



JOE ABERCROMBIE

SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE WISDOM *of* CROWDS

'Delightfully twisted and evil'

THE GUARDIAN

THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

Book Three of The Age of Madness

JOE ABERCROMBIE



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With grim, dark
hugs

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PART VII

“The great are only great because we are on our knees. Let us rise up!”

Elysée Loustallot

Like a King

“You know something, Tunny?”

The corporal’s lightly bloodshot eyes slid towards Orso. “Your Majesty?”

“I must confess to feeling rather pleased with myself.”

The Steadfast Standard rippled on the breeze, its white horse rampant and its golden sun aglitter, the name of Stoffenbeck already stitched among the famous victories it had witnessed. How many High Kings had ridden triumphant beneath that gleaming scrap of cloth? And now—despite being outnumbered, derided and widely written off—Orso had joined their ranks. The man the pamphlets once dubbed the Prince of Prostitutes had emerged, like a splendid butterfly from a putrid chrysalis, as the new Casamir! Life takes strange turns, all right. The lives of kings especially.

“You damn well should feel pleased with yourself, Your Majesty,” frothed Lord Marshal Rucksted, and few men knew more about feeling pleased with themselves than he. “You out-thought your enemies off the battlefield, out-fought ’em on it and took the worst traitor of the lot prisoner!” And he stole a self-satisfied glance over his shoulder.

Leo dan Brock, that hero who a few days ago had seemed too big a man for the world to hold, was now contained in a miserable wagon with barred windows, bumping along in Orso’s wake. But then there was less of him to contain than there used to be. His ruined leg had been buried on the battlefield alongside his ruined reputation.

“You won, Your Majesty,” piped up Bremer dan Gorst, then snapped his mouth shut, frowning off towards the approaching towers and chimneys of Adua.

“I did, didn’t I.” An unforced smile was creeping across Orso’s face, all by itself. He could hardly remember the last time that happened. “The Young Lion, beaten bloody by the Young Lamb.” His clothes just seemed to *fit* him better than they had before the battle. He rubbed at his jaw, left unshaven for a few days in all the excitement. “Should I grow a beard?”

Hildi pushed back her oversized cap to doubtfully assess his stubble. “*Can* you grow a beard?”

“It’s true I’ve often failed in the past. But one could say that about a great many things, Hildi. The future looks a different sort of place!”

For perhaps the first time in his life he was eager to find out what the future might hold—even to grapple with the bastard and force it into the shapes *he* desired—so he had left Lord Marshal Forest bellowing the battle-mauled Crown Prince’s Division back into order and ridden ahead for Adua with a hundred mounted men. He needed to get to the capital and set the ship of state on *course*. With the rebels crushed, he could finally embark on his grand tour of the Union and greet his subjects as a royal winner. He could find out what he could *do* for them, how he could make things *better*. He wondered fondly what name the adoring crowds would roar at him. Orso the Steadfast? Orso the Resolute? Orso the Dauntless, the Stone Wall of Stoffenbeck?

He sat back, rocked gently by the saddle, and took a deep breath of the crisp autumn air. Since a northerly breeze was carrying the vapours of Adua out to sea, he didn’t even need to cough afterwards.

“I finally understand what people mean when they say they feel like a king.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry,” said Tunny. “I’m sure you’ll feel baffled and helpless again before you know it.”

“Doubtless.” Orso could not help glancing towards the rear of the column yet again. The wounded Lord Governor of Angland was not their only significant captive. Behind the Young Lion’s prison wagon rattled the heavily guarded carriage containing his heavily pregnant wife. Was that Savine’s pale hand gripping the windowsill? The mere thought of her name made

Orso wince. When the only woman he had ever loved married another man, then betrayed him, he had fondly imagined he could feel no worse. Then he learned she was his half-sister.

The smell of the haphazard slums outside the walls of Adua hardly reduced his sudden nausea. He had pictured smiling commoners, little Union flags waved by freckled children, showers of perfumed petals from beauties on the balconies. He had always turned his nose up at such patriotic guff when it was directed at other victors, but he had been rather looking forward to its being directed at him. Instead, ragged figures frowned from the shadows. A harlot chewing a chicken leg laughed from a misshapen window. One ill-favoured beggar very noticeably spat into the road as Orso trotted past.

“There will always be malcontents, Your Majesty,” murmured Yoru Sulfur. “Only ask my master. No one ever thanks him for his pains.”

“Mmmm.” Though as far as Orso could recall, Bayaz was always treated with the heights of servile respect. “What’s his solution?”

“To ignore them.” Sulfur considered the slum-dwellers without emotion. “Like ants.”

“Right. Don’t let them spoil the mood.” But it was a little late for that. The wind seemed to have turned chilly, and Orso was developing that familiar worried prickling at the back of his neck.

