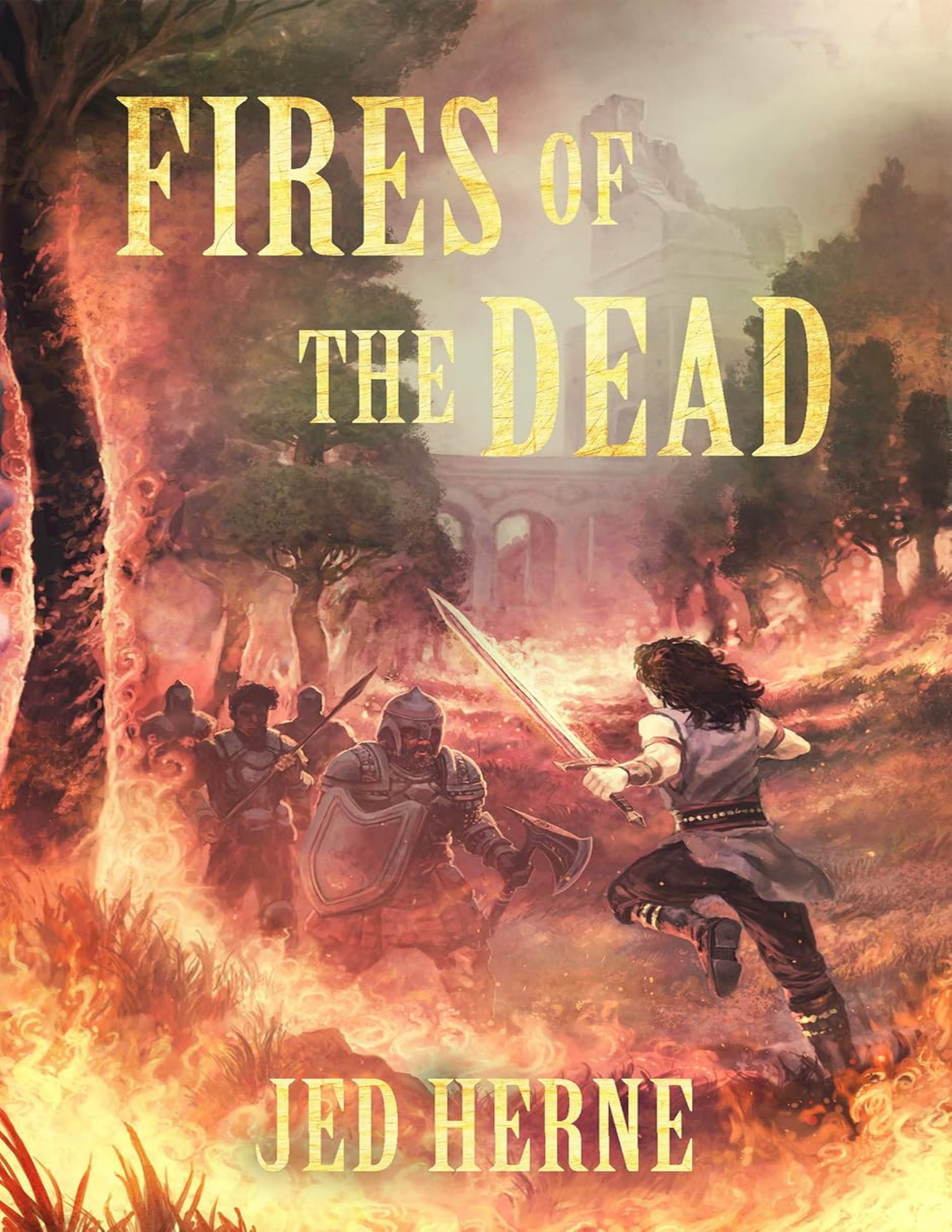
