

**THE NOTORIOUS
SCARLETT
& BROWNE**



**THE NOTORIOUS
SCARLETT
& BROWNE**

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE FEARLESS
OUTLAWS AND THEIR INFAMOUS DEEDS

**JONATHAN
STROUD**

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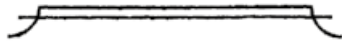
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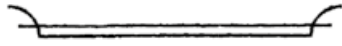
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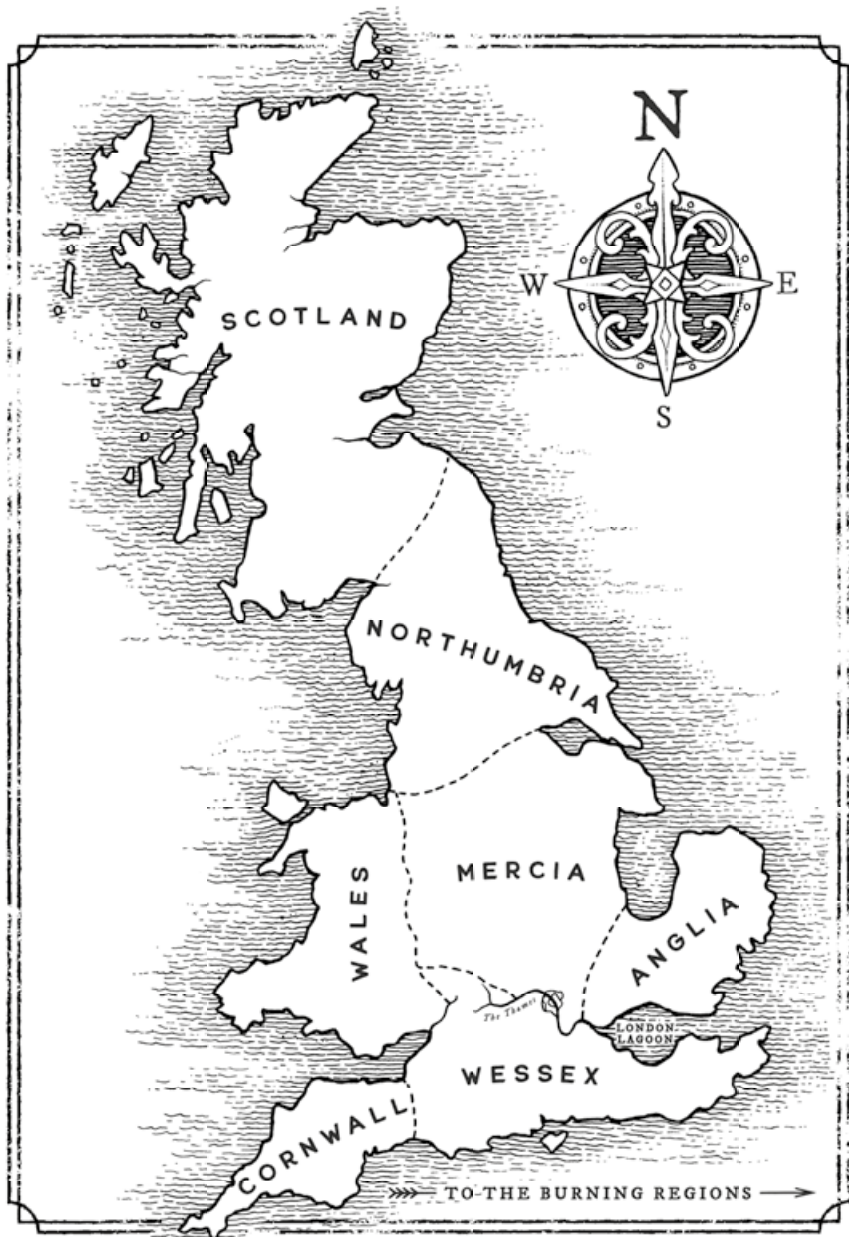
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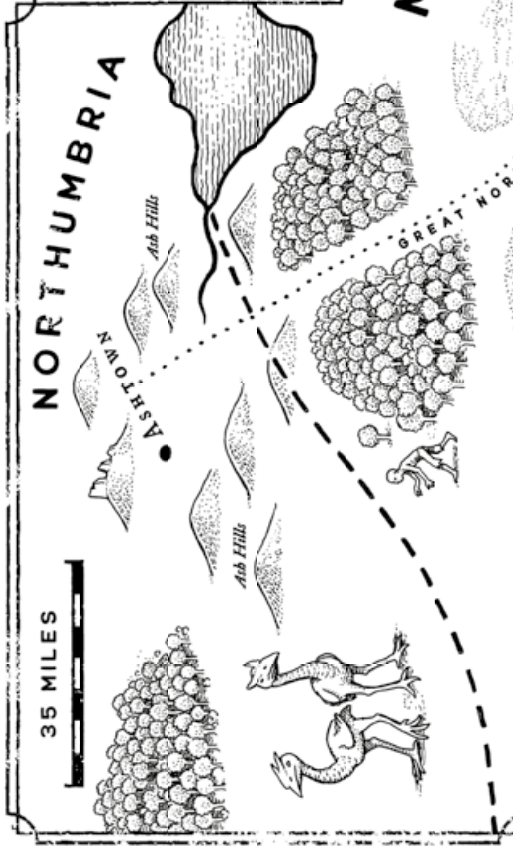


