

A Sample Chapter from

The Heroes

A Stand-Alone Novel set in
the World of *The First Law*

by Joe Abercrombie

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Chapter 18 - Casualties

Captain Lasmark thrashed through the barley at something between a brisk walk and a jog, the Ninth Company of the Rostod Regiment toiling after him as best they could, despatched towards Osrung with the ill-defined order to 'get at the enemy' still ringing in their ears.

The enemy were before them now, all right. Lasmark could see scaling ladders against the mossy logs of the town's fence. He could see missiles flitting up and down. He could see standards flapping in the breeze, a ragged black one over all the rest, the standard of Black Dow himself, the Northern scouts had said. That was when General Jalenhorm had given the order to advance, and made it abundantly clear nothing would change his mind.

Lasmark turned, hoping he wouldn't trip and catch a mouthful of barley, and urged his men forward with what was intended to be a soldierly jerk of the hand.

'On! On! To the town!'

It was no secret General Jalenhorm was prone to poorly considered orders, but saying so would have been terrible form. Usually officers quietly ignored him where possible and creatively interpreted him where not. But there was no room for interpretation in a direct order to attack.

'Steady, men, keep even!'

They kept even to no noticeable degree, indeed in the main they appeared rather ragged and reluctant, and Lasmark could hardly blame them. He didn't much care for charging unsupported into an empty mass of barley himself, especially since a good part of the regiment was still clogged up in the shambles of men and equipment on the bad roads south of the river. But an officer has his duty. He had made representations to Major Popol, and the major had made representations to Colonel Wetterlant of the Sixth, who was ranking officer on the hill. The colonel had appeared too busy to take much notice. The battlefield was no place for independent thought, Lasmark supposed, and perhaps his superiors simply knew better than he did.

Alas, experience did not support that conclusion.

'Careful! Watch the treeline!'

The treeline was some distance away to the north and seemed to Lasmark particularly gloomy and threatening. He did not care to imagine how many men could be concealed in its shadows. But then he thought that whenever he saw woods, and the North was bloody full of them. It was unclear what good watching them would do. Besides, there was no turning back now. On their right, Captain Vorna was urging his company ahead of the rest of the regiment, desperate to get into the action, as ever, so he could go home with a chestful of medals and spend the balance of his life boasting.

'That fool Vorna's going to pull us all out of formation,' growled Sergeant Lock.

'The captain is simply obeying orders!' snapped Lasmark and then, under his breath, 'The arsehole. Forward, men, at the double!' If the Northmen did come, the worst thing of all would be to leave gaps in the line.

They upped the pace, all tiring, men occasionally catching a boot and sprawling in the crops, their order fraying with every stride. They might have been half way between the hill and the town now, Major Popol in the lead on horseback, waving his sabre and bellowing inaudible encouragements.

'Sir!' roared Lock. 'Sir!'

'I bloody know,' gasped Lasmark, no breath to spare for moaning now, 'I can't hear a word he's ... oh.'

He saw what Lock was desperately stabbing towards with his drawn sword and felt a horrible wave of cold surprise. There is a gulf of difference, after all, between expecting the worst and seeing it happen. Northmen had broken from the woods and were rushing across the pastures towards them. It was hard to tell how many from this angle – the dipping ground was cut up by ditches and patchy hedgerows – but Lasmark felt himself go colder yet as his eyes registered the width of their front, the glimmer of metal, the dots of colour that were their painted shields.

The Rostod Regiment was outnumbered. Several companies were still following Popol blithely off towards Osprung where even more Northmen waited. Others had stopped, aware of the approaching threat on their left and seeking desperately to form lines. The Rostod Regiment was heavily outnumbered, and out of formation, and caught unsupported in the open.

'Halt!' he screamed, rushing into the barley ahead of his company, spinning about and throwing his arms up at his men. 'Form line! Facing north!' That was the best thing to do, wasn't it? What else could they do? His soldiers began to perform a shambolic mockery of a wheel, some faces purposeful, others panicked as they scrambled into position.

Lasmark drew his sword. He'd picked it up cheap, an antique, really, the hilt was prone to rattle. He'd paid less for it than he had for his dress hat. That seemed a foolish decision now. But then one sword looked much like another and Major Popol had been very particular about the appearance of his officers on parade. They were not on parade now, more the pity. Lasmark glanced over his shoulder, found he was chewing so hard at his lip he could taste blood. The Northmen were closing swiftly. 'Archers, ready your bows, spearmen to the—'

The words froze in his throat. Cavalry had emerged from behind a village even further to their left. A considerable body of cavalry, bearing down on their flank, hooves threshing up a pall of dust. He heard the gasps of alarm, felt the mood shift from worried resolve to horror.