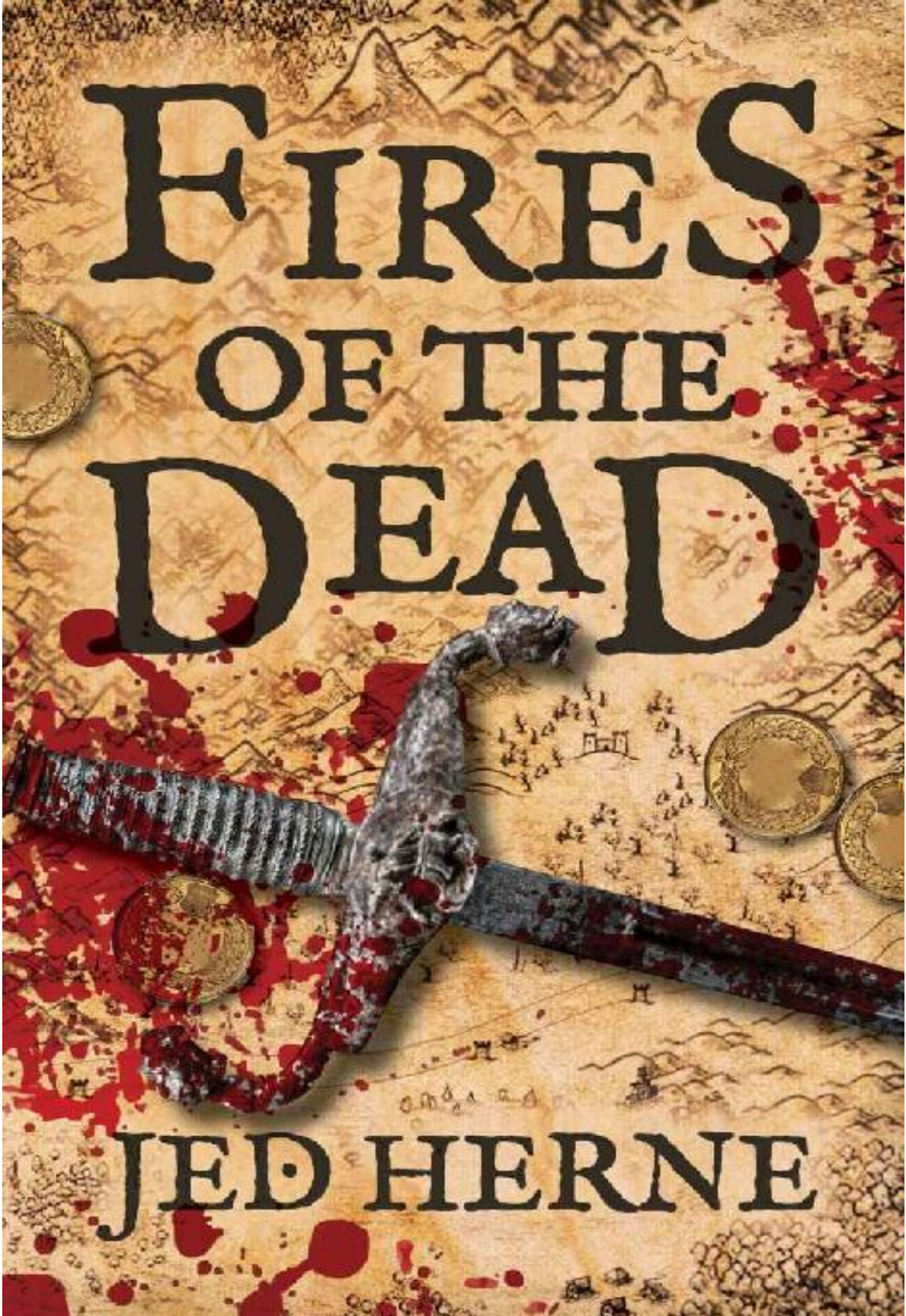


