

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a medieval battle. In the foreground, a large, tattered blue flag with a white emblem (a stylized 'S' or a similar symbol) flies from a pole. Behind the flag, a chaotic battle scene unfolds with soldiers on horseback and on foot, amidst smoke and fire. The sky is a dramatic mix of orange, red, and blue, suggesting a sunset or a fire in the distance.

JOE ABERCROMBIE

SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE TROUBLE *with* PEACE

‘Joe Abercrombie writes with terrifying wit, humour and heart’

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THE TROUBLE WITH PEACE

Book Two of The Age of Madness

JOE ABERCROMBIE



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With grim, dark

hugs

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PART IV

“In times of peace, the warlike man attacks himself.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

The World's Wrongs

“I hope no one minds if we dispense with this for now?” Orso tossed his circlet down, gold twinkling in a dusty shaft of spring sunlight as it spun around and around. “Damn thing chafes rather.” He rubbed at the sore spots it had left above his temples. There was a metaphor there somewhere. The burden of power, the weight of a crown. But his Closed Council had no doubt heard all that before.

The moment he sat they began to drag out their own chairs, wincing as old backs bent, grunting as old arses settled on hard wood, grumbling as old knees were eased under the tottering heaps of paper on the table.

“Where’s the surveyor general?” someone asked, nodding at an empty chair.

“Out with his bladder.” There was a chorus of groans.

“One can win a thousand battles.” Lord Marshal Brint worried at that lady’s ring on his little finger, gazing into the middle distance as though at an opposing army. “But in the end, no man can defeat his own bladder.”

As the youngest in the room by some thirty years, Orso ranked his bladder among his least interesting organs. “One issue before we begin,” he said.

All eyes turned towards him. Apart from those of Bayaz, down at the foot of the table. The legendary wizard continued to gaze out of the window, towards the palace gardens which were just beginning to bud.

“I am set on making a grand tour of the Union.” Orso did his best to sound authoritative. Regal, even. “To visit every province. Every major city.

When was the last time a monarch visited Starikland? Did my father ever go?"

Arch Lector Glokta grimaced. Even more than usual. "Starikland was not considered safe, Your Majesty."

"Starikland has always been afflicted with a restless temper." Lord Chancellor Gorodets was absently smoothing his long beard into a point, fluffing it up, then smoothing it again. "Now more than ever."

"But I have to connect with the *people*." Orso thumped the table to give it emphasis. They needed some *feeling* in here. Everything in the White Chamber was cold, dry, bloodless calculation. "Show them we're all part of the same great endeavour. The same *family*. It's supposed to be a Union, isn't it? We need to bloody *unite*."

Orso had never wanted to be king. He enjoyed it even less than being crown prince, if that was possible. But now that he *was* king, he was determined to do some good with it.

Lord Chamberlain Hoff tapped at the table in limp applause. "A *wonderful* idea, Your Majesty."

"Wonderful," echoed High Justice Bruckel, who had the conversational style of a woodpecker and a beak not dissimilar. "Idea."

"Noble sentiments, well expressed," agreed Gorodets, though his appreciation did not quite reach his eyes.

One old man fussed with some papers. Another frowned into his wine as though something had died in it. Gorodets was still stroking his beard, but now looked as if he could taste piss.

"But?" Orso was learning that in the Closed Council there was always at least one *but*.

"But..." Hoff glanced to Bayaz, who gave permission with the slightest nod. "It might be best to wait for a more *auspicious* moment. A more *settled* time. There are so many challenges *here* which require Your Majesty's attention."

The high justice puffed out a heavy breath. "Many. Challenges."

Orso delivered something between a growl and a sigh. His father had

always despised the White Chamber and its hard, stark chairs. Despised the hard, stark men who sat on them. He had warned Orso that no good was ever done in the Closed Council. But if not here, where? This cramped, stuffy, featureless little room was where the power lay. “Are you suggesting the machinery of government would grind to a halt without me?” he asked. “I think you over-sugar the pudding.”

“There are issues the monarch must be *seen* to attend to,” said Glokta. “The Breakers were dealt a crippling blow in Valbeck.”