The wagon grew even gloomier. Its clattering wheels began to echo. Beyond the barred window Leo saw cut stone rush past, knew they must be riding through one of Adua’s gates. He’d dreamed of entering the capital at the head of a triumphant parade. Instead he came locked in a prison wagon stinking of stale straw, wounds and shame.

The floor jolted, sent a throb of agony through the stump of his leg, squeezed tears from his raw eyes. What a fucking fool he’d been. The advantages he’d tossed away. The chances he’d let slip past. The traps he’d blundered into.

He should’ve told that treacherous coward Isher to fuck himself the

moment his prattle tilted towards rebellion. Or better yet, gone straight to Savine's father and spilled the whole story to Old Sticks. Then he'd still have been the Union's most celebrated hero. The champion who beat the Great Wolf! Not the dunce who lost to the Young Lamb.

He should've swallowed his pride with King Jappo. Flattered and flirted and played the diplomat, offered Westport with a giggle, swapped that worthless offcut of Union territory for all the rest and landed in Midderland with Styrian troops behind him.

He should've brought his mother. The thought of her begging on the docks made him want to rip his hair out. She'd have pressed that shambles on the beach into order, taken one calm glance at the maps and set the men flowing southwards, got to Stoffenbeck first and forced the enemy into a losing battle.

He should've sent his reply to Orso's dinner invitation on the end of a lance, attacked with every man before sunset and swept the lying bastard from the high ground, torn up his reinforcements as they arrived.

Even as Leo's left wing misfired and his right wing crumbled, he could've called off that final charge. At least he'd still have Antaup and Jin. At least he'd still have his leg and his arm. Perhaps Savine could've teased out some deal. She was the king's ex-lover, after all. From what Leo had seen at his own execution, likely his current one, too. He couldn't even blame her. She'd saved his life, hadn't she? Whatever his life was worth now.

He was a prisoner. A traitor. A cripple.

The wagon had slowed to a juddering crawl. He heard voices up ahead, chanting, ranting. King Orso's loyal subjects, come out to cheer his victory? But it sounded nothing like a celebration.

The training circle had been Leo's dance floor. Now it was an ordeal just to straighten the leg he still had, so he could grasp the bars of the window with his good hand and drag himself up. By the time he felt the chill breeze on his face and squinted out into a street murky with foundry smoke, the wagon had shuddered to a halt.

Strange details jumped at him. Shop shutters smashed, broken doors

hanging from hinges, rubbish scattered across the road. He thought a heap of rags in a doorway might be a sleeping tramp. Then, with a creeping worry that made him forget his own pain for a moment, he started to think it might be a corpse.

“By the dead,” he whispered. A warehouse had been burned out, its charred rafters like the ribs of a picked-over carcass. A slogan was daubed across its blackened front in letters three strides high.

TheTimeisNow.

He pressed his face to the bars, straining to see further up the street. Beyond the officers, retainers and Knights of the Body on their nervous horses, figures were crowded outside a spike-topped wall, banners bobbing over the mob like standards over a regiment. *Fair pay for fair work* and *Down with the Closed Council* and *Rise up!* They were already drifting towards the king’s column, droning with sullen anger, booing and jeering. Were these... Breakers?

“By the dead,” he whispered again. He saw people down a side street, too. Men with labourer’s clothes and clenched fists. Running figures, chasing someone. Falling on them, kicking and punching.

A bellow came from up ahead. Rucksted, maybe. “Clear the way, in the name of His Majesty!”

“*You* clear the fucking way!” snarled a man with a thick beard and no neck at all. People were filtering in from the alleys, creating a troubling sense of the column being surrounded.

“It’s the Young Lion!” someone barked, and Leo heard half-hearted cheers. His good leg, which a few days ago had been his bad leg, was on fire, but he clung to the bars as people crowded towards the wagon, hands reaching for him.

“The Young Lion!”

Savine watched from the carriage window, utterly helpless, one hand clutching her bloated mass of belly, the other gripping Zuri’s, while ruffians crowded around Leo’s prison wagon like pigs around a trough. She hardly

knew whether they were trying to rescue or murder him. Probably they had no idea, either.

She realised she could not remember how it felt, not to be scared.

It had probably begun as a strike. Savine knew every manufactory in Adua, and this was Foss dan Harber's paper mill, a concern she had twice declined to invest in. The profits were tempting, but Harber's reputation stank. He was the kind of brutal, exploitative owner who made it hard for everyone else to properly exploit their workers. It had probably begun as a strike then turned, as strikes quickly can, into something altogether uglier.