FIRES OF THE DEAD



JED HERNE



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Fires of the Dead

A Pyromancer Novella

By Jed Herne

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First edition.

To Mum and Dad, for all your support, belief, and love. Thank you!

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(This is a standalone prequel to *Fires of the Dead*, and can be read before, or

after.)

Part I: Wisp

1: WISP

Breeze handed Wisp the telescope and Wisp smiled, doing his best to avoid a grimace. His damn knees were hurting again.

Stretching ahead of 'em was the Ashwood Desolation. Last time Wisp saw it, before the Gutting, the forest was lush and green and full of plump deer. Now it was a charred wasteland. Blackened, leafless trunks marched out to the horizon and ashen clouds blew in the wind. Only upside was that you'd spot an ambush a mile off, 'cause most of the trees had been incinerated. Got to find the upside in these things.

Wisp lowered the telescope. Mountains surrounded the Ashwoods on all sides except one, which was blocked by a river. The damn water was deeper than a gambler's grudge, and twice as vicious. You could only cross in a handful of places. One of 'em lay ahead.

Wisp frowned. "Breeze, what're we dealing with?"

The young woman snapped to attention – eager to prove herself, as always. "A dozen men guarding the crossing. Only eight are soldiers. The rest are cooks, carpenters, blacksmiths. They've got a Source Flame in the middle hut."

Wisp stroked his stubbled chin. "So then at least one of 'em is a Pyromancer."

The river crossing was no easy path. More a place where the water ran shallow enough to wade through, so long as you kept your balance. Four huts and a low wall protected the bank on Wisp's side. Nothing on the Ashwood side. Why would there be? It'd been lifeless since the Gutting.

Was it worth building a raft? Wisp shook his head. Given the currents and the rocks, it was too time consuming and too risky. Besides, Wisp had spent none of his fifty-four years learning how to swim. No changing that now.

Anyway, the border crossing would be a good test for his crew. He glanced around, sizing 'em up: Black Eye, hulking and vacant-looking; Marogan, scowling and chewing jerky from last night's dinner; Breeze, twitchy-handed and fingering her bow; and Fleetfoot, pale-faced and shivering from the cold. Wisp had worked with 'em before, but never all together. They could do with some practice.

"Alright." Wisp gathered 'em around. "You know the plan. The Skull's across that border. Let's do this."

~

"Halt!" said the guard.

Wisp, Marogan, Black Eye, and Fleetfoot paused a stone's throw from the low wall. Six guards stood behind it, brandishing crossbows and swords. Wisp forced a smile. Didn't matter how much he did this – nerves jangled through him and he had to piss. Listening to the fast-flowing river only made his bladder ache more.

"State your business," said a guard.

"Passage into the woods, good sir," said Wisp.

"For what purpose?"

"Painting."

Beside Wisp, Marogan smirked. He elbowed her to shut her up.

"Entrance into the Ashwoods is prohibited," said the guard. "On orders of the High Priest and the Confederate Council."

"Because?"

"Because they bloody well say so. Piss off."

"We ain't gonna steal anything," said Wisp. "Just paint it. We're artists."

He waved his gloved hands in the air in a vague pattern. Seemed artistic enough.

The guard raised his eyebrows. "Do that from this side of the river."

A tall man climbed onto the wall. There was something in the way he carried himself that seemed suspicious, so Wisp activated his Sight.

A shimmering orange thread appeared, visible only to Wisp, leading from the tall man's chest to a hut behind the wall. Wisp surveyed the others, but the man was the only one with the orange thread.

"One Pyromancer," he whispered to his crew. "Tall man."

"Leave," said the guard. "Or my men will fill you with arrows."

"Hmph." Wisp crossed his arms. "That's the problem with today's young folk."

The orange thread leading from the Pyromancer vanished. The man gaped.

"No appreciation of art," said Wisp.

An arrow erupted from the Pyromancer's chest. He coughed blood and toppled over the wall and the other guards gawped.

Wisp opened his jacket and removed his hidden crossbow. He fired. Black Eye and Fleetfoot did the same, and bowstrings twanged and arrows hissed through the air as the defenders yelled and fired back. Wisp dove behind a boulder. Marogan slid next to him, spraying dirt over his face.