'Steady!' he shouted, but his own voice quavered. When he turned, many of his men were already running. Even though there was nowhere to run to. Even though their chances running were even worse than they were fighting. A calm assessment of the odds was evidently not foremost in their minds. He saw the other companies falling apart, scattering. He caught a glimpse of Major Popol bouncing in his saddle as he rode full tilt for the river, no longer interested in presentation. Perhaps if captains had horses Lasmark would have been right beside him. But captains didn't get horses. Not in the Rostod Regiment. He really should have joined a regiment where the captains got horses, but then he could never have afforded one. He'd had to borrow the money to purchase his captaincy at an outrageous interest and had nothing to spare ...

The Northmen were already horrifyingly close, breaking through the nearest hedgerow. He could pick out faces across their line. Snarling, screaming, grinning faces. Like animals, weapons raised high as they bounded on through the barley. Lasmark took a few steps backwards without thinking. Sergeant Lock stood beside him, his jaw muscles clenched.

'Shit, sir,' he said.

Lasmark could only swallow and ready himself as his men flung down their weapons around him. As they turned and ran for the river or the hill, too far, far too far away. As the makeshift line of his company and the company beside them dissolved leaving only a few knots of the most stunned and hard-bitten to face the Northmen. He could see how many there were, now. Hundreds of them. Hundreds upon hundreds. A flung spear impaled a man beside him with a thud, and he fell screaming. Lasmark stared at him for a moment. Stelt. He'd been a baker.

He looked up at the tide of howling men, open-mouthed. You hear about this kind of thing, of course, but you assume it won't happen to you. You assume you're more important than that. He'd done none of the things he'd promised himself he'd do by the time he was thirty. He wanted to drop his sword and sit down. Caught sight of his ring and lifted his hand to look at it. Emlin's face carved into the stone. Didn't look likely he'd be coming back for her now. Probably she'd marry that cousin of hers after all. Marrying cousins, a deplorable business.

Sergeant Lock charged forward, wasted bravery, hacked a lump from the edge of a shield. The shield had a bridge painted on it. He chopped at it again, just as another Northman ran up and hit him with an axe. He was knocked sideways, then back the other way by a sword that left a long scratch across his helmet and a deep cut across his face. He spun, arms up like a dancer, then was barged over in the rush and lost in the barley.

Lasmark sprang at the shield with the bridge, for some reason barely taking note of the man behind it. Perhaps he wanted to pretend there was no man behind it. His sword instructor would have been livid with him. Before he got there a spear caught his breastplate, sent him stumbling. The point scraped past and he swung at the man who thrust it, an ugly-looking fellow with a badly broken nose. The sword split his skull open and brains flew out. It was surprisingly easy to do. Swords are heavy and sharp, he supposed, even cheap ones.

There was a clicking sound and everything turned over, mud thumped and barley tangled him. One of his eyes was dark. There was a ringing, stupidly loud, as if his head was the clapper in a great bell. He tried to get up but the world was

spinning. None of the things he'd promised to do by the time he was thirty. Oh. Except join the army.

The Southerner tried to push himself up and Lightsleep knocked him on the back of the head with his mace and bonked his helmet in. One boot kicked a little and he was done.

'Lovely.' The rest of the Union men were all surrounded and going down fast or scattering like a flock o' starlings, just like Golden said they would. Lightsleep knelt, tucked his mace under his arm and started trying to twist a nice-looking ring off the dead Southerner's finger. Couple of other lads were claiming their prizes, one was screaming with blood running down his face, but, you know, it's a battle, ain't it? If everyone came out smiling there'd be no point. Away south Golden's riders were mopping up, driving the fleeing Southerners to the river.

'Turn for the hill!' Scabna was bellowing, pointing at it with his axe, the smug arse. 'To the hill, you bastards!'

'You turn for the hill,' grunted Lightsleep, legs still sore from all that running, throat sore from all that screaming besides. 'Hah!' Finally got the Union lad's ring off. Held it up to the light and frowned. Just some polished rock with a face cut into it, but he guessed it might fetch a couple of silvers. Tucked it into his jerkin. Took the lad's sword for good measure and stuck it through his belt, though it was a light little toothpick of a thing and the hilt rattled.

'Get on!' Scabna dragged one scavenger up and booted him in the arse to set him going. 'Bloody get on!'

'All right, all right!' Lightsleep jogged on after the others, towards the hill. Upset at not getting the chance to go through the Southerners' pockets, maybe get his boots off. It'd all be swept by the pickers and the women following after now. Beggar bastards too cowardly to fight, turning a profit out of other men's work. A disgrace, but he guessed there was no stopping it. Facts of life, like flies and bad weather.

