

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS — VOLUME III

THE WEIGHT OF BLOOD

A Novel

*For the dead whose names we counted,
and for the dead whose names we still owe.*

"There is no clean accounting in war. There is only the question of which deaths you are willing to remember by name. The men who refuse to count are not, in the end, kinder than the men who count and weep. They are only quieter, and the dead they will not name will be louder, in the long room of any honest mind, than any name a counting man has ever spoken aloud."

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

PREVIOUSLY

in The Bridge Between Worlds, Volumes I & II

A man died in a modern city, struck at a traffic light, and woke in the body of a young orc named Korrak in the warband of Gor'thak, above the eastern road. He learned the brutal grammar of his new people, found a small warm presence behind the bridge of his nose, and began, slowly, to use it.

He spared the prisoner Tomas; traded for the widow Sera; opened a correspondence with Captain Aldric Veyne and Brother Hesh of Ardenhold. He drew a small mark on his own wrist — a circle with a line across it, the small mercy — a private vow not to kill a wounded enemy. The mark spread, in charcoal and then in dwarven ink, to wrists on both sides of the war.

Summoned to Veystone Hall by Lord Calder Vey of the southern grain-counties, he met Master Edric Hain of the Office of His Majesty's Reach, who had been quietly watching his letters for a year. The bounty was withdrawn. A protocol was begun. Three valleys north, in the high hall of the chief Maug, the faction was given its name: *the Patient Bridge*.

Volume II ended in a yard at night, with Korrak's hand on the grey head of his old hound Drub, knowing tomorrow would bring new threats — from the iron-clads, from the southern grain-counties, and from his own clan.

Volume III is the weight of those threats arriving.

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PART ONE

The Cousin's Ride



CHAPTER ONE

The Old Hound's Spring

DRUB DID NOT, as it turned out, die in the winter.

He came close, twice. The first time was on a clear cold morning in the second moon, when I went to the door of the barracks and found him not at his place but in the snow ten paces beyond it, lying on his side, with his ribs working in the slow shallow way of an old animal who has chosen the place he intends to be done with the world. I knelt beside him. I laid my hand on his chest. The warm hand behind the bridge of my nose, which had spread very wide that winter, settled in my palm without my asking, and Drub, by some grace I did not understand and did not, in the moment, examine, took a longer breath, and then another, and then opened his cloudy yellow eye and looked at me with the patient irritation of a hound who has been disturbed in his nap.

He stood up. He walked, slowly, with me back to the door. He drank the broth Brae had warmed for him. He slept, that night, against my pallet rather than at the door, and in the morning he was still breathing, and the snow at his usual place outside the door had filled in.

The second time was in the third moon, and the warm hand did less. I sat with him in the hay-loft of the lean-to for the better part of a day, with Brae on the other side of him stroking the top of his head with the back of one knuckle, and we both prepared ourselves, in the quiet way the warband had begun to prepare itself for that kind of thing, to be losing him by sundown. He did not die. He came back, slowly,

with a small dry rasp in his breath that he did not afterwards lose, and he walked, with the slowest of his three slow gaits, to the door of the barracks again, and lay down, and looked at me as though to say that the matter had been considered and was not, for the moment, settled.

It was Brae, in the lean-to, who said the thing none of us had been quite willing to say.

"Korrak."

"Yes."

"He is staying for you."

I did not answer.

"He is not staying because his body is willing," she said. "His body is not willing. He is staying because he has not yet finished the work he has decided is his work, which is to be at your knee. When the work is done, he will go. I have seen this in two other hounds in my life. It is not, in the end, a kindness to ask them to stay longer than the work requires."

I looked at her. Brae was the warband's cutter and herdsman and, by the slow accident of her many quiet competences, its conscience. She did not, in council, speak often. She did not, when she spoke, soften.

"What are you telling me to do, Brae."

"I am not telling you to do anything. I am telling you that you should know what is happening, so that when the day comes you do not try to call him back. The warm

hand of yours, Korrak — it is a real hand. I have watched it on three of our wounded since the autumn. I have watched it work on Renn's leg and on the lower jaw of a calf in the upper field and on a chest-wound in a southerner whose name we did not learn before he died. It is real. It is a tool. I am telling you that on the day Drub asks to go, the tool is not for him. He has earned his end. Do not, on that day, ask him to stay because you are not ready."

I sat with that for a long count.

"Brae," I said.

"Yes."

"Thank you."

She nodded the small nod. She left me with the hound. I sat in the hay-loft until the light through the chinks of the wall had turned from white to the soft grey of late winter afternoon, and Drub, with his head on my thigh and the small dry rasp in his breath, slept without dreaming, and the warm hand behind my eyes did not, on that afternoon, do any work at all.

Spring came late.

It came in the way of springs in that country — first as a series of failed attempts, with the snow softening and then refreezing in the lower fields, and the river behind the hold going from solid to grey to solid again over four days, and the goats in the lean-to looking out at us from their pen with the long offended faces of creatures who had been promised better. Then, in a single warm night in the fourth moon, it came in earnest. The river ran. The smell of the high pastures came down in the air.

The hounds in the pen began to shed in clumps. Mott, who had spent the winter carving wooden tokens for the Patient Bridge until his hands were a permanent dark from oil and ash, walked the lower paddock and came back to report that the first lambs were on the ground.