Crossbow bolts smashed into the boulder. A bow thrummed and another guard shrieked. Wisp smirked. How long until the idiots realised Breeze was behind their wall?

Marogan peeled off gloves to reveal her hands, which were a mess of scars and waxy flesh. Wisp had to respect her courage. Hard enough having the guts to burn one hand, let alone two. Somehow, though, he doubted she'd ever considered another option.

Wisp removed his right glove. His hand wasn't as burnt as Marogan's, but it'd been enough to give him the Sight, and a small dose of Pyromancy.

Orange threads ran from him and Marogan into the distant hills, to the cave where they'd made a Source Flame that morning. He nodded. Their lines thickened, bursting with energy, and they stood from behind their boulder and pointed their burnt hands at the low wooden wall.

Flames erupted from their palms. Fire roared through the air, washing over the logs and making guards scream.

Black Eye used the distraction to sprint to the wall and scramble over the sharpened logs.

"Jon!" yelled a guard. "There's one over the-"

Bone broke with a sickening snap, followed by shrieks and curses.

Marogan strode towards the wall, maintaining the stream of fire spewing from her hands. Wisp stumbled after her. His knees hurt like hell but he grit his teeth, shoved the pain aside, and scrambled over the logs.

He landed on a guard. The man scrambled away, dropped his crossbow, and raised his hands in surrender. His lip trembled. He didn't look much older than a boy.

Poor kid.

Marogan clambered over the wall and pointed her hand at the youth. The orange thread leading from her chest thickened.

"Stop." Wisp sucked in a deep breath that did nothing to lower his racing heartbeat. "He surrendered."

Marogan scowled, but lowered her hand.

Bodies lay sprawled on the ground. A stray guard staggered across the river, splashing through the water, but he didn't get far before Breeze stepped from a hut and shot an arrow into his back. He crashed into the water and the current tugged him away.

Wisp's heart pounded. Bloody hell, they'd fought for thirty seconds and his body was screaming. Back in his younger days, he could've fought for hours without feeling a damn thing. He'd gone soft.

Squawks sounded from the air. Wisp glared at the Antoraxes circling above. Didn't matter how clear the skies were – any large burst of Pyromancy attracted the damn birds. Stupid carrion-feeders had botched his missions more times than he could count.

Black Eye strolled to Wisp and Marogan, stepping over the bodies. The rancid stench of spilled guts clogged the air, joining the smell of burnt hair and smoke. Spot fires flickered atop the wall.

"Please." At Wisp's feet, tears streamed down the young guard's face. "D-don't kill me."

Fleetfoot's thin-fingered hands grasped the top of the wall. Marogan heaved him over. He stared wide-eyed at the corpses and shoved a handkerchief over his nose to stop the smell. When it came to fighting, the damn boy was more useless than a boat in the desert. Good thing Wisp had got him for another task.

Wisp crouched next to the young guard. He stunk of sweat.

"What's your name, son?" asked Wisp.

The boy trembled. "Ben."

"I need you to do something for me, Ben. You got any other friends here? Any other guards on patrol?"

Ben sucked in a deep breath. "Are you g-going to burn me, too?"

"I ain't ever killed a fellow countryman who laid down his arms, Ben."

Relief filled Ben's eyes and he relaxed. "We're the only ones. Next border post is five leagues upstream. We used to have more people, but they've culled our numbers these last few years."

Ben kept babbling about guards and orders. While he talked, Marogan flexed her fingers, Black Eye watched with a blank face, and Breeze plucked arrows from dead soldiers.

Fleetfoot gaped at the guard. Maybe he was thinking about the scarce difference between him and the youth, save that one wore armour and the other had the shabby clothes of a street rat pulled into a thieving crew.

Wisp raised a hand to stop Ben's rambling. It was always this way. When they thought you were about to kill 'em, folk were so busy pissing themselves you couldn't get 'em to unhinge their jaws. Then soon as they saw safety you'd think they were paid by the word.