There were Union men up on the Heroes, he could see metal glinting round the drystone wall near the top, spears pricking the sky. He kept his shield up, peering over the rim. Didn't want to get stuck with one of those evil little arrows they used. Get stuck with one o' those, you won't never get yourself unstuck.

'Will you look at that,' Scabna grunted.

Now they'd climbed a little higher they could see all the way to the woods up north, and the land between was full of men. Black Dow's Carls, and Tenways', and Ironhead's too. Thralls surging after. Thousands of 'em, all streaming across towards the Heroes. Lightsleep had never seen so many fighters in one place, not even when he fought with Bethod's army. Not at the Cumnur, or Dunbrec, or in the High Places. He'd half a mind to let 'em take the Heroes while he hung back, maybe pleading a twisted ankle, but he weren't going to raise a sharp dowry for his daughters on a cheap ring and a little sword, now, was he?

They hopped over a ditch patched with brown puddles and were out of the trampled crops at the foot of the slope. 'Up the hill, you bastards!' screeched Scabna, waving his axe.

Lightsleep had swallowed about enough of that fool's carping, only Chief 'cause he was some friend to one of Golden's sons. He twisted sideways, snarling, 'You get up the fucking hill, you—'

There was a thud and an arrowhead stuck out of his jerkin. He spent a silent moment just staring at it, then he took a great whooping breath in and screamed. 'Ah, *fuck!*' He whimpered, shuddered, pain stabbing into his armpit as he tried to breathe again, coughed blood down his front, dropped on his knees.

Scabna stared at him, shield up to cover them both. 'Lightsleep, what the hell?'

'Bloody ... I'm stuck right ... through.' He had to spit blood out, gurgling with every word. He couldn't kneel any more, it was hurting him too much. He slumped over on his side. Seemed a shitty way to go back to the mud, but maybe they all are. Boots hammered around him as men started thumping up that hill, spraying spots of dirt in his face.

Scabna knelt, started to unbutton Lightsleep's jerkin. 'Let's have a look here.'

Lightsleep couldn't move hardly. Everything was going blurry. 'By the ... dead, it ... hurts.'

'Bet it does. Where did you put that ring?'

*

Gaunt lowered his bow, watched a few Northmen in the crowd topple over as the rest of the volley flickered down into them. From this height, the bolts from a

heavy flatbow could split their shields and punch through chain mail easily as a lady's gown. One of them threw his weapons down and ran off hooting, clutching his stomach, left a gently curving trail through the crops. Gaunt had no way of knowing if his own bolt had found a mark or not, but it hardly mattered. It was all about quantity. Crank, load, level, shoot, crank, load ...

'Come on, lads!' he shouted at the men around him. 'Shoot! Shoot!'

'By the Fates,' he heard Rose whisper, voice all choked off, pointing a wavering forefinger towards the north. The enemy were still pouring from the trees in fearsome numbers. The fields were crawling with them already, surging south towards the hill in a dully twinkling tide. But it took more than a pack of angry apes to make Sergeant Gaunt nervy. He'd watched the numberless Gurkish charge their little hill at Bishak and he'd cranked his flatbow just as hard as he could for the best part of an hour and in the end he'd watched them all run back again. Apart from those they left peppered in heaps. He grabbed Rose by the shoulder and steered him back to the wall.

'Never mind about that. The next bolt is all that matters.'

'Sergeant.' And Rose bent over his bow again, pale but set to his task.

'Crank, lads, crank!' Gaunt turned his own at a nice, measured pace, all oiled and clean and working smoothly. Not too fast, not too slow, making sure he did the job right. He fished out another bolt, frowning to himself. No more than ten left in his quiver. 'What happened to that ammunition?' he roared over his shoulder, and then at his own people, 'Pick your targets, nice and careful!' And he stood, levelled his bow, stock pressing into his shoulder.

The sight below gave a moment's pause, even to a man of his experience. The foremost Northmen had reached the hill and were charging up, slowing on the grassy slope but showing no sign of stopping. Their war cry got worryingly louder as he came up from behind the wall, the vague keening becoming a shrill howl.

He gritted his teeth, aiming low. Squeezed the trigger, felt the jolt, string humming. He saw where this one went, thudding straight into a shield and knocking the man who held it over backwards. Rattle and pop as a dozen or more bows went on his left, two or three Northmen dropping, one shot in the face, going over backwards and his axe spinning into the blue sky.

'That's the recipe, lads, keep shooting! Just load and—' There was a loud click beside him. Gaunt felt a searing pain in his neck, and all the strength went out of his legs.