“A hard task well done, Your Majesty,” Hoff drooled out, with cloying sycophancy.

“But they are far from eradicated. And those that escaped have become... even more extreme in their opinions.”

“Disruption among the workers.” High Justice Bruckel rapidly shook his bony head. “Strikes. Organising. Attacks on staff and property.”

“And the damn *pamphlets*,” said Brint, to a collective groan.

“Damn. Pamphlets.”

“Used to think education was merely wasted on the commoners. Now I say it’s a positive *danger*.”

“This bloody Weaver can turn a phrase.”

“Not to mention an obscene etching.”

“They incite the populace to disobedience!”

“To disaffection!”

“They talk of a *Great Change* coming.”

A flurry of twitches ran up the left side of Glokta’s wasted face. “They blame the Open Council.” And published caricatures of them as pigs fighting over the trough. “They blame the Closed Council.” And published caricatures of them fucking each other. “They blame His Majesty.” And published caricatures of him fucking anything. “They blame the banks.”

“They promote the ridiculous rumour that the debt... to the Banking House of Valint and Balk... has crippled the state...” Gorodets trailed off, leaving the room in nervous silence.

Bayaz finally tore his hard, green eyes from the window to glare down the

table. "This flood of disinformation must be stemmed."

"We have destroyed a dozen presses," grated Glokta, "but they build new ones, and smaller all the time. Now any fool can *write*, and *print*, and air their *opinions*."

"Progress," lamented Bruckel, rolling his eyes to the ceiling.

"The Breakers are like bloody moles in a garden," growled Lord Marshal Rucksted, who had turned his chair slightly sideways-on to give an impression of fearless dash. "You kill five, pour a celebratory glass, then in the morning your lawn's covered in new bloody molehills."

"More irritating than my bladder," said Brint, to widespread chuckling.

Glokta sucked at his empty gums with a faint squelch. "And then there are the Burners."

"Lunatics!" snapped Hoff. "This woman *Judge*."

Shudders of distaste about the table. At the notion of such a thing as a woman, or at the notion of this particular one, it was hard to say.

"I hear a mill owner was found murdered on the road to Keln." Gorodets gave his beard a particularly violent tug. "A pamphlet *nailed* to his face."

Rucksted clasped his big fists on the table. "And there was that fellow choked to death with a thousand copies of the rule-sheet he distributed to his employees..."

"One might almost say our approach has made matters worse," observed Orso. A memory of Malmer drifted up, legs dangling from his cage as it swung with the breeze. "Perhaps we could make some gesture. A minimum wage? Improved working conditions? I heard a recent fire in a mill led to the deaths of fifteen child workers—"

"It would be folly," said Bayaz, his attention already back on the gardens, "to obstruct the free operation of the market."

"The market serves the interests of all," offered the lord chancellor.

"Unprecedented," agreed the high justice. "Prosperity."

"No doubt the child workers would applaud it," said Orso.

"No doubt," agreed Lord Hoff.

"Had they not been burned to death."

“A ladder is of no use if all the rungs are at the top,” said Bayaz.

Orso opened his mouth to retort but High Consul Matstringer got in first. “And we face a veritable cornucopia of adversaries overseas.” The coordinator of the Union’s foreign policy had never yet failed to confuse complexity with insight. “The Gurmish may still be embroiled in all-encompassing predicaments of their own—”

Bayaz gave a rare grunt of satisfaction at that.

“But the Imperials endlessly rattle their swords on our western border, exhorting the populace of Starikland to continued disloyalty, and the Styrians are emboldened in the east.”

“They are building up their *navy*.” Lord Admiral Krepskin roused himself for a heavy-lidded interjection. “New ships. Armed with cannon. While ours *rot* in their docks for lack of investment.”

Bayaz gave a familiar grunt of dissatisfaction at that.

“And they are busy in the shadows,” went on Matstringer, “sowing discord in Westport, enticing the Aldermen to sedition. Why, they have succeeded in scheduling a vote within the month which could see the city secede from the Union!”

The old men competed to display the most patriotic outrage. It was enough to make Orso want to secede from the Union himself.