Wisp grimaced. Crouching was murder on his knees.

"Listen, Ben," he said. "What I said before – I ain't ever killed a fellow countryman."

The boy nodded.

"Thing is," said Wisp. "I ain't from your country."

2: WISP

They lit a fire in a hut. Wisp and Marogan pricked their fingers with knives and dripped blood into the flames. The blood sizzled. Through Wisp's Sight, he saw new orange threads appear, Bonding him and Marogan to the flames. Just as well, 'cause their link to the fire back in the hills was fading.

Couple of the soldiers had decent kit, so they stole their weapons. Then Wisp's crew splashed across the freezing river. He glanced back. Antoraxes plunged towards the charred corpses, ready to feast.

Wisp led them into the Ashwoods, heading north. Silence filled the air. No rustling leaves, no creatures slithering, or crawling, or running, or flapping. Just silence. A silent, charcoal landscape of grey skeletal trunks covered with burn marks and stripped bare of leaves. Ash coated the ground. It rose in puffs with each step, covering his boots with greyness.

He scowled. It'd been three years since the Gutting – the inferno that consumed the Ashwoods. Damn place should've healed by now. Ain't natural for it to be barren after so long.

"Wisp."

Breeze stood on a hill, a hundred paces away. He'd sent her to scout.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You'd better see."

He sighed. Course she had to be on a bloody hill. He struggled up the slope, using his sword as a walking stick, gritting his teeth when the other crew members raced past him. His knees creaked. How long before they snapped clean off? Did knees do that? Wish he knew more old folk. Then he could ask how they managed the aches. Thing was, in his line of work it was rare to reach twenty-five, let alone his age.

Again with the age.

This might be his last mission, but he had to find the Skull for the Baron if he wanted enough money to retire. Focussing on how broken he was wouldn't help.

So stop focussing on it.

Problem was, his bones squeaked so loud a one-eared grandpa would've heard 'em.

After a thousand years, he reached the top. He expected a hoard of buried treasure, or at least a stockpile of weapons, but after all his effort his reward was a cluster of trees.

"You dragged me up here," he said. "For trees?"

Breeze flushed. "I thought..."

Marogan crouched next to a trunk. "Look, Wisp."

Seared deep into the trunk was a hand. Blackened sap stained the wood, frozen into a charred puddle that looked like blood. Underneath the handprint, letters were scratched into the wood: *death lies beyond*.

Black Eye pointed at the other trees. "It's here, too."

Sure enough, the same handprint and message scorched the other leafless trees. Some trunks had split in two, from where the handprint had marked 'em.

Black eye shuddered and made a sign to ward off evil. Marogan scowled, but even she tightened her grip on her sword and her knuckles whitened.

Wisp's guts clenched. He used his telescope to survey trees on the hill's other side. All were scarred with the hand mark, hundreds of 'em, as far as he could see.

He frowned. Even with all her strength, Marogan would struggle to imprint her hand into one tree. But whoever had done this ... they'd burned a thousand trunks.

His skin crawled. Ain't many things that frightened Wisp. He'd bested dozens of foes in muddy battlefields and soot-stained streets, and each encounter had hardened him. But this ... this was something else. Something unknown.

Fleetfoot swallowed. "Wisp, what is it?"

"How old are you, son?"

"Fifteen."

"You know stories about the Gutting?"

Fleetfoot shivered and hugged himself. "A few."

"Well unless you enjoy pissing yourself, I suggest you forget 'em. Keep moving, crew."

They plodded deeper into the woods.

"Reckon they're still here?" asked Marogan. "Whoever did these?"

"It was a bunch of kids, with brands." If Wisp tried hard enough, he could almost believe it. "Probably a dare."

"How would they cross the border?" asked Black Eye.

Wisp growled. "I dunno. Swum, probably. All the kids can swim today, can't they? Not like they got weapons dragging 'em down, like us. Honestly, Black Eye. If you went any slower you'd be going backwards."