*

It was an accident. Rose had been tinkering with the trigger of his flatbow for a week or longer, trying to stop it wobbling, worried it might go off at the wrong moment, but he'd never been any good with machines. Why they'd made him a bowman he'd no clue. Would have been better off with a spear. Sergeant Gaunt would have been a lot better off if they'd given Rose a spear, that was a fact most definite. It just went off as he was lifting it, the point of the metal lath leaving a long scratch down his arm. As he was cursing at that, he looked sideways, and Gaunt had the bolt through his neck.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Gaunt's eyes rolled down, crossed, towards the flights, and he dropped his own bow and reached up to his neck. His quivering fingers came away bloody. 'Gurgh,' he said. 'Bwuthers.' And his lids flickered, and he dropped all of a sudden, his skull smacking against the wall and knocking his helmet skewed across his face.

'Gaunt? Sergeant Gaunt?' Rose slapped his cheek as though trying to wake him from an unauthorised nap, smeared blood across his face. There was more and more blood welling out of him all the time. Out of his nose, out of the neat slit where the bolt entered his neck. Oily dark, almost black, and his skin so white.

'He's dead!' Rose felt himself dragged towards the wall. Someone shoved his empty flatbow back into his bloody hands. 'Shoot, damn you! Shoot!' A young officer, one of the new ones, Rose couldn't remember his name. Could hardly remember his own name.

'What?'

'Shoot!'

Rose started cranking, aware of other men around him doing the same. Sweating, struggling, cursing, leaning over the wall to shoot. He could hear wounded men screaming, and above that a strange howl. He fumbled a bolt from his quiver, slotted it into the groove, cursing to himself at his trembling fingers, all smeared pink from Gaunt's blood.

He was crying. There were tears streaming down his face. His hands felt very cold, though it wasn't cold. His teeth were chattering. The man beside him threw down his bow and ran towards the top of the hill. There were a lot of men running, ignoring the desperate bellows of their officers.

Arrows flitted down. One went spinning from a steel cap just beside him. Others stuck into the hillside behind the wall. Silent, still, as if they'd suddenly sprung from the ground by magic rather than dropped from the sky. Someone else turned to run, but before he got a step the officer cut him down with his sword.

'For the king!' he squealed, his eyes gone all mad. 'For the king!'

Rose had never seen the king. A Northman jumped up on the wall just to his left. He was stabbed with two spears right away, screamed and fell back. The man beside Rose stood, cursing as he raised his flatbow. The top of his head came off and he stumbled, shot his bolt high into the sky. A Northman sprang over the wall into the gap he left, young-looking, face all twisted up with rage. A devil, screaming like a devil. A Union man came at him with a spear but he turned it away with his shield, swung as he dropped from the wall, axe blade thudding into the man's shoulder and sending blood flying in dark streaks. Northmen were coming over the wall all around. The gap to their left was choked with straining bodies, a tangle of spears, slipping boots ripping at the muddy grass.

Rose's head was full of mad noise, clash and clatter of weapons and armour, war cries and garbled orders and howls of pain all mingled with his own terrified, whimpering breath. He was just staring, bow forgotten. The young Northerner blocked the officer's sword and hit him in the side, twisted him up, chopped into his arm on the next blow, hand flying up bonelessly in its embroidered sleeve. The Northman kicked the officer's legs away and hacked at him on the ground, grin speckled with blood. Another was clambering over the wall beside him, a big face with a black and grey beard, shouting something in a gravelly voice.

A great tall one with long bare arms leaped clean over the jumble of stones, boots flicking at the grass that sprouted from the top, the biggest sword Rose had ever seen raised high. He didn't see how a man could swing a sword so big. The dull blade took an archer in the side, folded him up and sent him tumbling across

the hillside in a mist of blood. It was as if Rose's limbs came suddenly unstuck and he turned and ran, was jostled by someone else doing the same, slipped, ankle twisting. He scrambled up, took one lurching stride, and was hit so hard on the back of his head he bit his tongue off.

Agrick hacked the archer between the shoulder-blades to make sure, haft jolting in his raw hand, sticky with blood. He saw Whirrun struggling with a big Union man, hit him in the back of the leg with his axe, made a mess of it and only caught him with the flat, still hard enough to bring him down where Scorry could spear him as he slipped over the wall.

Agrick never saw Union men in numbers before, and they all looked the same, like copies o' one man with the same armour, the same jackets, the same weapons. It was like killing one man over and over. Hardly like killing real people at all. They were running, now, up the slope, scattering from the wall, and he ran after like a wolf after sheep.

'Slow down Agrick, you mad bastard!' Jolly Yon, wheezing at his back, but Agrick couldn't stop. The charge was a great wave and all he could do was be carried along by it, forwards, upwards, get at them who'd killed his brother. On up the hill, Whirrun at the wall behind, the Father of Swords cutting into a knot of Southerners still standing, hacking 'em apart, armour or not. Brack near him, roaring as he swung his hammer.

