and let him see you, and show him you feel no fear. That was the way his father had taught him. 'I don't know. Do you?'

'Where did you come over from? Whitesides' crew, is it?'

'No. I been working alone.'

'Alone? Well, now. Seems like I recognise—' The old boy's eyes opened up wide, and his jaw sagged open, and his face went white as cut chalk. 'By all the fucking dead,' he whispered, taking a stumbling step back. 'It's the Bloody-Nine!'

Maybe Logen had been hoping no one would know him. That they'd all have forgotten. That they'd have new things to worry them, and he'd be just a man like any other. But now he saw that look on the old boy's face – that shitting-himself look, and it was clear enough how it would be. Just the way it used to be. And the worst of it was, now that Logen was recognised, and he saw that fear, and that horror, and that respect, he wasn't sure that he didn't like seeing it. He'd earned it, hadn't he? After all, facts are facts.

He was the Bloody-Nine.

The lad didn't quite get it yet. 'Having a joke on me are yer? You'll be telling me it's Bethod his self come over next, eh?' But no one laughed, and Logen lifted his hand up and stared through the gap where his middle finger used to be. The lad looked from that stump, to the trembling old man and back.

'Shit,' he croaked.

'Where's your chief, boy?' Logen's own voice scared him. Flat, and dead, and cold as the winter.

'He's . . . he's . . .' The lad raised a quivering finger to point towards the fires.

'Well then. Guess I'll sniff him out myself.' The two of them edged out of Logen's way. He didn't exactly smile as he passed. More he drew his lips back to show them his teeth. There was a certain reputation to be lived up to, after all. 'No need to worry,' he hissed in their faces. 'I'm on your side, ain't I?'

No one said a word to him as he walked along behind the Carls, up towards the head of the fire. A couple of them glanced over their shoulders, but nothing more than any newcomer in a camp might get. They'd no idea who he was, yet, but they soon would have. That lad and that old man would be whispering, and the whispers would spread around the fire, as whispers do, and everyone would be watching him.

He started as a great shadow moved beside him, so big he'd taken it for a tree at first. A huge, big man, scratching at his beard, smiling at the fire. Tul Duru. There could be no mistaking the Thunderhead, even in the half-light. Not a man that size. Made Logen wonder afresh how the hell he'd beaten him in the first place.

He felt a strange urge, right then, just to put his head down and walk past, off into the night and never look back. Then he wouldn't have to be the Bloody-Nine again. It would just have been a fresh lad and an old man, swore they saw a ghost one night. He could've gone far away, and started new, and been whoever he wanted. But he'd tried that once already, and it had done him no good. The past was always right behind him, breathing on his neck. It was time to turn around and face it.

'Alright there, big lad.' Tul peered at him in the dusk, orange light and black shadow shifting across his big rock of a face, his big rug of a beard.

'Who . . . hold on . . .' Logen swallowed. He'd no idea, now he thought about it, what any of them might make of seeing him again. They'd been enemies long before they were friends, after all. Each one of them had fought him. Each one had been keen to kill him, and with good reasons too. Then he'd run off south and left them to the Shanka. What if all he got after a year or more apart was a cold look?

Then Tul grabbed hold of him and folded him in a crushing hug. 'You're alive!' He let go of him long enough to check he had the right man, then hugged him again.

'Aye, I'm alive,' wheezed Logen, just enough breath left in him to say it. Seemed he'd get one warm welcome, at least.

Tul was grinning all over his face. 'Come on.' And he beckoned Logen after. 'The lads are going to shit!'

He followed Tul, his heart beating in his mouth, up to the head of the fire, where the chief would sit with his closest Named Men. And there they were, sat around on the ground. Dogman was in the middle, muttering something quiet to Dow. Grim was on the other side, leaning on one elbow, fiddling with the flights on his arrows. It was just like nothing had changed.

'Got someone here to see you, Dogman,' said Tul, his voice squeaky from keeping the surprise in.

'Have you, now?' Dogman peered up at Logen, but he was hidden in the shadows behind Tul's great shoulder. 'Can't it wait 'til after we've eaten?'

'Do you know, I don't think it can.'

'Why? Who is it?'

'Who is it?' Tul grabbed Logen's shoulder and shoved him lurching out into the firelight. 'It's only Logen fucking Ninefingers!' Logen's boot slid in the mud and he nearly pitched on his arse, had to wave his arms around all over to keep his balance. The talk around the fire all sputtered out in a moment and every face was turned towards him. Two long, frozen rows of them, slack in the shifting light, no sound but the sighing wind and the crackling fire. The Dogman stared up at him as though he was seeing the dead walk, his mouth hanging wider and wider open with every passing moment.