Black Eye blinked. "Okay."

Wisp scowled. For a hulking man nearing on seven feet tall, outside a fight Black Eye was the most docile person you'd ever meet. Drove Wisp mad at times. He missed having Bats in the crew. Bats was weaker than Black Eye, but he'd been a damn sight better to talk with. Too bad he'd taken an axe to the guts.

They stopped for a lunch of cold rations. Wisp squinted at the sky. Only good thing about the ash clogging the air was that it stopped the sun cooking 'em raw. Got to find the upside in these things, even if he'd prefer to be sitting on the grass outside his cottage.

Stop thinking about retirement, fool.

When he'd met the Baron's messenger, this mission seemed an easy way to finish his career. But now he was here, the Gutting seemed closer. And sharper. Before, stories about the Gutting made him lean towards the campfire, or grip his mug tighter in the taverns. Thing was, around a campfire or in a tavern, he'd never worried about those tales being real. Now ...

They ain't real. Just superstition.

"Which way to the Castle, Fleetfoot?" he asked.

Fleetfoot froze with his jerky halfway to his mouth. He wrapped it back up and scrambled to pull the map from his pocket.

"Relax," said Wisp. "It ain't a race."

Marogan barked with laughter. Black Eye watched with blank-eyed disinterest. Breeze looked on with the closest thing to sympathy.

Fleetfoot blushed. "Sorry."

Hands shaking, he spread the map, then pointed to their location.

"We're about six miles from the border crossing." Fleetfoot's voice grew calmer as he gazed at the map. "Another hour and we should reach the Flegethon River, which we can follow to Castle Randall."

Wisp smiled. The boy had been nervous all day, but now he was beside a map he'd regained his confidence.

"You think it'll still be there?" asked Wisp.

"I think so. Even if it's dry, we should see the riverbed."

Wisp clapped Fleetfoot on the shoulder. "Good man. Knew you'd be a decent navigator."

Fleetfoot flushed again, except this time he looked pleased. He kept smiling, even when they broke camp and marched deeper into the Ashwoods.

The sun arced through the sky, burning into deeper shades of red as it inched towards the horizon. As they walked, Wisp thought he heard voices whispering through the burned trees, but whenever he turned or made Breeze climb a tree to survey the land, the forest was empty. The largest animal they saw was a solitary Antoraxe gliding overhead.

Wisp kept sending Breeze ahead to scout. He became used to her ambling back without any news, so when she appeared over a hill and sprinted towards 'em, he tensed.

"There's a fire!" she said.

He stiffened. "Weapons out, crew."

Breeze led 'em to a hollow tree. "In here."

Wisp and Marogan crawled inside the trunk. A smouldering fire sat inside. Smoke rose through the hollow inside and twirled into the air, fading against the

grey sky. Judging by the wood and the ash, this fire must've only been lit a few hours ago.

He activated his Sight. A shimmering orange thread sprung from the fire, pointing north.

Coldness settled into his guts and he scowled. "We ain't alone. Another Pyro's in these woods."

3: WISP

Fleetfoot paled.

Marogan bared her teeth. "Too bad for them."

Wisp stroked his beard. The thread was turning clockwise, but the movement was slight, so the Pyromancer was miles away.

Wisp and Marogan pricked their fingers and dripped blood into the flames. If they found the other Pyro, they could drain this fire and cut their enemy's fuel.

Funny, assuming they'll be an enemy.

Made sense. Most people he met tried to kill him – better to keep expectations low. You had to take things as they were.

He crawled out of the hollowed tree and stood, wincing at his sore knees. Without a clear view of the fire, the orange thread vanished. He sighed. If only he had stronger Sight. Wisp had to see a Pyromancer or a Source Flame to spot the threads, but some people could notice 'em from miles away.

"Whoever it is, they're north, but not close," he said.

They kept walking. Wisp scratched his forearms. Didn't feel right, this place. The sooner they reached the Castle and found the Skull, the better. Damn it. Why couldn't the Baron have given him a simple last mission, like robbery, or kidnapping?

