

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOE ABERCROMBIE

A LITTLE HATRED



"A TALE OF BRUTE FORCE AND
SUBTLE MAGIC SET IN A WORLD ON THE
CUSP OF AN INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION....
BUCKLE YOUR SEATBELTS."

—ROBIN HOBB

A LITTLE HATRED

Book One of The Age of Madness

JOE ABERCROMBIE



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With grim, dark
hugs

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PART I

“The age is running mad after innovation; and all the business of the world is to be done in a new way.”

Dr. Johnson

Blessings and Curses

“Rikke.”

She prised one eye open. A slit of stabbing, sickening brightness.

“Come back.”

She pushed the spit-wet dowel out of her mouth with her tongue and croaked the one word she could think of. “Fuck.”

“There’s my girl!” Isern squatted beside her, necklace of runes and finger bones dangling, grinning that twisted grin that showed the hole in her teeth and offering no help at all. “What did you see?”

Rikke heaved one hand up to grip her head. Felt like if she didn’t hold her skull together, it’d burst. Shapes still fizzed on the inside of her lids, like the glowing smears when you’ve looked at the sun.

“I saw folk falling from a high tower. Dozens of ’em.” She winced at the thought of them hitting the ground. “I saw folk hanged. Rows of ’em.” Her gut cramped at the memory of swinging bodies, dangling feet. “I saw... a battle, maybe? Below a red hill.”

Isern sniffed. “This is the North. Takes no magic to see a battle coming. What else?”

“I saw Uffrith burning.” Rikke could almost smell the smoke still. She pressed her hand to her left eye. Felt hot. Burning hot.

“What else?”

“I saw a wolf eat the sun. Then a lion ate the wolf. Then a lamb ate the lion. Then an owl ate the lamb.”

“Must’ve been a real monster of an owl.”

“Or a tiny little lamb, I guess? What does it mean?”

Isern held a fingertip to her scarred lips, the way she did when she was on the verge of deep pronouncements. “I’ve no frigging clue. Mayhap the turning of time’s wheel shall unlock the secrets of these visions.”

Rikke spat, but her mouth still tasted like despair. “So... wait and see.”

“Eleven times out of twelve, that’s the best course.” Isern scratched at the hollow above her collarbone and winked. “But if I said it that way, no one would reckon me a deep thinker.”

“Well, I can unveil two secrets right away.” Rikke groaned as she pushed herself up onto one elbow. “My head hurts and I shat myself.”

“That second one’s no secret, anyone with a nose is party to it.”

“Shitty Rikke, they’ll call me.” She wrinkled her nose as she shifted. “And not for the first time.”

“Your problem is in caring what they call you.”

“My problem is I’m cursed with fits.”

Isern tapped under her left eye. “You say cursed with fits, I say blessed with the Long Eye.”

“Huh.” Rikke rolled onto her knees and her stomach kept on rolling and tickled her throat with sick. By the dead, she felt sore and squeezed out. Twice the pain of a night at the ale cup and none of the sweet memories. “Doesn’t feel like much of a blessing to me,” she muttered, once she’d risked a little burp and fought her guts to a draw.

“There are few blessings without a curse hidden inside, nor curses without a whiff of blessing.” Isern carved a little piece of chagga from a dried-out chunk. “Like most things, it’s a matter of how you look at it.”

“Very profound.”

“As always.”

“Maybe someone whose head hurt less would enjoy your wisdom more.”

Isern licked her fingertips, rolled the chagga into a pellet and offered it to Rikke. “I am a bottomless well of revelation but cannot force the ignorant to drink. Now get your trousers off.” She barked out that savage laugh of hers.

“Words many a man has longed to hear me say.”

Rikke sat with her back to one of the snow-capped standing stones, eyes narrowed as the sun flashed through the dripping branches, the fur cloak her father gave her hugged around her shoulders and the raw wind wafting around her bare arse. She chewed chagga and chased the itches that danced all over her with black-edged fingernails, trying to calm her mangled nerves and shake off the memories of that tower, and those hanged, and of Uffrith burning.