'I thought you was all killed,' said Logen as he got his balance back. 'Guess there's such a thing as being too realistic.'

Dogman got to his feet, slowly. He held out his hand, and Logen took hold of it.

There was nothing to say. Not for men who'd been through as much as the two of them had together – fighting the Shanka, crossing the mountains, getting through the wars, and after. Years of it. Dogman pressed his hand and Logen

slapped his other hand on top of it, and Dogman slapped his other hand on top of that. They grinned at each other, and nodded, and things were back the way they had been. Nothing needed saying.

'Grim. Good to see you.'

'Uh,' grunted Grim, handing him up a mug then looking back to his shafts, just as though Logen had gone for a piss a minute ago and come back a minute later like everyone had expected. Logen had to grin. He'd have hoped for nothing else.

'That Black Dow hiding down there?'

'I'd have hidden better if I knew you were coming.' Dow looked Logen up and down with a grin not entirely welcoming. 'If it ain't Ninefingers his self. Thought you said he went over a cliff?' he barked at Dogman.

'That's what I saw.'

'Oh, I went over.' Logen remembered the wind in his mouth, the rock and the snow turning around him, the crash as the water crushed his breath out. 'I went on over and I washed up whole, more or less.' Dogman made room for him on the stretched-out hides by the fire, and he sat down, and the others sat near him.

Dow was shaking his head. 'You always was a lucky bastard when it came to staying alive. I should've known you'd turn up.'

'I thought the Flatheads had got you all sure,' said Logen. 'How d'you get out of there?'

'Threetrees got us out,' said Dogman.

Tul nodded. 'Led us out and over the mountains, and hunted through the North, and all the way down into Angland.'

'Squabbling all the way like a bunch of old women, no doubt?' Dogman grinned across at Dow. 'There was some moaning on the trail.'

'Where's Threetrees now, then?' Logen was looking forward to having a word with that old boy.

'Dead,' said Grim.

Logen winced. He'd guessed that might be the way, since Dogman was in charge. Tul nodded his big head. 'Died fighting. Leading a charge, into the Shank. Died fighting that thing. That Feared.'

'Bastard fucking thing.' And Dow hawked some spit into the mud.

'What about Forley?'

'Dead n'all,' barked Dow. 'He went into Carleon, to warn Bethod that the Shanka were coming over the mountains. Calder had him killed, just for the sport of it. Bastard!' And he spat again. He'd always been a great one for spitting, had Dow.

'Dead.' Logen shook his head. Forley dead, and Threetrees dead, it was a damn shame. But it wasn't so long since he thought the whole lot of them were back in the mud, so four still going was quite the bonus, in a way. 'Well. Good men both. The best, and died well, by the sound of it. As well as men can, anyway.'

'Aye,' said Tul, lifting up a mug. 'As well as you can. Here's to the dead.'

They all drank in silence, and Logen smacked his lips at the taste of beer. Too long away. 'So, a year gone by,' grunted Dow. 'We done some killing, and we walked a damn long way, and we fought in a bastard of a battle. We lost two men and we got us a new chief. What the hell you been up to, Ninefingers?'

'Well . . . that there is some kind of a tale.' Logen wondered what kind, exactly, and found he wasn't sure. 'I thought the Shanka got you all, since life's taught me to expect the worst, so I went south, and I fell in with this wizard. I went a sort of journey with him, across the sea and far away, to find some kind of a thing, which when we got there . . . weren't there.' It all sounded more than a bit mad now he said it.

'What kind of a thing?' asked Tul, his face all screwed up with puzzlement.

'Do you know what?' Logen sucked at his teeth, tasting of drink. 'I can't say that I really know.' They all looked at each other as if they never heard such a damn-fool story, and Logen had to admit they probably hadn't. 'Still, it hardly matters now. Turns out life ain't quite the bastard I took it for.' And he gave Tul a friendly clap on the back.

The Dogman puffed out his cheeks. 'Well, we're glad you're back, anyway. Guess you'll be taking your place again now, eh?'

'My place?'

'You'll be taking over, no? I mean to say, you were chief.'

'Used to be, maybe, but I've no plans to go back to it. Seems as if these lads are happy enough with things the way they are.'

'But you know a sight more than me about leading men—'

'I don't know that's a fact. Me being in charge never worked out too well for anyone, now did it? Not for us, not for those who fought with us, not for them we fought against.' Logen hunched his shoulders at the memories. 'I'll put my word in, if you want it, but I'd sooner follow you. I did my time, and it wasn't a good one.'