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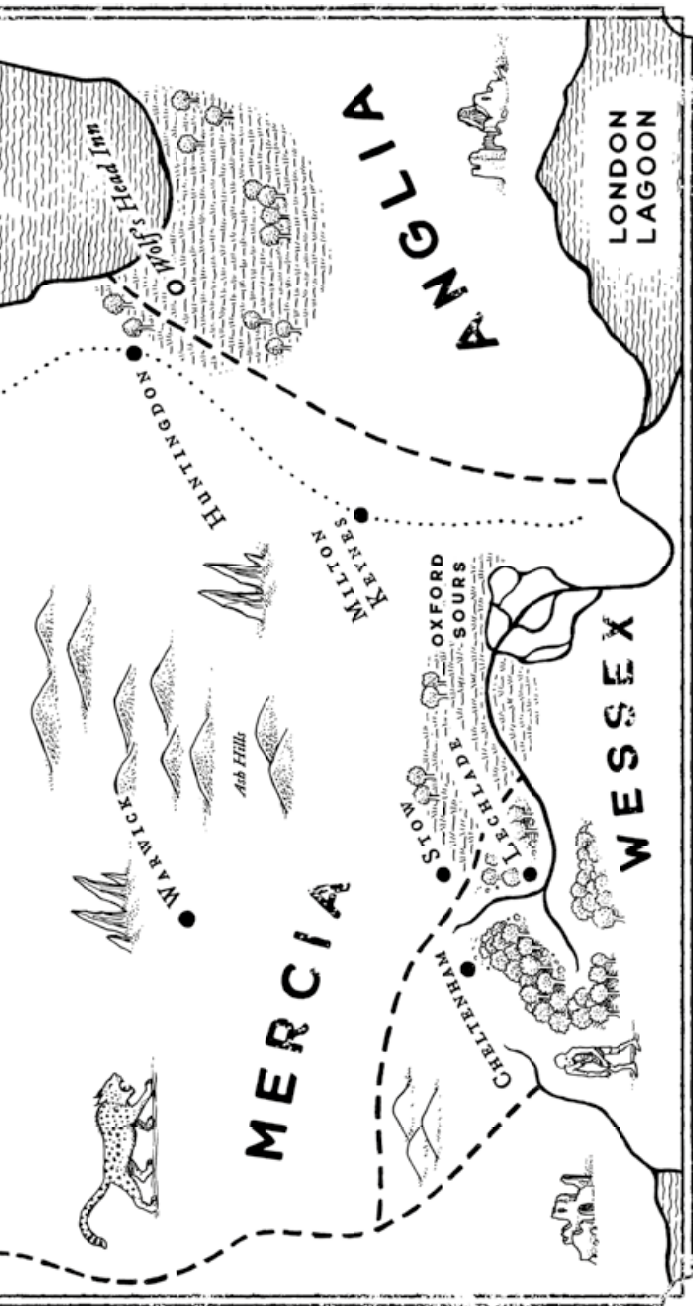


THE SEVEN KINGDOMS



MERCIA





THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

I

THE WARWICK

JOB

1

THAT EVENING, WITH THE SUN SETTING OVER THE ASH-FIELDS AND the curfew bells ringing out above the cities of the plains, three murderers gathered at a crossroads. They wasted no words in greeting. The youngest climbed the broken tower to survey the land; the oldest took up a position of concealment in the ruins beyond the ditch. The third, the bandit captain, strolled to a concrete slab that lay amid the sagebrush and black foxgloves beside the road. He lit his pipe and sat at ease, waiting for travellers to come to them.

The crossroads was a good place for an ambush, which was why the bandits had selected it. The tumbled walls of the old watchhouse provided cover, while the surviving tower gave a clear view in all directions. They were close enough to the towns to guarantee foot traffic, and far enough away for the militias not to bother them while they chatted with their prisoners. Also, there was a ravine nearby where the bodies could be tipped.

The bandit captain enjoyed his work, and waiting was part of the pleasure. He felt like a fisherman on a riverbank, scanning the surface of the water, knowing that sleek fat trout were close at hand. He sat with his leather coat open, one booted leg

outstretched, sucking on his pipe. Through half-closed eyes he watched the fragrant smoke twirl skywards. Yes, patience was the key... Presently the fish would come.

Sure enough, soon a low whistle sounded from Lucas on the tower. The captain glanced up towards the parapet and noted the direction of the boy's outstretched arm. From the east, then: the Corby road. Traders, probably, hurrying to reach Warwick before nightfall. The captain rubbed his bearded chin and glanced at the pistol in his belt. From Corby might come spices, furs, black tektite jewels... A Corby haul was rarely disappointing.

How would they be travelling? On foot? In a motor vehicle? He could not hear an engine.

He got to his feet unhurriedly, took his pipe from his mouth and set it on the slab to await his return. Stepping through the sagebrush, he stood ready at the side of the road.

The ash-fields were soft and sugary in the evening light. Long shadows, sharp as coffin nails, stretched from the pines behind the ruins. To the east, the shadow of the tower was a slash across the red-brown earth.

And now two bicycles came in sight, making for the crossroads.

The bandit captain frowned in mild surprise. Bicycles were not unusual in the safe-lands, but the Corby road was long and arduous, and had deteriorated in the period of the Rains. As he watched, the lead bike weaved smoothly to avoid a pothole. The one behind swerved at the last minute, teetering on the brink of disaster, righted itself and rushed on.

Both riders were heavily laden with rucksacks and packages. Despite this, and even at a distance, he could see how slight they

were. If they were young, this suggested further possibilities. There was a slave market in Warwick, and the bandit captain was on passable terms with its overseer.

He waited until he could hear the rattle of the wheels. Then he walked out into the dying sunlight and took up a heroic posture, legs straddling the centre of the road. He flicked his coat aside and tucked his thumb in his belt, so that his palm cupped the gun-hilt loosely.

Smoothing back his glistening mane of hair, he held up his hand.

The leading bicycle came to an abrupt halt, wheel twisting, raising a cloud of thin red ash. The other nearly collided with it. With a squawk of woe, its rider veered away and skewed to a standstill too, his rucksack pitching drunkenly to the side.

They *were* young. A blinking, bewildered, dark-haired boy. The other was a girl in a broad-brimmed hat.

The red dust settled slowly around them.

This was always the best bit for the bandit captain. He liked the theatricality of the moment. Him blocking the road. Seeing the shock on their faces, the slowly awakening fear.

“One moment, travellers!” he called. “A word with you.”

“Bandit,” the boy said.

“Yeah?” The girl’s head tilted slightly. “I’d never have guessed.”

Her face was in shadow, but the bandit captain could see twirls of red hair spilling down below the angled hat. She wore a battered brown jacket, dark jeans stained with ash. She had a rifle on her back; also a rucksack with packs and tubes strapped to it. There was a pistol tucked into a slouched gun-belt just inside her coat.

“A friendly conversation,” the bandit captain said. “That’s all I require of you. I should mention that I have armed men watching us. I must politely request that you remove your weapons and dismount from your bicycles.”

He waited. The riders didn’t move.

“Hat,” the boy said.