'On! Fucking on!' Black Dow himself, lips curled from bloody teeth, shaking his axe at the summit, blade flashing red and steel in the sun. Lit a fire in Agrick knowing his leader was there, fighting beside him in the front rank. He came up level with a stumbling Union man, clawing at the slope, hit him in the face with his axe and knocked him shrieking back.

He burst between two of the great stones, head spinning like he was drunk. Blood-drunk, and needing more. Lots of corpses in the circle of grass inside the Heroes. Union men hacked in the back, Northmen stuck with arrows.

Someone shouted, and flatbows clattered, and a few dropped around him but Agrick ran right on, towards a flag in the middle of the Union line, voice hoarse from screaming. He chopped an archer down, broken bow tumbling. Swung at the big Southerner carrying the standard. He caught Agrick's first blow with the

flagstaff, got it tangled with the blade. Agrick let go, pulled out his knife and stabbed the standard-bearer overhand though the open face of his helmet. He dropped like a hammered cow, mouth yawning all twisted and silent. Agrick tried to drag the standard from his dead-gripping fists, one hand on the pole, the other on the flag itself.

He heard himself make a weird whoop, sounded like someone else's voice. A half-bald man with grey hair round his ears pulled his arm back and his sword slid out of Agrick's side, scraping the bottom rim of his shield. It had been in him right to the hilt, the blade came out all bloody. Agrick tried to swing his axe but he'd dropped it just before and his knife was stuck in the standard-bearer's face, he just flapped his empty hand around. Something hit him in the shoulder and the world reeled.

He was lying in some dirt. A pile of trampled dirt, in the shadow of one of the stones. He had the torn flag in one hand.

He wriggled, but he couldn't get comfortable.

All numb.

Colonel Wetterlant was still having trouble believing it, but it appeared the King's Own Sixth Regiment was in a great deal of difficulty. The wall, he thought, was lost. Knots of resistance but basically overrun, and Northmen were flooding into the circle of stones from the north. Where else would Northmen come from? It had all happened so damnable fast.

'We have to withdraw!' screamed Major Culfer over the din of combat. 'There are too many of them!'

'No! General Jalenhorn will bring reinforcements! He promised us—'

'Then where the hell is he?' Culfer's eyes were bulging. Wetterlant would never have had him down as the panicky type. 'He's left us here to die, he's—'

Wetterlant simply turned away. 'We stand! We stand and fight!' He was a proud man of a proud family, and he would stand. He would stand until the bitter end, if necessary, and die fighting with sword in hand, as his grandfather was said to have done. He would die under the regimental colours. Well, he wouldn't, in fact, because that boy he ran through had torn them from the pole when he fell. But Wetterlant would stand, there was no question. He had often told

himself so. Usually while admiring his reflection in the mirror after dressing for one official function or another. Straightening his sash.

These were very different circumstances, however, it had to be admitted. No one was wearing a sash, not even him. And there was the blood, the corpses, the spreading panic. The unearthly wailing of the Northmen, who were flooding through the gaps between the stones and into the trampled circle of grass at their centre. Virtually a constant press of them now, as far as Wetterlant could see. The difficulty with a ring of standing stones as a defensive position is undoubtedly the gaps between them. The Union line, if you could use the phrase about an improvised clump of soldiers and officers fighting desperately wherever they stood, was bulging back under the pressure, in imminent danger of dissolving all together, and with nowhere defensible to dissolve back to.

Orders. He was in command, and had to give orders. ‘Er!’ he shouted, brandishing his sword. ‘Er ...’ It had all happened so very, very fast. What orders would Lord Marshal Varuz have given at a time like this? He had always admired Varuz. Unflappable.

Culfer gave a thin scream. A narrow split had appeared in his shoulder, right down to his chest, splinters of white bone showing through it. Wetterlant wanted to tell him not to scream in a manner so unbefitting of an officer in the King’s Own. A scream like that might be good enough for one of the levy regiments, but in the Sixth he expected a manly roar. Culfer almost gracefully subsided to the ground, blood bubbling from the wound, and a large Northman stepped up with an axe in his fist and began to cleave him into pieces.

Wetterlant was vaguely conscious that he should have jumped to the aid of his second-in-command. But he found himself unable to move, fascinated by the Northman’s expression of businesslike calm. As if he was a bricklayer getting a difficult stretch of wall to meet his high standards. Eventually satisfied by the number of pieces he had made of Culfer – who still, impossibly, seemed to be making a quiet squealing sound – the Northman turned to look at Wetterlant.

The far side of his face was crossed by a giant scar, a bright ball of dead metal in his eye socket.