Dogman looked like he'd been hoping for a different outcome. 'Well . . . if you're sure . . .'

'I'm sure.' And Logen slapped him on the shoulder. 'Not easy, is it, being chief?'

'No,' grumbled Dogman. 'It bloody ain't.'

'Besides, I reckon a lot of these lads have been on the other side of an argument with me before, and they're not altogether pleased to see me.' Logen looked down the fire at the hard faces, heard the mutterings with his name in them, too quiet to tell the matter for sure, but he could guess that it wasn't complimentary.

'They'll be glad enough to have you alongside 'em when the fighting starts, don't worry about that.'

'Maybe.' Seemed an awful shame that he'd have to set to killing before folk would give him so much as a nod. Sharp looks came at him from out the dark, flicking away when he looked back. There was only one man, more or less, who met his eye. A big lad with long hair, halfway down the fire.

'Who's that?' asked Logen.

'Who's what?'

'That lad down there staring at me.'

'That there is Shivers.' Dogman sucked at his pointed teeth. 'He's got a lot of bones, Shivers. Fought with us a few times now, and he does it damn well. First of all I'll tell you he's a good man and we owe him. Then I ought to mention that he's Rattleneck's son.'

Logen felt a wave of sickness. 'He's what?'

'His other son.'

'The boy?'

'Long time ago now, all that. Boys grow up.'

A long time ago, maybe, but nothing was forgotten. Logen could see that straight away. Nothing was ever forgotten, up here in the North, and he should've known better than to think it might be. 'I should say something to him. If we have to fight together . . . I should say something.'

Dogman winced. 'Might be better that you don't. Some wounds are best not picked at. Eat, and talk to him in the morning. Everything sounds fairer in the daylight. That or you can decide against it.'

'Uh,' grunted Grim.

Logen stood up. 'You're right, most likely, but it's better to do it—'

'Than to live with the fear of it.' Dogman nodded into the fire. 'You been missed, Logen, and that's a fact.'

'You too, Dogman. You too.'

He walked down through the darkness, smelly with smoke and meat and men, along behind the Carls sitting at the fire. He felt them hunching their shoulders, muttering as he passed. He knew what they were thinking. The Bloody-Nine, right behind me, and there's no worse man in the world to have your back to. He could see Shivers watching him all the way, one eye cold through his long hair, lips pressed together in a hard line. He had a knife out for eating, but just as good for stabbing a man. Logen watched the firelight gleaming on its edge as he squatted down beside him.

'So you're the Bloody-Nine.'

Logen grimaced. 'Aye. I reckon.'

Shivers nodded, still staring at him. 'This is what the Bloody-Nine looks like.'

'Hope you're not disappointed.'

'Oh no. Not me. Good to have a face on you, after all this time.'

Logen looked down at the ground, trying to think of some way to come at it. Some way to move his hands, or set his face, some words that might start to make the tiniest part of it right. 'Those were hard times, back then,' he ended up saying.

'Harder'n now?'

Logen chewed at his lip. 'Well, maybe not.'

'Times are always hard, I reckon,' said Shivers between gritted teeth. 'That ain't an excuse for doing a runny shit.'

'You're right. There ain't any excuses for what I did. I'm not proud of it. Don't know what else I can say, except I hope you can put it out of the way, and we can fight side by side.'

'I'll be honest with you,' said Shivers, and his voice was strangled-sounding, like he was trying not to shout, or trying not to cry, or both at once, maybe. 'It's a hard thing to just put behind me. You killed my brother, when you'd promised him mercy, and you cut his arms and legs off, and you nailed his head on Bethod's standard.' His knuckles were trembling white round the grip of his knife, and Logen saw that it was taking all he had not to stab him in the face, and he didn't blame him. He didn't blame him one bit. 'My father never was the same after that. He'd nothing in him any more. I spent a lot of years dreaming of killing you, Bloody-Nine.'

Logen nodded, slowly. 'Well. You'll never be alone with that dream.' He caught other cold looks from across the flames, now. Frowns in the shadows, grim faces in the flickering light. Men he didn't even know, afraid to their bones, or nursing scores against him. A whole lot of fear and a whole lot of scores. He could count on the fingers of one hand the folk who were pleased to see him alive. Even missing a finger. And this was supposed to be his side of the fight.

Dogman had been right. Some wounds are best not picked at. Logen got up, his shoulders prickling, and walked back to the head of the fire, where the talk came easier. He'd no doubt Shivers wanted to kill him just as much as he ever had, but that was no surprise.

You have to be realistic. No words could ever make right the things he'd done.