The girl lifted a hand slowly, lazily – but not to remove her pistol, as the bandit expected. Instead, she took her hat off, propped it on the handlebars. She sat back on the saddle, straight-backed, one boot on the pedal, the other on the ground. Long red hair, dark with sweat, fell in a mess of ringlets either side of a pale and sullen face. No more than nineteen, the bandit guessed. Nineteen and healthy. Certainly worth keeping alive.

But she had still not dismounted from the bicycle. Or taken off her gun. And nor had the boy moved. He wore an old grey militia jacket, which hung long and shapeless on his feeble form. He was slender-faced, dark-eyed, almost girlish in his features, and was gazing at the bandit captain with an expression of vacant intensity. A simpleton, perhaps. The main point was he carried no weapon, and the bandit instantly disregarded him.

He returned his attention to the girl. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah.” Her voice was surprisingly calm. “You want my guns.”

“So, then.”

“We’d prefer to negotiate.”

“I’m sure you would.” The bandit captain smiled suavely; he made an expansive gesture in the direction of the ruins. “Sadly, that’s not an option, my dear. You’d do well to obey me. I have

five men concealed here, each a crack-shot, each with a rifle trained on your heart.”

The girl wrinkled her nose in mild distaste. She looked at her companion. “Albert?”

“Two men,” the boy said. “One on the tower, one at the window of the ruins.”

“Rifles?”

“Pistols.”

The bandit scowled. “Enough of this jabbering. Five men, I say, who—”

But the girl was glancing towards the ruins.

“Left and up a bit,” the boy said. “Yep. You’ve got him. The other’s at the top.” The curious thing was, he wasn’t looking at her *or* at the ruins, but was still watching the captain with his big dark eyes.

“OK, that’s fine,” the girl said. “Which would I take first?”

“The one on the tower is the best shot. He’s the fastest. The one in the ruins sucks.”

A muffled voice came from the ruins. “*Hey!*”

“This guy?”

“*Was* good, but his nerves are shot. He drinks too much.”

The bandit captain had been a publican before his rages got the better of him and he killed a man in a brawl. He had a thirst on him now, and he could feel his anger swelling in his belly as the conversation ran away from him. Just looking at the boy’s bland, blank face made him oddly furious. That and his disconcertingly accurate chatter. He had the sense that he was missing something, and that infuriated him too. If it wasn’t for the girl, for the price she’d fetch at auction, he would have taken out his pistol and shot them both where they stood.

“Excuse me,” he said. “*If* I could get a word in for a moment, we’re agreed that several guns are trained on you, correct? The point is – if you go for your weapon, we will kill you. If you try to run, the same.”

“Cycle,” the boy said.

“What?”

“We’d cycle. Not run. Look, we’re sitting on bikes.”

“Talk some sense,” the girl said.

“Gods above us! It makes no difference!” The bandit stamped his boot upon the road. “Cycle, run or flap your arms and fly like two toothed birds, the outcome will not change.”

A breeze blew a curled strand of hair across the girl’s forehead. She brushed her face clear. She had green eyes, as bright and cold as glass. The bandit found it hard to look at them. “All right,” she said slowly. “Keep your pants on, mister. No need to get upset. So what happens if we do as you ask?”

The bandit captain flicked irritably at a dusting of ash on the side of his tight black jeans. He had lost his calm and that made him feel put out. Lucas would have seen that, and Ronan too; they would needle him about it later. “Well,” he growled, “suffice to say, we are gentlemen of the road, and we have our own code of honour. We will look through your bags, perhaps take a few trifles, things that appeal to us...” He shrugged. “That is all.”

“And after that?”

“We let you go.”

“Albert?”

“They’ll kill us,” the boy said.

The bandit started. “I assure you—”

“At least, they’ll kill *me*. Shoot me or cut my throat, dump me

in a ravine for the wolves to find. You, they'll keep alive, Scarlett. Maybe sell you to the slavers. If you're lucky."

"Oh, dear," the girl said. She stared at the bandit captain with her bright green eyes.

The captain found his own gaze flickering uneasily to and fro. He adjusted his position slightly in the road. "Whatever your fate," he said thickly, "it is ours to decide. Throw away your gun and dismount. I will not ask again."

"Good," the girl said. "I'm glad about that. Here's my counter-proposal. It's late. The sky is growing red. We've ridden miles today across difficult country. There was a collapsed bridge in the hills and we had to ford the torrent. We came through ash squalls and sand slips, and had a pack of spotted fell-cats following us for miles across the scarp. Plus Albert got a puncture and fell in a bog. We're tired, our backsides are saddle-sore, and we want to get to town before they close the gates. We have work to do in Warwick tomorrow. We don't need trouble with you gentlemen of the road, and I don't want to waste my bullets. So, stand down and let us go by."

Again the bandit captain experienced a vague sense of unreality, that things were not going quite as they should. He could imagine Lucas crouching on the parapet, pistol ready, watching everything with his cold grey eyes. Looking at the girl and the loaded rucksacks, waiting for the talking to be done. He would be impatient now. These days, he was kicking too often against orders, and was happy when his captain faltered. The little swine thought he was the better shot too, and quicker, when all he really had was the arrogance of youth—

"He's not listening, Scarlett," the boy on the bicycle said.

The girl nodded. "OK. Tell me when."

The captain drew himself up. His fingers tightened on the pistol.

"Last chance," he said.

"Yeah," the girl said. "It is."

There was a pause.

The way it always worked was: the captain drew his gun, then Lucas and Ronan fired too. He moved first, then came the barrage. The travellers never had a chance; Lucas, in particular, was too fast. But the captain didn't quite feel his usual confidence. Nothing was right here. Somehow, he didn't want to start things. All at once he thought of his pipe waiting on the concrete slab.

"You can always go back to it, John," the dark-haired boy said. "You'll find the tobacco's still alight."

The captain's eyes widened. He felt the world pressing in on him, the natural order of things turning upside down. A stab of shock went through him, curdling into fear and hatred.

The boy's smile faded. His gaze was sad.

The captain looked at him, looked at the girl.

The girl said nothing.

They stood in silence, the three of them, in the dust of the empty road.

"Now," the boy said.

Three shots.

Silence again.

