

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS — VOLUME II

THE BRIDGE BUILDER

A Novel

For the people who keep walking onto the wager,

stone by stone,

long after the river has stopped pretending not to notice.

"A bridge is not a kindness. A bridge is a wager. You set the first stone in the river and you ask the river to allow it, and you ask the men on either bank to allow it, and you ask the gods, who do not always answer, to allow it. And then you walk out onto your wager, and you find out, stone by stone, what the world has decided about you."

— from the private journals of the one called Korrak the Quiet

P R E V I O U S L Y

in Volume I — Awakening in Green Flesh

A man died in a modern city, struck by a wagon at a traffic light, and woke in the body of a young orc named Korrak in a barracks above the eastern road. He learned the brutal grammar of the Horde under a war-father called Gor'thak, and discovered, behind the bridge of his nose, a small warm presence that the world was willing, when asked gently, to answer.

He spared a fifteen-year-old prisoner named Tomas; traded a widow named Sera and her two sons for a season of open road; rode out alone to meet a tired iron-clad captain named Aldric Veyne; and ended his first winter watching that captain ride through the gate of the hold under falling snow, asking the only question that mattered: *What are we starting?*

Volume II takes up the answer.

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P A R T O N E

Letters in the Snow



CHAPTER ONE

The Captain in the Snow

ALDRIC VEYNE SAT at the long table in our barracks for two hours before he said anything that mattered.

He sat the way iron-clads of his rank had been trained to sit in the halls of strangers — straight-backed, both hands visible, the cup of warmed beer untouched in front of him until Gor'thak had drunk first from his own. He had taken off his helm and laid it on the bench beside him, and the snow that had been on it had melted into a small dark stain on the wood. The grey at his temples was wet. His face was the same face I had seen on the eastern road in the autumn — tired, careful, intelligent — and it had not, in the four months since, found any new rest.

Gor'thak sat across from him. Gor'thak had also been trained to sit a certain way in the presence of strangers, and his way and the captain's way were not the same way, but they were, I noticed, two halves of the same old grammar. Both men kept their elbows off the table. Both men set their cups down quietly. Both men, when they spoke, spoke first to me, because I was the only person in the room whose tongue belonged to both of them.

I had become, in the last four months, a translator.

I had not planned it. I had planned, in the quiet of my own head, a great many other things. But the world had supplied a tired captain in the autumn, and a small unofficial correspondence through the winter, and a snow-cold morning in late winter on which the captain had ridden through our gate alone for the second time,

and I had found myself, by simple necessity, sitting between two men who needed each other and could not yet speak.

The first hour of the meeting was about grain. Grain was the easiest topic. Grain was a thing both men understood with their stomachs, and also a thing whose movement they could measure in carts, and also a thing that, if it stopped moving in either direction, would kill a great many people on both of their sides before spring. The two of them spoke through me about cart counts and depot rotations and the curve at Greyfen Post and the widow's barn, and I translated each sentence carefully, and I added nothing of my own.

I had decided, on the morning Aldric had ridden in, that I would not, in this first proper meeting, push for anything. I would translate. I would pour beer. I would let the room teach itself what it was capable of. The work of bridge-building, I had been learning all winter, was nine parts patience and one part cleverness, and the cleverness was almost always the cheap part.

The second hour was about the dead.

It was Gor'thak who began it. He did it the way Gor'thak did everything that mattered — without warning, in the middle of an unrelated sentence, in a tone that made the room go a degree colder.

"Captain," he said, and he set down his cup very gently. "In the last full season, on the eastern road, between the curve and the bridge, my warband killed thirty-one of yours. We took six prisoners, of whom we returned four, and two died of wounds. Tell your men's families this when you get home. We did not lose them. We killed them. We did it with axes and with hounds and with a small fire on the night of the

third raid, and I will not have it said, in the years to come, that we pretended otherwise."

I translated. I did not soften. Aldric Veyne listened with his hands folded very still on the table.

When I had finished, he was quiet for a long count. Then he said, in his own tongue, slowly, looking at Gor'thak and not at me,

"In the same season, in the same place, my company killed twenty-six of yours. We took four prisoners, of whom three died, the third because we were not patient enough with his wounds. The fourth we returned in a trade we did not record because we did not want it on the rolls. I do not know all their names. I know some of them. I will write them down for you tonight."

I translated. Gor'thak listened. His yellow eyes did not move.

Then Gor'thak nodded once, the smallest nod, the same nod Shen had given me on the ridge above the eastern road, and he said,

"Good."

It was, I think, the first honest hour I had ever sat in the company of soldiers. They had named their dead. They had not haggled them. They had not used them as counters in a sum. They had set them down on the table between them like two stacks of coins and they had agreed, without saying so, that no future trade would pretend the stacks did not exist.