"This is it," said Fleetfoot. "The Flegethon River."

Wisp gaped. Been decades since he'd come this far, but back then the Flegethon was a raging mess of water, so deep that when you peered inside there was only darkness.

Now, the river was dry. A lifeless husk that scarred the ground.

Black Eye shuddered and muttered a prayer. Wisp sighed. He wished he shared Black Eye's faith. Be damn nice for a prayer to comfort him after seeing this.

Fleetfoot and Breeze frowned. Made sense. Too young to have seen the river back when it was alive, so the horror was lost on 'em.

Marogan crouched and dug her gloved fingers into the soil. It was crumbly and dry.

"How'd you reckon it happened?" She licked her lips. "Boiled away in the Gutting?"

"Must've," Wisp said. "But for this to happen ... their Ancestral Flame would've been huge."

"Thirteen generations," said Black Eye.

"Eh?"

"That's how long the Randalls fed it."

Wisp frowned. Maybe Black Eye wasn't as dumb as he looked. Wisp chewed his fingernails. Plenty of tales circulated about the Gutting, but standing beside this corpse of a river ... well, it changed things.

Back when this place was the Midacord Forest, it belonged to the Randalls – one of the realm's strongest families. Three years ago, they called their Pyromancers to their main stronghold, here in these woods. Plenty of stories speculated why. None gave real answers, but they all had the same ending. Something happened, and the Randalls' Ancestral Flame escaped their Hearth, engulfed the Castle, and turned the forest to cinders. From then on, people called this place the Ashwoods.

The image of hands burned into trunks flashed before Wisp.

He shook his head, trying to forget it. "How long 'till the Castle, Fleetfoot?"

"Um ... at this speed, we'll reach it the day after tomorrow?"

"Good man. Keep moving, crew."

~

Shadows grew as the sun crawled below the horizon. Marogan and Wisp summoned flames to light the way. Tree trunks spread darkness across the ashen ground. Wisp's neck tingled. Normally he liked the night. Night was for campfires, for eating, for bonding with his crew. Night was for stargazing and dreaming and thinking about his cottage.

Here in the Ashwoods, night made him edgy. They'd seen no animals during the day, but that only made him worry they were being stalked.

And of course, there were the stories Marogan had whispered to Fleetfoot all day. Poor kid. The woman's sadistic streak was wider than the High Priest's arse. Even though her stories about the Gutting were ridiculous, by sunset Fleetfoot was a quivering mess.

"Knock it off, Marogan," said Wisp when she described, with delight, how the fire had melted soldiers into puddles of flesh and steel.

"What's the matter, old man?" Marogan bared her teeth. "Scared?"

"I ain't. But Fleetfoot is and I don't want our camp stinking of bedwetting."

Fleetfoot flushed. Marogan laughed.

"Alright, I'll save the one about Xaphess for when we're back in Kroliss," Marogan said. "That'd really loosen your bladder. And Fleetfoot – sleep next to Wisp, not me."

Smirking, Marogan paced ahead of the group.

Wisp waited until she was far enough away, then lent closer to Fleetfoot. "Sorry about that. Pretending you're on her side's the best way to win."

"That's alright," said Fleetfoot with a shaking voice.

Black Eye patted the boy's back. "Cheer up. Haven't seen monsters yet."

Fleetfoot swallowed and eyed the shadows growing between the trees.

"Monsters come out at night."

Wisp glanced at Black Eye, wondering how the big man would escape that.

Black Eye shrugged. "True."

Wisp chuckled. For a man of few words, Black Eye made 'em count.

Footsteps crunched nearby. Wisp tensed and raised his sword and Fleetfoot yelped, but it was only Breeze emerging from the shadows.

"There's ten people up ahead," she said. "About a mile away. They look like another thieving crew."

Wisp and Marogan extinguished the fires in their palms. He blinked to restore his night vision. After a few moments, he saw a faint light glowing in the distance and a trail of rising smoke.