What was really galling to the bandit captain in his last moments, what *really* offended his dignity, was the way the boy knew he was going to shoot before he did himself. Throughout

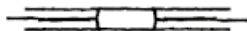
his life, in moments of panic or rage, the captain had been like a machine driven by levers. When enough of them were pulled, he acted, and the conscious thought came after. So, now, in his terror and confusion, he had drawn his pistol before his mind framed the intention – yet the boy had already predicted it. Not only that, but two shots had already been fired while his gun was still in the process of rising. And neither bullet was his own. The third shot followed, but *that* wasn't his doing either. He could not quite understand it, nor why his finger refused to tighten on the trigger... He felt, rather than saw, the pistol fall from his nerveless hand. There was a sudden impact to his knees. He realized he was kneeling on the ground.

For some reason, he could not move his eyes. At the edge of his vision, he caught sight of a swift black shape flashing downwards – something heavy dropping from the tower. He heard the impact on the stones beneath, then a brief cry from a window in the ruins.

His eyes were locked. He saw the bicycles, the boy and girl still standing there, the ash on the wheel rims, the dust on their boots. The girl was tucking her gun back in her belt. He could no longer focus on them. Then he realized he was lying on his face in the road. It was curious how he hadn't noticed the transition. There'd been no sensation of falling.

He smelled the cordite from the pistol. It made him think of his pipe again.

Now there were no sensations at all.



A decorative frame with a double-line border and ornate, curved corners. In the center of the frame is the number '2'.

IT WAS MIDNIGHT IN THE TOWN OF WARWICK. EVEN AT SUCH AN hour, the day's heat radiated ghost-like from the cobblestones. Across the plaza, the cafes were closing. The last customers idled at their tables, watching the slave girls sweeping up beside the empty market stalls. Soft fragrances hung in the air. At the militia station, fiery braziers illuminated the posters on the Wanted Wall, making the faces of its outlaws shift as if alive.

From beyond the boundary wall of the Faith House gardens, bells and incantations sounded. Evening worshippers began to exit the gates and disperse across the square. At a discreet table, Scarlett McCain took a sip of coffee, adjusted her tinted glasses and watched them leave. Ten minutes remaining. Everything was going like clockwork. In ten minutes, the compound would be locked, and the great heist could begin.

For four days she and Albert had covertly surveyed the Faith House, the oldest such establishment in Mercia and famous for the wealth locked in its vaults. No one had detected them. Thanks to their disguises, no one had noticed that two of the most notorious outlaws in the Seven Kingdoms had infiltrated the crowds. Right

now, Scarlett wore a knee-length green cotton dress, white pumps in the local Mercian style, and a neatly bobbed blonde wig. She had her legs crossed, a bowl of coffee at her hand and a cloth bag of weapons at her feet. In her neatness and sophistication, she looked a typical rich young Warwick woman, and nothing like a certain dishevelled red-haired robber whose face was pasted a few feet away on the militia wall. Scarlett disliked the dress and the wig itched like a bastard, but they had kept her incognito for four days.

Snatches of conversation drifted to Scarlett as the townsfolk passed her. There had been a delay with the supply trains... A convoy on the Great North Road had been set upon by the Tainted, several lorries overturned, the guards eaten, the products lost... In better news, two slaves and a religious dissenter would be whipped for deviancy at the House tomorrow... The chief Mentor would give an accompanying speech, with tea and cakes available...

Scarlett frowned behind her glasses at the mention of the whipping, but kept her face impassive. She waited. Now the gates to the Faith House compound clanged shut, and bolts were drawn to seal it for the night. As the worshippers moved off, a slight, slim figure broke away from the back of the crowd. He wandered over as if to inspect the shop fronts, looped past where Scarlett sat, and disappeared up a narrow lane beside the compound wall.

Scarlett finished her coffee. She placed a pound note under the glass, picked up her cloth bag and left the square. She too entered the quiet lane. The bag was heavy in her hand. As she went, she mentally itemized its contents: her gun-belt, a rucksack containing ropes and twine, a crowbar, cotton dampers, picklocks,

torches.... Yeah, she had it all. The rest of their kit was with the getaway bikes, stowed in the wadi outside town. Nothing had been forgotten. All that was needed now was to carry out the job with professionalism and cool efficiency.

“Yo, Scarlett!”

A scrawny shape lurched from the shadows. Scarlett jumped aside. Like her, Albert Browne was in disguise. He wore the local Warwick fashion – a crumpled linen suit, a white shirt, blue deckshoes. He lacked a wig, but his hair had recently been combed. He carried a wodge of glossy documents and a sticky paper bag.

Scarlett glowered at him. “Don’t leap out at me like that! And don’t shout out my name!” She glanced back up the lane, but all was still. “Are you OK? You survived the evening, I take it?”

“More than that.” His smile was as guileless as ever. “I found it very interesting.”

“I bet you did. I see they gave you some religious brochures. What’s in the bag?”

“Two massive buns. They were handing them out after the services. Nice Mentor lady practically thrust them into my hands as I was leaving. Fancy a nibble? They’re good.”

“No, thanks. Did you get the last piece of information we needed?”

“I got it. I had to do a lot of sieving before I found someone who knew the secret.”

“Excellent. So where’s—”

“Turns out,” Albert said, “that half the Mentors aren’t allowed into the inner sanctum. Only the senior ones know the hidden door. The one I found was a little pimply guy, but by the point I’d got to him, I’d chatted to everyone else during the

breaks between the rituals. Goodness, I'd read a *lot* of minds, and it was teas all round each time, which I don't mind admitting is putting a bit of a strain on the old bladder right now. *And* my head's spinning from all the incense in the rituals. I had to sit through a Sikh Gurbani, a Muslim Salah, a Christian Mass *and* a Hindu Puja, which is fairly heavy-going for one evening..." He hesitated. "You seem impatient."

Scarlett spoke softly. "I'm just wondering if you'll ever finish."

"I've finished now. No, wait – there was a super Animist dance too. Lots of high-kicking from the ladies of the town."

In six months, Scarlett had learned the arts of patience and perseverance. She took off her sunglasses, rubbed her eyes and suppressed the urge to clout him. "*Albert*. Where is the secret entrance to the vaults?"

"Main public chamber. Behind some drapes."

"Booby-trapped?"

"Yes."

"Any other dangers?"