Wetterlant ran. There was not the slightest thought involved. His mind was turned off like a candle snuffed out. He ran faster than he had in thirty years or

more, faster than he thought a man of his years possibly could. He sprang between two of the ancient stones and jolted down the hillside, boots thrashing at the grass, vaguely conscious of other men running all around him, of screams and hisses and threats, of arrows whipping through the air about his head, shoulders itching with the inevitability of death at his back.

He passed the Children, then a column of dumbstruck soldiers who had been on their way up the hill and were just now scattering back down it. His foot found a small depression and the shock made his knee buckle. He bit his tongue, flew headlong, hit the ground and tumbled over and over, no way of stopping himself. He slid into shadow, finally coming to an ungainly stop in a shower of leaves, twigs, dirt.

He rolled stiffly over, groaning. His sword was gone, his right hand red raw. Twisted from his grip as he fell. The blade his father had given him the day he received his commission in the King's Own. So proud. He wondered if his father would have been proud now. He was in among trees. The orchard? He had abandoned his regiment. Or had they abandoned him? The rules of military behaviour, so unshakeable a foundation until a few moments ago, had vanished like smoke in a breeze. It had happened so fast.

His wonderful Sixth Regiment, his life's work, built out of copious polish, and rigorous drill, and unflinching discipline, utterly shattered in a few insane moments. If any survived it would be those who had chosen to run first. The rawest recruits and most craven cowards. And he was one of them. His first instinct was to ask Major Culfer for his opinion. He almost opened his mouth to do it, then realised the man had been butchered by a lunatic with a metal eye.

He heard voices, the sounds of men crashing through the trees, shrank against the nearest trunk, peering around it like a scared child over their bedclothes. Union soldiers. He shuddered with relief, stumbled from his hiding place, waving one arm.

'You! Men!'

They snapped around, but not at attention. In fact they stared at him as if he was a ghost risen from a grave. He thought he knew their faces, but it seemed they had turned suddenly from the most disciplined of soldiers into trembling, mud-smeared animals. Wetterlant had never been afraid of his own men before,

had taken their obedience entirely for granted, but he had no choice but to blather on, his voice shrill with fear and exhaustion.

'Men of the Sixth! We must hold here! We must—'

'Hold?' one of them screeched, and hit Wetterlant with his sword. Not a full-blooded blow, only a jarring knock in the arm that sent him sliding onto his side, gasping more from shock than pain. He cringed as the soldier half-raised the sword again. Then one of the others squealed and scrambled away, and soon they were all running. Wetterlant looked over his shoulder, saw shapes moving through the trees. Heard shouting. A deep voice, and the words were in Northern.

Fear clutched him again and he whimpered, floundered through the slick of twigs and fallen leaves, the slime of rotten fruit smeared up his trouser leg, his own terrified breath echoing in his ears. He paused at the edge of the trees, the back of one sleeve pressed to his mouth. There was blood on his dangling hand. Seeing the torn cloth on his arm made him want to be sick. Was it torn cloth, or torn flesh?

He could not stay here. He would never make it to the river. But he could not stay here. It had to be now. He broke from the undergrowth, running for the shallows. There were other runners everywhere, most of them without weapons. Mad, desperate faces, eyes rolling. Wetterlant saw the cause of their terror. Horsemen. Spread out across the fields, converging on the shallows, herding the fleeing Union soldiers southwards. Cutting them down, trampling them, their howls echoing across the valley. He ran on, ran on, stumbling forwards, snatched another look. A rider was bearing down on him, he could see the curve of his teeth in a tangled beard.

Wetterlant tried to run faster but he was so tired. Lungs burning, heart burning, breath whooping, the land jerking and see-sawing wildly with every step, the glittering hint of the shallows getting gradually closer, the thunder of hooves behind him—

And he was suddenly on his side, in the mud, an unspeakable agony burning out from his back. A crushing pressure on his chest as if there were rocks piled on it. He managed to move his head to look down. There was something glinting

there. Something shining on his jacket in the midst of the dirt. Like a medal. But he hardly deserved a medal for running away.

'How silly,' he wheezed, and the words tasted like blood. He found to his surprise, and then to his mounting horror, that he could not breathe. It had all happened so very, very fast.

Sutt Brittle tossed the splintered shaft of his spear away. The rest was stuck in the back of that running fool. He'd run fast, for an old man, but not near as fast as Sutt's horse, which was no surprise. He hauled the old sword out, keeping the reins in his shield hand, and dug in his heels. Golden had promised a hundred gold coins to the first of his Named Men across the river, and Brittle wanted that money. Golden had showed it, in an iron box. Let 'em feel it, even, everyone's eyes on fire with looking at it. Strange coins, a head stamped on each side. Came from the desert, far away, someone had said. Sutt didn't know how Glama Golden came by desert coins, but he couldn't say he much cared either.