“Visions,” she muttered. “A curse for sure.”

Isern squelched up the bank with Rikke’s dripping trousers. “Clean as new snow! Your only stench now shall be of youth and disappointment.”

“You’re one to talk of stenches, Isern-i-Phail.”

Isern raised her sinewy, tattooed arm, sniffed at her pit and gave a satisfied sigh. “I’ve a goodly, earthy, womanly savour of a kind much loved by the moon. If you’re rattled by an odour, you picked the wrong companion.”

Rikke spat chagga juice but messed it up and got most of it down her chin. “If you think I picked any part of this, you’re mad.”

“They said the same thing about my da.”

“He was mad as a sack of owls, you’re always saying so!”

“Aye, well, one person’s mad is another’s remarkable. Need I observe you’re a long leap from ordinary yourself? You kicked so hard this time you nearly kicked your boots off. Might have to rope you in future, make sure you don’t crack your nut and end up a drooler like my brother Brait. At least he can keep his shit in, mind you.”

“My thanks for that.”

“No bother.” Isern made a little diamond from her fingers and squinted through it at the sun. “Past time we were on our way. High deeds are being done today. Or maybe low ones.” And she dropped the trousers in Rikke’s lap. “Best dress yourself.”

“What, wet? They’ll chafe.”

“Chafe?” Isern snorted. “That’s the limit o’ your worries?”

“My head still aches so bad I can feel it in my teeth.” Rikke wanted to shout but knew it’d hurt too much, so she had to whine it soft instead. “I need no more small discomforts.”

“Life is small discomforts, girl! They’re how you know you *are* alive.” And Isern hacked that laugh out again, slapped happily at Rikke’s shoulder and sent her stumbling sideways. “You can walk with your plump white arse hanging out if that’s your pleasure, but you’ll be walking one way or the other.”

“A curse,” grumbled Rikke as she wriggled into her clammy trousers. “Definitely a curse.”

“So... you really think I’ve got the Long Eye?”

Isern strode on through the woods with that loping gait that, however fast Rikke walked, always left her an uncomfortable half-step behind. “You really think I’d be pissing my efforts away on you otherwise?”

Rikke sighed. “Guess not. Just, in the songs, it’s a thing witches and magi and deep-wise folk used to see into the fog of what comes. Not a thing that makes idiots fall down and shit themselves.”

“In case you never noticed, bards have a habit of dressing things up. There is a fine living, d’you see, in songs about deep-wise witches, but in shitty idiots, less.”

Rikke sadly conceded the truth of that.

“And proving you have the Long Eye is no simple matter. You cannot force it open. You must coax it.” And Isern tickled Rikke under the chin and made her jerk away. “Take it up to the sacred places where the old stones stand so the moon might shine full upon it. But it’ll see what it sees when it chooses, even so.”

“Uffrith on fire, though?” Rikke was feeling a weight of worry now they were down from the High Places and getting close to home. The dead knew she hadn’t always been happy in Uffrith, but she’d no wish to see it in flames. “How’s that meant to happen?”

“Carelessness with a cook-fire would do it.” Isern’s eyes slid sideways.

“Though up here in the North, I’d say war’s a more likely cause of cities aflame.”

“War?”

“It’s when a fight gets so big almost no one comes out of it well.”

“I know what it bloody is.” Rikke had a spot of fear growing at the nape of her neck which she couldn’t shrug off however much she wriggled her shoulders. “But there’s been peace in the North all my lifetime.”

“My da used to say times of peace are when the wise prepare for violence.”

“Your da was mad as a bootful of dung.”

“And what does your da say? Few men so sane as the Dogman.”

Rikke wriggled her shoulders one more time, but nothing helped. “He says hope for the best and prepare for the worst.”

“Sound advice, say I.”

“But he lived through some black times. Always fighting. Against Bethod. Against Black Dow. Things were different then.”

Isern snorted. “No, they weren’t. I was there when your father fought Bethod, up in the High Places with the Bloody-Nine beside him.”

