



# COURAGE AT THE CROSSROADS

## Season 3: In Some Smothering Dream

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*Tak-tuh-tak. Tak-tuh-tak.*

As the train rolled south, the wheels thudded a steady rhythm over the railroad ties. Its destination was a small depot at the end of the track, where a caravan awaited them. There, the wounded would journey to the fortress Northguard, where better facilities waited.

*Tak-tuh-tak. Tak-tuh-tak.*

Holden rolled the gold coin Rogers had given him over and over in his hand—heads to tails and back again, in time with the drumming of the train. They traveled an old and, until very recently, abandoned stretch of track. At one time, someone in Llael must have imagined this line would one day carry passengers to their Cygnaran allies. War and occupation had put those plans to rest, but the Cygnaran Army wasn't ready to complain about a gift horse when they stumbled upon it. The line traveled east of the Black River in territory still held by Free Llael and was one of the only safe passages left in the entire nation.

*Tak-tuh-tak.*

Holden tried not to look out the window. Not like the other wounded soldiers in the car—they craned their necks to see the roll of the hills and the sudden clusters of trees that rushed by. At least, those of them still able to move their necks did. Many were too wounded to lift themselves off the canvas cots crowding the narrow aisle of the train car. Some of them hadn't woken up for days.

While the landscape of Llael rushing beside the train was beautiful, if Holden looked out the window for too long, he would see his reflection in the glass. In that reflection, he would eventually see his face staring back at him with deep-shadowed eyes and a black gaping mouth.

*Tak-tuh-tak. Sweet child. As if it was ever up to you. Tak-tuh-tak.*

Instead, Holden looked at his worn coin, flipping it from heads to tails and back again.

*Tak-tuh-tak. Don't worry about it. I'll get another one. Tak-tuh-tak.*

Holden shook his head, trying to escape the noise of the train and his own intrusive thoughts.

He kept flipping the coin as the door at the front of the cabin slid open. Dorothy Walsh walked through, holding a steel tray propped against her hip. The tray was stacked high with fresh dressings and clear bottles of antiseptic fluid. The nurse had helped Holden get on board the medical train back on the battlefield. She was the reason he wasn't back on the field rotting in the mud with his friends.

As Dorothy made her way down the train car, she checked in on the wounded men, stopping with each one to confirm the colored cloth tags the medics left hanging from their cots. At each stop, she made notes in a little leather book before dropping it into a pocket on her apron.

Each colored tag prioritized the men by the severity of their wounds. Most of the swaying tags were either yellow or green; almost all of the men with red or black tags had died in the first few hours of the journey. Orderlies covered their bodies with burlap and carried them to the back to wait for burial when the troops reached Cygnaran soil again. A few red-tagged men remained clinging to life but only a few.

Dorothy spent a great deal more time examining those particular soldiers. Holden watched as she felt for their pulse with one hand, pulled back the lids of their eyes, or gently checked the dressings on their missing arms and legs.

Holden didn't have a tag. *No immediate danger, lowest priority*, one of the surgeons explained when he'd asked why not. He didn't mind the assessment. In his own mind, he didn't even deserve to be on the train. He'd fled from the field of battle, leaving his brothers-in-arms behind. They had died while he lived.

In fact, being ignored by the medics and nurses was the best outcome he could hope for. Too many of them wanted to thank him for killing the Khadoran kommandos who tried to assault the train. Too many of them tried to make him feel *better*, which actually made him feel worse. He'd faked an injury to get aboard the train, and these people kept treating him like a damned hero.

Dorothy worked the length of the train to him after checking on the other soldiers. He noted she always kept a bright expression when she talked to him. Probably to keep him from feeling too much guilt, he thought. He and all the medical staff knew he was a malingerer. If he hadn't killed the Khadorans, he was sure they would have kicked him off the train or reported him. Fortunately, none of the other soldiers seemed to know. If they did, they at least kept their silence.

"How are we doing, Holden?" she asked as she approached, offering him a canteen of fresh water.

"Okay. Thank you." He gripped the coin in his left hand and took a quick drink before handing the canteen back.

Dorothy studied him for a moment and combed hair out of her face with one hand before she continued. "Surgeon Breggs told me you might give me a hand with some of the others. Would you like to do that?"

He nodded. She and the chief surgeon Ewin Breggs treated him as they would any other patient. He didn't know if it was for his benefit or for the benefit of the truly injured with whom he shared the car. "Of course, ma'am."

She offered to help him up, but he didn't take her hand. It felt like too much of a lie.

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He and Dorothy made their way through the car, treating the wounded soldiers. Many of the men were trenchers, but a few knights lay among them. They were easier to spot due to the deep bruises on their shoulders where the heavy storm knight or sword knight armor weighed against its leather strapping. Most of the knights had stab wounds, gashes, or dark bruises spread over their broken ribs. To a man, the trenchers had bullet wounds that left angry black-and-purple holes in their flesh, large patches of burned, melted skin, or a web of deep gouges left by shrapnel. Holden tried not to notice how the knights were given the thickest blankets and the cots closest to the windows.