"Just what we already know. Poison gas, pitfalls..." He shrugged. "I got the visuals. We shouldn't have any problems. Oh, and I saw glimpses of the vaults themselves. Gold, jewels, piles of banknotes... You know, all that stuff you like." He opened the paper bag, took a bite of bun. "Are we still going ahead with it?"

The old thrill was running through Scarlett, dark joy at the imminence of action. "Of course we're going ahead. Did you learn anything else?"

"Yes. There are two watchmen in the foyer tonight. Plus a Mentor sentry walking in the gardens. I spoke to him in person,

and he had lots to say about building up my religious portfolio. He said I should pick two starter-faiths – Judaism and Shintoism, say – and see how they worked for me over a twelve-month period. After that, I could diversify into—”

Scarlett held up a hand. “Yes, fascinating. Right now it’s the *guard* himself I’m interested in. What can you tell me about him?”

Albert chewed, considering. “He’s big and hairy, and his name is Bert.”

“Any *relevant* information?”

“He carries a gun under his robes. Also a ritual sword. He’s been trained, knows how to handle himself. Violence in his past. Judging from the few minutes I was reading his mind, these days he’s mainly interested in rice wine, poker and girls from the Kenilworth district.” Albert spoke thoughtfully. “You know, for a Mentor, I don’t think he’s particularly spiritual.”

Scarlett snorted. “Of *course* he’s not. None of them are. All right, you’ve done brilliantly, Albert. We don’t need to wait any longer. Let’s go.”

They continued down the lane, Scarlett leading, Albert eating his bun. Moonlight cut diagonally across them, silvering the far verge, but the side by the wall was black. Scarlett’s senses crackled with anticipation. *This* was it: this was what she lived for. *Now* she was alive. *Now* the drab world leaped into exquisite focus: the shadows pooling darker, the moonlight gleaming brighter, her clothes tingling against her skin. Each sound, each smell, the very taste of the air was invested with rich significance. Danger or opportunity might be hidden in each detail.

Scarlett had already surveyed the wall, found a spot where the flaking mortar between the bricks gave good purchase.

She had left a stone in the gutter to mark the place. When they reached it, she waited again, watching, listening. The sounds of the town were faint, or at least fainter than Albert's chewing. Moonlight and shadows. She opened the cloth bag, drew out her gun-belt and strapped it on. For the first time in four days, she felt properly dressed.

She set her fingers to the wall – and hesitated.

“Albert,” she said, “will you *stop* eating so loudly? You're like a marsh-ox from the steppe. All that slurping and chomping will bring the militia down on us.”

“Sorry. It's my nerves, I think.”

“No, it isn't. We've done six bank robberies. This is no different. Put the bun down.”

“It is a *bit* different, Scarlett. You know the stories about this place.”

“Yeah. And I don't believe a word of any of them. Apart from the details about the gold.”

“If you say so.” A final frenzy of chewing and swallowing followed. The pamphlets were cast aside; Albert wiped his fingers on his jacket. “There. I'm ready.”

“Right. The rucksack's in the bag. Put it on. Wait till you hear my whistle, then join me.”

The wall was maybe twelve feet high; it took Scarlett eleven seconds to scale it. At the top, she straddled the stones, keeping low, looking out over the compound. The tree-lined gardens of the Faith House formed a great black rectangle, surrounded by the huddled lights of modern Warwick. To the north, immeasurably greater, the vast ruined arches and girders of the Old Town gleamed like bones against the stars.

There were one or two lights burning in the separate dormitory building beyond the trees, where most of the Mentors would now be retiring to rest; but the Faith House itself was a grey moonlit mass, a blocky, sprawling shadow sleeping beneath its minarets and spires. Robbers had never penetrated it. Even the formidable criminal fraternity known as the Brothers of the Hand, Scarlett's old employers, was said to have tried and failed. Its reputation – both for its gold and the intricacy of its dark defences – extended across the kingdoms. It was supposed to be invulnerable.

Scarlett grinned. But *that* wasn't reckoning on the unusual abilities of Albert Browne.

She whistled quietly. Presently she heard a tremendous puffing and groaning coming from below. Albert appeared, very out of breath, and hauled himself atop the wall. A drowning one-armed man clambering into a lifeboat would have made less fuss about it.

Scarlett glared down at him. "What's the matter?"

"It's all that tea I had. I can hear myself sloshing."

"Always do a heist on an empty stomach. Rule Number One."

He perched awkwardly beside her. "Have we got to drop down? I think I might burst."

"Really? *That* would be worth seeing..." Scarlett swivelled on the wall and lowered herself swiftly, frowning at the feel of her bare legs against the cold stone. Good disguise or not, a cotton dress wasn't cut out for this kind of work. She missed her trusty old coat and jeans, stowed with the bikes outside town.

Hanging for an instant, she dropped lightly into darkness. The fall was not far; she landed on soft, dry earth, with the

smell of aromatic flowers all around. She stood, alert and silent, listening to the eager beating of her heart. She exulted in the moment, as she always did when she entered the territory of her enemies. Now there was no going back.

Noises overhead. She stepped away from the wall. There was a squeak, the briefest rushing sound, a muffled impact where she'd just been standing. Scarlett sighed and turned her attention to her gun-belt. Yes, all the clips and pouches were in the right positions: ammunition, picklocks, knives... Behind her, she heard Albert get tottering to his feet, brushing soil from his clothes and rucksack.

He drew alongside. "This poor suit is never going to be the same again."

"Who cares? We're never going to be in Warwick again, either."

"True. It would be unwise. I'm sad about that, in a way."

Scarlett was moving softly off between the trees. The moon was bright and had lent the earth its silver sheen. "Sad? Why?"

"Well, it's like every place we rob. There's so much history here. The eerie ruins, the curious local customs... Some of the people are quite nice too."

Scarlett snorted. This was the amazing thing about Albert. Six months of an outlaw's life, and he still managed to retain his incorrigible positivity. "Albert. You've seen the posters. We're Public Enemies Number One. If they catch us, if they find out who we are, they'd string us up in the central square. They'd torture us, then kill us horribly. Everyone wants us dead."

"I know ... but aside from that."