"Get back!" snapped a young officer, lashing at the crowd with his riding crop. A mounted guard dragged one man away by the shoulder, then clubbed another across the scalp with his shield. Blood showed bright as he fell.

"Oh," said Savine, her eyes going wide.

Someone hit the officer with a stick and rocked him in his saddle.

"Wait!" She thought it might have been Orso's voice. "Wait!" But it made no difference. The High King of the Union was suddenly as powerless as she was. People pressed in on every side, a sea of furious faces, shaken placards and clenched fists. The clamour made her think of Valbeck, of the uprising, but the terrible present was bad enough without reaching for the terrible past.

More soldiers rode in. A cry cut off as someone was trampled.

"Bastards!"

A faint ring as a blade was drawn.

"Protect the king!" came Gorst's shriek.

A soldier struck out with the pommel of his sword, then with the flat, knocking a man's cap off and sending him tumbling to the cobbles. One of the other Knights of the Body was less forbearing. A flicker of steel, a high-pitched scream. This time, Savine saw the sword fall and open a yawning wound in a man's shoulder. Something smashed against the side of the carriage and she flinched.

"God help us," muttered Zuri.

Savine stared at her. "Does He ever?"

“I keep hoping.” Zuri slid a protective arm around Savine’s shoulders. “Come away from the window—”

“And go where?” whispered Savine, shrinking back against her.

Beyond the glass it was utter chaos. A mounted soldier and a red-faced woman wrestled over one end of a banner that read *All Equal*, the other tangled up in a mass of arms and faces. A Knight of the Body was dragged from his horse, lost in the crowd like a sailor in a stormy sea. They were everywhere, forcing their way between the horses, shoving, clutching, screeching.

A crash as the window shattered and Savine jerked back, broken glass showering in.

“Traitor!” someone screamed. At her? At Leo? An arm hooked through, a dirty hand fishing for the catch. Savine smashed at it clumsily with the side of her fist, not sure whether it would be worse to be dragged from the carriage by the mob or dragged to the House of Questions by the Inquisition.

Zuri was just getting up when there was a flicker outside. Something pattered Savine’s cheek. Red spots on her dress. The arm slithered away. Fire bloomed suddenly beyond the window and she hunched over, both arms around her belly as pain stabbed through her guts.

“God help us,” she mouthed. Would she give birth there, on the glass-littered floor of a carriage in the middle of a riot?

“You fuckers!” A big man in an apron had caught the reins of that blonde girl Orso kept as a servant, the one who used to carry messages between him and Savine, a thousand years ago. He clutched at her leg while she kicked back, spitting and snarling. Savine saw Orso wrench his horse around and start punching the man about his balding scalp. He grabbed at Orso, trying to pull him down from his saddle. “You—”

His skull burst open, spraying red. Savine stared. She could have sworn that man Sulfur had slapped him with an open hand and torn his head half-off.

Gorst spurred past, teeth bared as he hacked savagely on one side then the other, bodies dropping. “The king!” he squealed. “The king!”

“The Agriont!” someone bellowed. “Stop for nothing!”

The carriage lurched forwards. Savine would have been thrown from her seat had Zuri not shot out an arm. She clung desperately to the empty window frame, bit her lip at another flash of pain in her swollen stomach.

She saw people scatter. Heard shrieks of terror. A body was knocked reeling by the corner of the carriage, clattered against the door and went down under the milling hooves of a knight herald. There were strands of blonde hair caught in the broken window.

Wheels bounced over a trampled sign, whirred over pamphlets stuck flapping to the damp road. The prison wagon clattered ahead, striking sparks from the cobbles, maddened horses all around, whipping manes and flapping harness. Something clonked against the other side of the carriage, then they were past, leaving Harber’s mill and its rioting workers behind.

Cold wind rushed through the broken window, Savine’s heart hammering, her hand frozen on the sill but her face burning as if she’d been slapped. How could Zuri be so calm beside her? Her face fixed, her arm so firm around Savine. The baby squirmed as the carriage rocked and jolted. It was alive, at least. It was alive.

Outside the window she saw Lord Chamberlain Hoff clinging to his reins, chain of office tangled tight around his red throat. She saw the king’s old, grey-haired standard-bearer gripping his flagstaff, the sun of the Union streaming overhead, an oily smear across the cloth of gold.

Streets whipped by, so familiar, so unfamiliar. This city had been hers. No one more admired. No one more envied. No one more hated, which she had always taken as the only honest compliment. Buildings flashed past. Buildings she knew. Buildings she owned, even. Or had owned.

It would all be forfeit now.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She could not remember how it felt, not to be scared.

She remembered taking Leo’s ring, with the Agriont and all its little people spread out beneath them. The future had been theirs. How could they have so totally destroyed themselves? His recklessness or her ambition alone