Rikke blinked at her. “You can’t have been ten years old.”

“Old enough to kill a man.”

“What?”

“Used to carry my da’s hammer, ’cause the smallest should take the heaviest load, but that day he was fighting with the hammer so I had his spear. This very one.” Its butt tapped the rhythm of their walking on the path. “My da knocked a man down, and he was trying to get up, and I stabbed him right up the arse.”

“With that spear?” Rikke had come to think of it as just a stick Isern carried. A stick that happened to have a deerskin cover over one end. She didn’t like thinking there was a blade under there. Especially not one that had been up some poor bastard’s arse.

“Well, it’s had a few new shafts since then, but—” Isern stopped dead, tattooed hand raised and eyes narrowed. All Rikke could hear was

whispering branches, the tap, tap of drips from the melting snow, the tweet, tweet of birds in the budding trees.

Rikke leaned towards her. "What's the—"

"Nock a shaft to your bow and keep 'em talking," whispered Isern.

"Who?"

"Failing that, show 'em your teeth. You're blessed with fine teeth." And she darted off the road and into the trees.

"My teeth?" hissed Rikke, but Isern's flitting shadow had already vanished in the brambles.

That was when she heard a man's voice. "Sure this is the way?"

She'd had her bow over her shoulder hoping for a deer and now she shrugged it off, fumbled out an arrow and nearly dropped it, managed to get it nocked in spite of a flurry of nervy twitches up her arm.

"We was told check the woods." A deeper, harder, scarier voice. "Do these look like woods?"

She had a sudden panic it might just be a squirrel arrow, checked it was a proper broadhead.

"Forest, I guess."

Laughter. "What's the bloody difference?"

An old man came around the bend in the road. He'd a staff in his hand, and he lowered it, metal gleaming in the dappled light, and Rikke realised it wasn't a staff but a spear, and she felt the worry spread out from that spot on her neck to the roots of her hair.

There were three of them. The old one had a sorry look like none of this was his idea. Next came a nervous lad with a shield and a short axe. Finally, there was a big man with a heavy beard and a heavier frown. Rikke didn't like the look of him at all.

Her father always said don't point arrows at folk unless you mean to see 'em dead, so she drew her bow halfway and pointed it at the road.

"Best hold still," she said.

The old one stared at her. "Girl, you have a ring through your nose."

"I am aware." And Rikke stuck her tongue out and touched the tip to it.

“It keeps me tethered.”

“You might wander off?”

“My thoughts might.”

“Is it gold?” asked the lad.

“Copper,” she lied, since gold is apt to turn unpleasant meetings into deadly ones.

“And the paint?”

“The mark of the cross is a goodly mark much loved by the moon. The Long Eye is the left eye and the cross will keep its sight true through the fog of what comes.” She turned her head and spat chagga juice without taking her eyes off them, then added, “Maybe,” since she wasn’t sure the cross had done a thing but get smeared on her pillow when she forgot to wipe it off of an evening.

She wasn’t the only doubter. “You mad?” growled the big man.

Rikke sighed. Far from the first time she’d fielded that question. “One person’s mad is another’s remarkable.”

“Be a fine thing if you were to put that bow down,” said the old one.

“I like it where it is.” Though she definitely didn’t, it was getting all sticky in her hand, shoulder aching from the effort of holding it half-drawn and a twitch in her neck starting up that she worried might jerk the string loose.

Seemed the lad trusted her to hold it even less than she did, peering at her over the rim of his shield. It was only then she noticed what was painted on it.

“You’ve a wolf on your shield,” she said.

“Stour Nightfall’s mark,” growled the big man, with a hint of pride, and Rikke saw he had a wolf on his shield, too, though his was scuffed almost back to the wood.

“You’re Nightfall’s men?” The fear was spreading all the way into her guts now. “What you doing down here?”

“Putting an end to the Dogman and his arse-lickers, and bringing Uffrith back into the North where it belongs.”

Rikke’s knuckles whitened around her bow, fear turning to anger. “You’re