Gold was gold.

And this was almost too easy. The Union ran – knackered, stumbling, crying, and Sutt just leaned from the saddle and chopped 'em down, one side then t'other, whack, whack, whack. It was this Sutt got into the business for, not the skulking around and scouting they'd been doing, the pulling back over and over, trying to find the right spot and never getting there. He hadn't joined the grumblers, though, not him. He'd said Black Dow would bring 'em a red day afore too long, and here it was.

All the killing was slowing him down, though. Frowning over into the wind on his left he saw he weren't quite at the front of the pack no more. Feathers had pulled ahead, bent low over his saddle, not bothering about the work and just riding straight through the rabbiting Southerners and down the bank into the shallows.

Sutt was damned if he was going to let a liar like Hengul Feathers steal his hundred coins. He dug his heels harder, wind and mane whipping at his eyes, tongue wedged into the big gap in his teeth. He plunged down into the river, water showering, Union men flailing up to their hips around him. He urged his

horse on, eyes for nothing but Feathers' back as he trotted up onto the shingle and—

Went flying out of his saddle, war whoop cut off in a spray of blood.

Brittle weren't sure whether to be pleased or not as Feathers' corpse flopped over and over into the water. On the sunny side it looked like he was at the front of Golden's whole crew now. On the shady, there was a strange-looking bastard bearing down on him, well armoured and well horsed, short sword and the reins in one hand, long sword ready in the other, catching the sun and glistening with Feathers' blood. He had a plain round helmet with a slot in the front to see through and nothing but a big mouthful of gritted teeth showing below it. Riding at Golden's cavalry all on his own while the rest of the Union fled the other way.

In the midst of all Sutt's greed and bloodlust he felt this niggling moment of doubt made him check his horse to the right, get his shield between him and this steel-headed bastard. Just as well, 'cause a twinkling later his sword crashed into Sutt's shield and nearly ripped it off his arm. The shorter one came stabbing at him before the noise had faded, would've stuck him right in the chest if his own sword hadn't got in the way by blind chance.

By the dead he was fast, this bastard. Sutt couldn't believe how fast he was in all that armour. The swords came flickering out of nowhere. Sutt managed to block the short blade, the force of it near dumping him from the saddle. Tried to swing himself as he rocked back, screaming at the top of his lungs. 'Die, you fucking— Uh?' His right hand wasn't there. He stared at the stump, blood squirting out of it. How had that happened? He saw something at the corner of his eye, felt a great crunching in his chest, and his howl of pain was cut off in a squawk of his own.

He was flung straight out of his saddle, no breath in him, and splashed down in the cold water where there was nothing but bubbles gurgling around his face.

Even before the gap-toothed Northman had toppled from his horse, Gorst had twisted in his saddle and brought his long steel blurring down on the other side. The next one had a patchy fur across his shoulders, managed to raise his axe to parry, but it was wasted effort. Gorst's blow splintered the haft and drove the

pick on the back deep into him below the collarbone, the point of Gorst's long steel opening a gaping red wound in his neck. *A touch to me.*

The man was just opening his mouth, presumably to scream, when Gorst stabbed him through the side of the head with his short steel so the point came out of his cheek. *And another.* Gorst wrenched it free in time to deflect a sword with his buckler, shrug the blade harmlessly off his armoured shoulder. Someone clutched at him. Gorst smashed his nose apart with the pommel of his long steel. Smashed it again and drove it deep into his head.

They were all around him. The world was a strip of brightness through the slot in his helmet filled with plunging horses, and flailing men, and flashing weapons, his own swords darting by instinct to block, chop, stab, jerking the reins at the same time and dragging his panicked mount about in mindless circles. He swatted another man from his saddle, twisted chain mail rings flying like dust from a beaten carpet. He parried a sword and the tip glanced from his helmet and made his ears ring. Before its owner could swing again he was cut across the back and fell shrieking forward. Gorst caught him in a hug and bundled him down among the thrashing hooves.

Union cavalry were splashing through the shallows around him, meeting the Northmen as they charged in from the north bank and mingling in a clattering, shattering melee. Vallimir's men. *How nice that you could join us!* The river became a mass of stomping hooves and spray, flying metal and blood, and Gorst hacked his way through it, teeth ground together in a frozen smile. *I am home.*

He lost his short steel in the madness, stuck in someone's back and wrenched from his hand. It might have been a Union man. He was a long way from caring. He could scarcely hear a thing apart from his own breath, his own grunts, his own girlish squeaks as he swung, and swung, and swung, denting armour, smashing bone, splitting flesh, every jolting impact up his arm a burning thrill. Every blow like a swallow to a drunkard, better, and better, but never enough.