"There *is* no 'aside'. These are people of the Towns. They're cruel, vindictive and hateful, as I keep saying. And the Mentors are

worst of all. Look at the post there. It's all the evidence you need." She slowed; they had come to the edge of the trees. A gravel path and a broad strip of silvered grass ran up towards the Faith House. Not far away, the path bifurcated around a circular pool, dark as ink, its rim of white tiles symbolizing the all-encompassing circle of the Faith Houses, the way it embraced every permitted religion. But here too was a dais, on which stood a slim and upright pole – the whipping post. Scarlett's eyes glinted. Tomorrow the Mentors would use it again on three more victims.

Well, with luck they'd have other things to think about by then.

They did not move for a while, but stood still and watched the gardens. It was always as well not to be hasty at such times. Nothing stirred up at the house itself. The great façade was blank white plaster, pitted and stained with age. You could see the curved brick steps that led up to the entrance foyer. Light showed from a single small window above the doors.

Presently they moved towards the building, keeping to the trees.

"You mentioned our Wanted posters just now," Albert said. "Did you take a look at them while you were passing? A proper look? Seems the reward's gone up to £25,000."

"Yeah. I saw that."

"You realize it used to be £20,000 just for me. That means you're worth £5,000 now, Scarlett. Well done."

He was smiling at her, and she grinned back. "Get lost. We'll be worth a whole lot more after tonight, if all goes well... OK, we need to cross the lawns. We go straight to the door, burst in, deal with the watchmen inside. Are you ready?"

“Yes.” There was a pause. “Well, actually not quite.” Albert cleared his throat. “You know, it’s all that tea...”

Scarlett rolled her eyes. If he didn’t, he’d never be able to concentrate. “Shiva! All right, but be quick about it. The nearest tree.”

He flitted away on stiff-legged strides, and Scarlett stood looking out across the gardens. The whipping post was lit by moonlight; try as she might, her gaze kept returning to it. A cloud passed across the moon, and the post vanished. For a moment Scarlett’s focus changed; she saw three different posts, standing in the sunshine of a golden dawn...

She blinked fiercely, wiped the image away. Footsteps on the grass: Albert returning from the bushes. Only it wasn’t Albert. It was a man in the long black robes of a Faith House Mentor, appearing from round the corner of the building. The sentry had a squat, broad torso, a ruddied face, black hair slicked back long over his high white collar. He and Scarlett noticed each another at the exact same time. Scarlett was the first to react. She started forwards, reaching for her belt. The sentry moved swiftly too. His right hand pulled clear of his robes, holding a pistol. In the same instant, a knife left Scarlett’s hand; it struck the man’s wrist, handle-first, knocking the gun from his grip.

They were both still moving forwards. Now the Mentor’s left hand appeared; it held a long knife, curved like a bird’s beak. He lunged close, swiped viciously at Scarlett’s arm. She swivelled aside; the blade tip cracked against the ground. The guard lashed sideways at waist height. Scarlett dropped forwards onto her hands, so that the knife swept over her head, passing through her upflung hair like a fish through waterweeds. She swung a leg

in a vicious horizontal circle, connecting with the man's shins and making him stumble away. A moment more, she was on her feet again. He swung the knife desperately; curling round it, she kicked out again, so that her pumps made contact with the softest, most central portion of his trousers. There was a noise like a deflating balloon. The sentry folded inwards. As his chin came down, Scarlett met it with a vicious uppercut. Another noise: this one like an egg cracking. The man seemed newly boneless. He went flying back, landed heavily, relaxed into a spreadeagled star shape on the ground.

Scarlett blew her blonde fringe out of her eyes and straightened. She rubbed briefly at her knuckles. They ached.

Albert came out from behind the trees, fiddling with his buttons. "Phew, *that's* better... I feel much lighter now." He pulled up short. "Oh, who's this?"

Scarlett glared at him. "*I* don't know, do I? Was it Bert or Bill? You're the one who met him. Now hurry up and take hold of his legs. We need to tie him somewhere out of sight."

She was pleased to see that Albert didn't hesitate, didn't ask questions, but just did what he was asked. The heist had properly started. The body on the floor had snapped him into line. Six months it had taken to iron out his quirkiest, most life-threatening idiosyncrasies, but she'd just about managed it. In an emergency situation, he was almost as well-drilled as her.

They removed the unconscious sentry, gagged and bound him, left him trussed against a tree. Then they returned to the Faith House. Brightness still shone from the room beyond the door.

The night was silent. The house and its contents waited.

Albert went to the door, looked towards the wood a moment. He glanced back at Scarlett and in silence held up two fingers. Then he raised his thumb.

Two men, as predicted. They were expecting nothing.

Scarlett nodded, took out her pistol. She moved towards the door.



A decorative frame with a double-line border and ornate, curved corners. In the center of the frame is the number 3.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, ALBERT BROWNE FELT THAT HIS LIFE of crime was going rather well. Yes, there *were* drawbacks, but this was to be expected with any career, and the benefits more than outweighed them. He was confident of this because, in quieter moments – whenever he wasn't being chased, hunted, or shot at – he'd gone so far as to compare pros and cons.

The top four drawbacks were:

1. The constant prospect of violent death.
2. The abusive language that frequently came his way.
3. The endless nights camped out in the wilderness, with thorns poking into intimate areas of his anatomy, and wolves and dire-bears prowling avidly beyond the sulphur sticks.
4. The twinges of guilt that afflicted him from time to time.

Number four was bothering him a bit that evening. Take Bert the Mentor. One moment, he'd been chatting agreeably with the fellow; an hour later, he'd been tying his lolling body to a stump and gagging him with one of his own socks. No doubt the fellow deserved it; nevertheless, the disconnect was real. And now he had the sensation again, as he looked at the two black-suited

watchmen, lying trussed and gagged on the floor of the Faith House foyer. Scarlett was just dragging them over behind their Welcome Desk, out of view of the door. Albert couldn't help feeling sorry for them, despite their furiously bulging eyes, their muffled curses and the naked hostility of their thoughts. He flashed them an apologetic smile as he tidied the brochures that had been scattered in the fight. It would be *so* much nicer to live in a society where he and Scarlett could share pleasant conversation with such men, instead of bursting in, knocking them smartly on the heads, and tying them up with fifteen yards of prime knicker elastic, purchased at a Warwick fabric store the previous day. Perhaps one day the world would change for the better. Albert certainly hoped so.