It was a good spring.

It was, in fact, the last good spring I would have for a long time, and I did not know it, and the not-knowing was, I think now, looking back at it from where I now am, the small mercy that was extended to me — that I did not, in those few weeks of warming light, know what was coming.

I rode out, in those weeks, more than I had ridden in any season of my body's life. I rode south to the curve at Greyfen Post, where the cairns at each end of the half-mile of neutral road were now so weathered and overgrown with the small purple flowers of that country that they looked like things that had been there since the empire. I rode east to Sera the widow's farm, where her two boys, Tam and Pell, were now nine and seven, and where Tam, who had decided in his own quiet way that I was a relative, came running out to the gate as Drub and I clopped up the lane and threw both his thin arms around Drub's neck for the longer count he was permitted before his mother called him in for porridge.

I rode north to Maug's high hall, twice, on the formal moon-end visits the protocol required, and sat in his lower hall for two hours on each visit while his oldest scribe read out, in his careful clerk's voice, the lists of new wrists and new mercies counted and new correspondences begun. Maug listened. Maug nodded. The milk-eyed second wife, who had taken to attending these readings with a small piece

of embroidery in her hands, never once looked up at me during them. She did not need to. She had filed me, by then, and the filing had crossed over into the kind of working trust that did not require eye contact to be maintained.

I rode west, twice, with Velg and a small careful escort, to two of the lower villages of our line, where clansmen of Gor'thak's mother's side lived in three holds of their own. I sat at three different long hearths. I drew the small mercy on six wrists in one hold, four in the second, and none in the third. The third hold was that of a cousin of Gor'thak's mother named Vukar. Vukar was sixty-seven. He had killed, in the wars of his youth, more iron-clads than any chief had killed before Maug. He listened to me through a council of an hour and a half, with the slow attention of a man who had decided in advance that he would not be moved, and at the end of the hour and a half he said, in plain speech, in front of his five sons and his two surviving brothers and a small grim-faced shaman whose eyes did not leave me,

"Korrak of Gor'thak's hold. I will not draw your mark on my wrist. I will not draw it on the wrists of any clansman under my roof. I will not, while I live, raise a hand against your faction, because Gor'thak is the cousin of my mother and I owe him the small grace of not splitting our clan in his old age. But I will tell you, in this hall, in front of these men, that I think the mark on your wrist is a softness, and the softness is the kind of softness that, in older days, the elders would have cut out of a warband with a hot knife before it had spread. I think you have, by some accident of which Gor'thak is the chief author, been spared what would have been done to you in a colder season. I think the spring will not last. I think, when the spring is done, the knife will come for you. I will not hold it. But I will not, on the day it is held by

another hand, raise mine against that hand. Go in peace from my hall. Do not come back into it without an invitation I have not yet given."

I rode out of his gate that afternoon.

Velg was silent for the first hour of the ride home. Drub, under me, was breathing his small dry rasp, and I rode him slowly, and the escort matched our pace without complaint.

After the first hour, Velg said,

"Korrak."

"Yes."

"He has decided."

"Yes."

"Not for him. He will keep his word. He will not raise his hand. But there is a younger man in his hall, Korrak. The youngest of his five sons. He stood behind his father, on the right, with his hands flat on the table the whole council. He did not look at any of us once. I know that face. I have seen it on three other young men in three other halls in the last thirty years. The father will keep his word. The son will not."

I rode in silence for another count.

"His name," I said.

"Tarn."

I nodded.

I did not, that night at the long hearth in our own barracks, tell Gor'thak about Tarn. I told him about Vukar. I told him, in the careful flat voice I had been learning to use for hard news, that the third hold had refused. Gor'thak listened. Gor'thak nodded. Gor'thak said, in the same flat voice,

"He has a youngest son."

"Yes, war-father."

"Velg saw him."

"Yes."

"I will write to my mother's sister, who is Vukar's wife's younger sister, and ask her to keep an eye on the boy. It is not much. It is what we have."

He looked at me across the hearth. The fire was low. Drub was at my knee, his small dry rasp the only sound in the room besides the fire and the wind.

"Korrak," he said.

"War-father."

"You have known, since the night I named the faction in this room, that this would come."

"Yes, war-father."

"You have been waiting for it."

"Yes, war-father."

"It will not be Tarn," Gor'thak said. "Or not only Tarn. The first hand that comes for you will be a hand you have not yet seen. The Tarns of the world are the second wave. Remember this. The first hand will come from a place you did not look. You did not look there because you trusted it. Do not, when it comes, hold the not-looking against yourself. We all have a small set of places we trust. The first hand comes through one of them. That is how it always is."

I did not answer.

He drank from his cup. He set it down.

"Sleep," he said. "The spring is good. Use it. The summer will not be."

I went to my pallet. Drub came with me. He lay against my legs, with his small dry rasp going in and out, and I lay on my back in the dark with my eyes open for a long count, and I listened to the breathing of the warband and the wind on the palisade and the slow shifting of an old hound's ribs, and I tried, for a while, to think of every place I trusted, so that I could number them, and watch them, and not be surprised.

I numbered eleven places before sleep took me. I had not, when I fell asleep, been thorough. The first hand, when it came, came through none of the eleven.

It came through the twelfth.