"What are we up against, Breeze?" he asked.

"I couldn't get close, but I recognised Snoutnose."

Wisp frowned. "Describe the rest of 'em."

Breeze did, and as she talked a horrible realisation settled into Wisp's guts.

"Clubhead's crew," he said.

Marogan snarled.

Fleetfoot gulped. "Who's he?"

"Thief. Got his name 'cause he enjoys breaking noses with his head. Works for Baron Earnstain. Breeze, were they also following the river, heading for the Castle?"

Breeze nodded.

"Damn." Wisp rubbed his stubble. "Must've heard about our mission. We could loop around 'em, but I doubt we'd get to the Castle first. Looks like we've got to set an ambush. Breeze, describe what you saw."

"They're camping in the riverbed. Two sentries on top of the bank and the rest of them are eating and getting ready to sleep. They had a big campfire. Based on what I heard, a few Pyromancers are Bonded to it."

Wisp nodded. "If it's Clubhead, he'll have at least two Pyros with him: Cinder and Verve. Young, but skilful."

Marogan scratched her chin. "Verve ... he got thrown out of the Three Crows."

Wisp nodded. "For complaining about a bet. Took his money in the end, though, and the others got fireballs to the face. What else, Breeze?"

She told 'em everything she'd seen. Wisp smiled. He'd recruited the girl a year ago, after she'd almost pickpocketed him at the markets. Would've succeeded if Wisp's daughter hadn't turned at the wrong moment. It took a deft touch to lift his purse without him feeling it, so after his crew beat her up and dumped her in the river, he'd hauled her out and offered her a job.

Baron Hargrieve used dozens of thieves, and as his go-to crook, Wisp had the pick of 'em all. For the last year, however, whenever he'd needed a Sneaker his choice was easy: Breeze. Quiet killings, accurate scouting, eavesdropping – the girl had it all. She reminded Wisp of his younger days, when climbing a five-story wall was easier than tying his bootlaces. Now, one flight of stairs made his knees twang.

Even better, the girl loved learning. For the last year, Wisp had taught her the art of stealthy moving. She'd improved so much he kept a mirror on his desk to counter her annoying habit of sneaking inside his study, sitting, and not making a sound – not even when Wisp sung tavern songs under his breath. That was an embarrassing day.

While she gave her report, plans formed in his head, twisting and warping and growing and adapting. Another part of his mind broke away from the scheming and thought about how much he enjoyed this. Maybe it was too early to retire.

Breeze moved on to describing Clubhead's crew. Wisp recognised most of the names, apart from three new members.

As she talked, Fleetfoot lent forward, a half-smile forming. Seemed like he'd be happy if Breeze talked forever. Wisp frowned. Probably not an issue, but he'd watch it all the same.

Breeze finished.

"Alright," said Wisp. "Here's the plan."

He told 'em his ambush scheme.

Marogan frowned. "What if Breeze misses those shots? The Cuckoo Manoeuvre would be better."

Wisp frowned. He hadn't thought of that.

"Too risky," he said. "They might have other Source Flames."

"Why not check, then decide?"

Wisp huffed. Back when he'd first recruited her, Marogan never dared question him. That had changed in these last few years. Sure, she had the skill, but that didn't give her the right to be cocky. Wisp had made it past fifty for a reason.

Black Eye, Fleetfoot, and Breeze glanced between Wisp and Marogan. Wisp opened his mouth to reject her plan. Then he paused.

Maybe she hadn't become rude. Maybe he'd become grumpy. Decades ago, he'd never plan without consulting his crew. Now, though ... when was the last time he'd gotten a second opinion?

Damn. He'd always hated how old Redhands never let Wisp ask questions. Now he'd turned into the bastard.

"You're right, Marogan," Wisp said. "Anyone else got suggestions?"

Marogan's lips twitched. Might've even smiled, although it could've been a trick of the light. He'd made the right move. After all, his crew would become hers when he retired, so probably right to give her more responsibility.