“Disloyalty,” grumbled the high justice. “Discord.”

“Bloody Styrians!” snarled Rucksted. “Love to work in the shadows.”

“We can work there, too,” said Gloкта softly, in a manner that made the hairs prickle beneath Orso’s braid-heavy uniform. “Some of my very best people are even now ensuring Westport’s loyalty.”

“At least our northern border is secure,” said Orso, desperate to inject some optimism.

“Well...” The high consul crushed his hopes with a prim pursing of the mouth. “The politics of the North are always something of a cauldron. The Dogman is advanced in years. Infirm. No man can divine the fate of his Protectorate in the event of his death. Lord Governor Brock would appear to have forged a strong bond with the new King of the Northmen, Stour

Nightfall—”

“That *has* to be a good thing,” said Orso.

Doubtful glances were traded across the table.

“Unless their bond becomes... *too* strong,” murmured Glokta.

“The young Lord Governor is popular,” agreed Gorodets.

“Damned,” pecked the high justice. “Popular.”

“Handsome lad,” said Brint. “And he’s earned a warrior’s reputation.”

“Angland behind him. Stour as an ally. Could be a threat.”

Rucksted raised his bushy brows very high. “His grandfather, lest we forget, was an infamous bloody traitor!”

“I will not see a man condemned for the actions of his grandfather!” snapped Orso, whose own grandfathers had enjoyed mixed reputations, to say the least. “Leo dan Brock risked his life fighting a duel on my behalf!”

“The job of your Closed Council,” said Glokta, “is to anticipate threats to Your Majesty before they become threats.”

“After may be too late,” threw in Bayaz.

“People are... discomfited by the death of your father,” said Gorodets. “So young. So unexpected.”

“Young. Unexpected.”

“And you, Your Majesty, are—”

“Despised?” offered Orso.

Gorodets gave an indulgent smile. “*Untried*. At times like this, people yearn for stability.”

“Indeed. It would without doubt be a very fine thing if Your Majesty were...” Lord Hoff cleared his throat. “To marry?”

Orso closed his eyes and pressed finger and thumb against them. “Must we?” Marriage was the last thing he wanted to discuss. He still had Savine’s note in a drawer beside his bed. Still looked at that brutal little line every evening, as one might pick at a scab. *My answer must be no. I would ask you not to contact me again. Ever.*

Hoff cleared his throat once more. “A new king always finds himself in an uncertain position.”

“A king with no heir, doubly so,” said Glokta.

“The absence of clear succession gives a troubling impression of impermanence,” observed Matstringer.

“Perhaps with the help of Her Majesty your mother, I might draw up a list of eligible ladies, both at home and abroad?” Hoff cleared his throat yet a third time. “A *new* list... that is.”

“By all means,” growled Orso, pronouncing each word with cutting precision.

“Then there is Fedor dan Wetterlant,” murmured the high justice.

Glokta’s permanent grimace became even further contorted. “I hoped we might settle that matter without bothering His Majesty.”

“I’m bothered now,” snapped Orso. “Fedor dan Wetterlant... didn’t I play cards with him once?”

“He lived in Adua before inheriting the family estate. His reputation here was...”

“Almost as bad as mine?” Orso remembered the man. Soft face but hard eyes. Smiled too much. Just like Lord Hoff, who was even now breaking out a particularly unctuous example.

“I was going to say *abominable*, Your Majesty. He stands accused of serious crimes.”

“He raped a laundry woman,” said Glokta, “with the assistance of his groundskeeper. When her husband demanded justice, Wetterlant murdered the man, again with the groundskeeper’s assistance. In a tavern. In full view of seventeen witnesses.” The emotionless quality of the Arch Lector’s grating voice only served to sicken Orso even more. “Then he had a drink. The groundskeeper poured, I believe.”

“Bloody hell,” whispered Orso.

“Those are the *accusations*,” said Matstringer.

“Even Wetterlant scarcely disputes them,” said Glokta.

“His mother does,” observed Gorodets.

There was a chorus of groans. “Lady Wetterlant, by the Fates, what a battleaxe.”