He chopped a horse's head half-off. The Northman riding it had a look of comical surprise, a clown in a cheap stage show, still pulling at the reins as his flopping mount collapsed under him. A rider squealed, hands full of his own guts. Gorst backhanded him across the head with his buckler and it tore from his fist

with a crash of steel and flew into the air in a fountain of blood and bits of teeth, spinning like a flipped coin. *Heads or tails? Anyone?*

A big Northman sat on a black horse in the midst of the river, chopping around him with an axe. His horned helmet, his armour, his shield, all chased with whorls of gold. Gorst spurred straight through the combat at him, hacking a Northman across the back as he went and dumping another from the saddle by chopping into his horse's hind leg. His long steel was bright red with blood. Slathered with it, like an axle with grease.

It caught the golden shield with a shattering impact, left a deep dent through all that pretty craftsmanship. Gorst chopped at it again and crossed the one scar with another, sent the golden man lurching in his saddle. Gorst lifted his long steel for a finishing blow then felt it suddenly twisted from his hand.

A Northman with a shaggy red beard had knocked it away with a mace and now swung it at Gorst's head. *Bloody rude.* Gorst caught the shaft in one hand, pulled out his dagger in the other and rammed it up under the Northman's jaw to the crosspiece, left it stuck there as he toppled backwards. *Manners, manners.* The golden man had his balance back, standing in the stirrups with his axe raised high.

Gorst clutched hold of him, dragged him into an ungainly embrace between their two jostling horses. The axe came down but the shaft caught Gorst's shoulder and the blade only scraped harmlessly against his backplate. Gorst caught one of the absurd horns on the man's gilded helmet and twisted it, twisted it, twisting his head with it until it was pressed against Gorst's breastplate. The golden man snarled and spluttered, most of the way out of his saddle, one leg caught in his stirrup. He tried to drop his axe and wrestle but it was on a loop around his wrist, snagged on Gorst's armour, his other arm trapped by his battered shield.

Gorst bared his teeth, raised his fist and started punching the man in the face, his gauntlet crunching against one side of the golden helmet. Up and down, up and down, his fist was a hammer and gradually it marked, then dented, then twisted the helmet out of shape until one side of it dug into the man's face. *Even better than the sword.* Crunch, crunch, and it bent further, cutting into his cheek. *More personal.* No need for discussion or justification, for introductions or

etiquette, for guilt or excuses. Only the incredible release of violence. So powerful that he felt this golden-armoured man must be his best friend in all the world. *I love you. I love you, and that is why I must smash your head apart.* He was laughing as he pounded his gauntleted knuckles into the man's bloody-blond moustache again. Laughing and crying at once.

Then something hit him in the backplate with a dull clang, his head snapped back and he was out of the saddle, jostled upside down between their two horses, gripped by cold and his helmet full of bubbling river. He came up coughing, water sprayed in his face by thrashing hooves.

The man in the golden armour had floundered to a riderless horse and was dragging himself drunkenly into the saddle. There were corpses everywhere: horses and men, Union and Northman, sprawled on the shingle, bobbing in the ford, carried gently by the soft current. He hardly saw any Union cavalry left. Only Northmen, weapons raised, nudging their horses cautiously towards him.

Gorst fumbled with the buckle on his helmet and dragged it off, the wind shockingly cold on his face. He clambered to his feet, armour leaden with river water. He held his arms out, as if to embrace a dear friend, and smiled as the nearest Northman raised his sword.

'I am ready,' he whispered.

'Shoot!' There was a volley of clicks and rattles behind him. The Northman toppled from his saddle, stuck through with flatbow bolts. Another shrieked, axe tumbling as he clapped his hand to a bolt in his cheek. Gorst turned, stupidly, to look over his shoulder. The south bank of the shallows was one long row of kneeling flatbowmen. Another rank stepped between them as they started to reload, knelt and levelled their bows with mechanical precision.

A big man sat on a large grey at the far end of the line. General Jalenhorm. 'Second rank!' he roared, slashing his hand down. 'Shoot!' Gorst ducked on an instinct, head whipping around as he followed the bolts flickering overhead and into the Northmen, already turning their horses to flee, men and beasts screaming and snorting as they dropped in the shallows.

'Third rank! Shoot!' The hiss and twitter of another volley. A few more fell peppered, one horse rearing and going over backwards, crushing its rider. But

most of the rest had made it up the bank and were away into the barley on the other side, tearing off to the north as quickly as they had arrived.

Gorst slowly let his arms drop as the sound of hooves faded and left, aside from the chattering of the water and the moaning of the wounded, an uncanny silence.

Apparently the engagement was over, and he was still alive.

How strangely disappointing.