Meanwhile, the four top benefits of the roving outlaw life were:

1. Being with Scarlett.
2. Being free.
3. Being fit (this due, in no small part, to the endless getaway rides).
4. Travelling the Seven Kingdoms, seeing its wonders, meeting its people, uncovering its beauties and its mysteries, and so satisfying the craving for knowledge that hunkered at the depths of his being.

On this current expedition, point four had been particularly satisfactory. They had left the fens and open skies of Anglia, crossed the ruined tarmac stripway of the Great North Road and cycled through the hills and gorges of the ash-belt, sampling some delightful karst scenery, before passing several days in the fascinating town of Warwick.

Now they were about to explore its celebrated Faith House too.

Scarlett was on the move again. She crossed the room, her blonde wig shining, her gun and burgling tools swinging incongruously against her dress. Albert pattered over to meet her, past the plastic charity box with its collection of pennies, the rack of brochures, the tea urns, the rows of simple wooden chairs... He smiled ruefully: a short while ago, he'd been standing here, disguised as a prospective worshipper ... now he was robbing the place! Yes, it was the sheer variety of experience he appreciated. No two jobs were ever the same.

They reached the door at the end of the foyer, where Scarlett paused to listen. Albert adjusted his rucksack and looked back at the huddled men. "Are they OK?"

"Well, I haven't given them each a pillow, but I think they can just about breathe..." She pushed at the door with a cautious boot. "Don't look at me like that. I've got this far without shooting anyone, Albert... You should be pleased."

"It certainly makes a change." He scanned the room beyond: everything was still.

"I think I'm very restrained these days. Apart from those bandits the other night, I haven't shot anyone for..." Scarlett frowned slightly, trying to recall.

"For almost a week. The sentry at the Mercian border, remember?"

"Oh, he doesn't count – I just winged him. He shouldn't have tried to stop us riding past." She slipped through the door. "Which way is it now?"

"'Hall 2'. Far side of this atrium. All the same, that Mercian sentry ... a simple 'sod off' would have sufficed, surely."

“Oh, don’t worry. I think I said that too.”

The central atrium was a cool, dim space of smoothed stone and pitted brick, lit with soft electric lights and hung with drapes of grey and gold. It smelled strongly of incense. Neutrally coloured doors opened to halls of worship on either side, and there was a curtained arch at the end. They strode straight towards this without delay.

Scarlett’s efficiency of purpose was one thing she’d taught Albert during his six months at her side. There were countless others too – some of them even legal. He knew how to choose a safe spot for a camp; how to make a cooking fire; how to set snares for mud-rats and weasels; and how to keep blood-moles from surfacing under your sleeping bag during the night. He knew the six top uses for a V-shaped stick; the best way to skin and debone a rabbit; how to find his way across a tektite-field, when compasses were useless and the buzzing in your head could not be stilled; how to draw water from a gourd-tree, how to walk safely through black marshland; even how to cross a burning zone without a pair of fireproof boots. He had bartered with vagabonds, broken bread with thieves and lepers, joined zealots in their odd devotions. He had travelled on the motorized convoys that braved the Great North Road, and the barques that hugged the Anglian coasts. He’d seen the Iron Mounds from afar and felt their magnetic pulses jolt his bones. In short, he’d *lived* a little, and the shuttered privations of his childhood in the prison of Stonemoor seemed an age ago.

It went without saying that Scarlett had taught him certain *other* abilities too, techniques of stealth and silence that came in handy during their expeditions. Skills at lock-picking, window-easing

and door-jesting; little flourishes of knife and jemmy that helped gain access to safes and filing cabinets and desk drawers... This is not to say that Albert was particularly good at any of this, but these days he rarely put their lives in danger through sheer natural incompetence, which was itself a result.

They arrived at the archway at the end of the atrium. Hall 2, beyond it, was a place of shade and silence, lined with purple drapes. Scarlett paused now, listening. “So,” she murmured, “the entrance to the secret rooms is here, behind the curtains?”

“If the pimply guy had it right.”

“I suppose he’d know, pimples notwithstanding. Other Mentors inside?”

“Possibly.”

“Traps?”

“Definitely. The real defences start here.”

The smell of incense was stronger in the inner room. Ranks of low stools curved around a blank, semicircular space where ceremonies of worship could be held. A neat display stand still held the list of the rituals that Albert had attended earlier that evening. It was not the first Faith House they had broken into, and he had come to understand the way they worked – their mix of the theatrical and the mundane. They were places of order, first and foremost, no matter which god you worshipped, which rites you chose for your portfolio. Orderliness was all. You could see it in each room, in the carefully arranged drapes and candles, the gold and glimmer, the cosiness, the comfy chairs, and the tea urns in the vestibule. It was a place of public chatter, of warmth and well-made things. Everything was kept on a human scale, and the world beyond was barred to it. Nowhere were there windows

facing out to stark reality – to the fractured ruins of old Warwick or (worse) the beast-haunted hills beyond. But there *were* artful glimpses of the numinous: portals into blackness, high windows looking onto painted stars, thin alcoves with statues of gods and saints standing in husky dimness. It was deliberately created to be a house of mystery and shadow, and—

“*Albert.*”

“Yes, Scarlett?”

“I just asked you a question.”

“Did you? What was it?”

“Stay focused! We’re on a job, remember! I said: ‘Where’s the hidden door?’”

“Left-hand curtain. Be careful with the levers.” Albert hefted the rucksack more comfortably onto his shoulders. It was his job to carry that. Scarlett had the tools and gun.

She pulled aside the drapes, revealing the flat outline of a doorway and three short, plastic-handled levers protruding from the wall. She looked at him questioningly.

“The one on the right,” Albert said. “The other two will kill us horribly.”

“Uh-huh ... OK. Do I pull it up or down?”

“Up. The door swings inwards, I believe.”

“Anyone behind it?”

Albert concentrated, opened his mind to the dark and the silence. “No.”

“Fine.” She pulled the lever without hesitation, and the door indeed swung inwards, much more swiftly than Albert had expected. The entrance corridor of the inner sanctum of the Warwick Faith House stretched away in darkness. Far away was a lantern, burning.

They stood and looked at it. Somewhere beyond, if the stories whispered across the Seven Kingdoms were true, if the startling images Albert had sensed when sieving the Mentors were not deceptive, untold wealth was waiting.

It was a very inviting corridor.

Neither of them moved.

“Well, it *seems* all right,” Albert said.

Scarlett scowled at the glimmering lantern in the distance, at its little halo of molten gold. “Doesn’t it? That’s what I don’t like. Anything in anyone’s thoughts about this corridor?”

Albert considered. The images he had stolen from the Mentors’ minds shimmered dimly in front of him, like fragments of a dream. “Not specifically. There are definitely flip-stones somewhere, but I couldn’t get the exact location. I asked lots of leading questions about the defences of the House, but most of the people were too busy trying to give me brochures. I *do* know the way to the vault. It’s down the end there, make a right, and then straight on.”

“All in good time...” Scarlett took her torch from her belt and slanted its light ahead of them. The floor tiles were large and grey and rectangular, each stretching the width of the corridor. Every fifth one was slightly discoloured – paler, somehow, than the rest. She wrinkled her nose. “They don’t look *quite* so trodden on, do they?” she said.

Albert nodded. “Dusty with disuse, in fact.”

“Yeah... Let’s keep them that way.”

They moved slowly down the corridor, adjusting their strides to step over every fifth tile. As ever, Scarlett was calm, deliberate, unruffled. She kept the torch circling systematically, looking for oddities in the walls or ceiling, but the plaster was blank and bare.

Whenever she paused, Albert looked back over his shoulder at the open door behind them, where a tiny strip of Hall 2 could still be seen beyond the drapes. It was a deep grey space, empty and still. Albert realized he rather disliked it.

“We should have shut that door,” he said.

“No. We may need a rapid exit...” She snatched at his arm. “Careful! Watch your step!”

Albert gave a shimmy of fright, staring at the innocuous pale tile he had nearly trodden on. Certain unpleasant rumours about the Warwick Faith House returned unbidden to his mind.

“Scarlett, what *do* you think’s down there?”

“Under the flip-stones?” She grinned back at him. She was already moving on. “Well, I don’t reckon it’s giant man-eating frogs, if that’s what you’re worrying about.”

“You don’t believe those stories? Good. Why?”

“Because of the logistics. How d’you keep a bunch of whopping frogs healthy, trapped down there? What do you feed them on? How d’you stop them eating each other?” She gave a shrug of thin shoulders. “Nope, it’s nonsense, take it from me. But, hey, we’ll never know, will we? Because *we’re not treading on the tiles...* And now, what do you make of this?”

They were almost at the end of the corridor, with closed arched doors to the left and right. Ahead of them, the lantern glimmered enticingly on a high shelf, below which was a wooden lectern with a book resting on it. Albert stopped short: the image was identical to one he’d seen in a Mentor’s mind, when he had asked about their defences.

“It’s one of their holy books,” he said. “It’s bound in Tainted skin, and it’s got gems pasted on the spine. Looks tempting, but

it's a trap." His gaze flitted to the ceiling. "Yes, there! Above the door. See the tiny pipe? It's where the gas comes out if we take the book."

Scarlett grinned at him. "Well done. I'd have missed that. Give me a bunk-up, will you? Then look away. It's awkward clambering about in this stupid dress."

She opened a wallet on her belt and took out the cotton wool padding they had brought for the purpose. Then she stepped onto Albert's hands, and so jumped to the lectern and then the shelf. From here she leaned out, plugged the pipe and jumped lightly down again.

While waiting for her, Albert had been obediently glancing back up the long, blank corridor. It was still empty. "What about this holy book?" he asked.

"We nick it. Joe can get a good price for the jewels." Scarlett plucked the book off the lectern. There was a slight click, but nothing else happened; she handed it to Albert, who put it in his rucksack. "And now we go right," she said. "Anyone behind this door?"

He concentrated, searched for nearby thoughts. "No."

"Fine."

She opened the door; beyond it was a large square room, lit by flickering electric light. There were several doors out, tables and comfy chairs, and ranks of display cabinets lining the walls. These contained the usual Faith House mementoes – artefacts stretching back to the days of the Frontier Wars. There were guns with which the pioneers shot the Tainted; papers showing grants to the people of Warwick to reclaim the ruins and plough new fields... There were photos too: of the big-moustached first

Mentors; of executions of deviants in the central square; even of the first travelling Faith Houses from which the Mentors spread the doctrine of hope and spiritual connection to the scattered Towns. The Houses in those days were little more than curtained booths, set atop a wooden wagon and reached by scaling a simple ladder. Albert tried to imagine them trundling through the wilderness, avoiding the dangers along the way. How had they kept safe? Perhaps there were fewer Tainted in those days.

As ever, he found himself lingering at the cabinets; as ever, he would have liked to stay and study the old pictures properly. But it was impossible. Scarlett was waiting in the centre of the room.

“Will you hurry it up?” she hissed. “You’re like an old duffer admiring a view. I want to get to the vault.”

“But don’t you think it’s fascinating?” Albert bustled over, his shoes falling softly on the rugs that lined the floor. “So much history! This House is stuffed with it.”

“It’s the fact it’s stuffed with *gold* that interests me,” Scarlett said. And sure enough, her thoughts bore this out. Albert was doing his best to ignore them, out of courtesy, but he could see the images swirling around her head – the vats of coins, the gold and silver bars... Now that she was close to success, her avarice was swelling, pressing in on her cool practicality.

“I don’t think it’s piled up *quite* as high as that,” Albert said.

She glared at him. “Not reading my mind, are you?”

He spread his hands. “If I am, it’s not *my* fault. We’re on a job, so you’re not wearing the hat, plus you’re practically throwing your thoughts at me. It’s like you’re hanging coloured flashing lights on them, they’re that brash and gaudy. Anyway, it’s not how the Mentors saw the vault, that’s all I’m saying.”

“All right. Stop grumbling. Where *is* the vault?”

“Door straight ahead.”

“OK. Watch out for that big pale tile here. Don’t tread on it.”

They circled carefully round, approached the door. Scarlett grasped the handle, pushed her blonde hair out of her face. “Not locked. Anyone behind this door?”

Albert concentrated. “No.”

“Fine.”

She opened the door. Behind it stood a tall bald man in a black suit, holding a long, thin-bladed knife. Without a sound he lunged forwards, stabbing at Scarlett’s heart.