The two of them worked in near silence, broken only by Dorothy asking for extra bindings or to tell Holden to hold a man down as she doused his angry wounds with antiseptic. They served the men who could feed themselves and fed the men who couldn't. Sometimes she forced a wounded soldier to drink an alchemical solution. If her patient was unconscious, she had Holden rub the man's throat until he swallowed. Once, he accidentally handed her a bottle of the antiseptic when she requested a drink that would reduce a man's fever. It smelled sweet, but she patiently cautioned him to never mix the two up again.

They passed through most of the train and treated most of the other soldiers before Dorothy insisted they take a break. As they shared dry biscuits and watery coffee, she spoke around a mouthful of food.

"You don't hide it as well as you think you do," she said.

Holden's hand twitched up to his face on reflex. First to his mouth, then to the corner of his right eye. Finally, haltingly, he asked, "Sorry, what?"

"Your accent. You're Ordic, right?"

He sagged with relief. "No. I mean, sort of."

"You're sort of Ordic?" Her eyes crinkled as she smiled.

"My father was."

"But not your mother?"

"No. Not really. She lived in Ord. But when they died..." He trailed off. Dorothy's smile faded, so he pressed on. "It's okay. It happened when I was little. Five or six. I went to live with my grandmother in the Midlunds. I liked it."

Dorothy chewed a bit before she responded. "I lost my parents, too. In Caspia. During the war with Sul."

"I'm sorry."

"It isn't your fault. It wasn't even theirs. Sometimes people just die."

Rogers' coin felt heavy in his pocket. After a moment, he realized she was staring at him, so he cleared his throat and spoke. "I suppose so. My grandmother died, too. A drunk from Fharin shot her when we were hunting. She was the mechanik back home. I guess he thought she overcharged him, or he didn't like her work."

"Holden..." She trailed off without anything useful to say.

That was most people's response the first time they heard. Holden smiled a bit to help her. "I used to blame myself. I was there, and I didn't stop him."

"You can't blame yourself."

He thought of Wyatt again. His friend often said as much. But he'd also said other things, hadn't he?

*Tak-tuh-tak. Help me, Holden. Tak-tuh-tak.*

The thudding of the train echoed in his head. "No, I know that now. My friend—I mean, my sergeant, Rogers—tried to tell me that we can't control fate and that we shouldn't blame ourselves for things outside our control. I didn't listen to him then, but I try to now."

Dorothy looked at him again, tilting her head to one side. Perhaps she was trying to evaluate his state of mind or even considering if she should get Breggs to upgrade him to a green tag for reasons of mental well being.

"Your friend was right," she said at last.

Holden shrugged.

They finished their meal and went back to work.

In all, there were three cars of wounded soldiers, nearly forty men total, and other than Dorothy, only six medical personnel tried to look out for every one of them. Aiding in the care of the wounded helped Holden keep his mind off the thoughts and nightmares that had plagued him in recent days. Helping them, even as clumsy and unskilled as he was, made him feel happy for the first time since his friend Wyatt died.

When they finished their rounds, Holden helped Dorothy carry the unused medical supplies back to the storage cars near the front of the

train. As they passed the wounded soldiers along the way, several of them rose and stared past them to the east horizon. They looked astounded. A few nudged their sleeping neighbors awake and pointed to the windows behind Holden and Dorothy.

Holden looked over his shoulder to see what fascinated them so. Beyond the eastern windows, with the lavender of twilight at its edge, the northern edge of the Glimmerwood crept into view. Among the broad trees, flashes of turquoise foxfire flickered in the shadows, and the shiver of leaves flashed reflections of sunset on their silver bellies.

Despite his earlier misgivings about the windows, Holden couldn't help but stare at the spray of colors in the expanse of untamed forest. He stood there breathlessly for a moment before Dorothy nudged him forward into the privacy of the storage car. She slid the door closed behind them.

As the train thundered by the mixed color in the trees, Dorothy stood behind him and peered over his shoulder, her chin brushing his epaulet. "We're nearly to the caravan now. In another few days, you'll all be safe back at Northguard."

*Safe.* The word sounded impossible. He'd been so far from safe for so long it was almost a joke. He looked at Dorothy to respond, but before he could speak, a spot of orange fire flashed deep in the tree line.

Something screamed out of the trees. Trailing a line of sparks and oily smoke, a crude projectile hurtled at the front of the train. Holden couldn't act before it impacted with a roar near the engine.

The train and everyone aboard tumbled as the missile exploded. With a screech, the train pitched sideways, slamming Holden into the wall. The sound of metal linkages snapping was deafening, muffled only by the crash of the car against the ground. Everything spun around him. Cases of supplies broke free of their tethers to bounce around the confined space like cannon balls. A storm of bandages, splints, and broken glass spiraled in the air. Holden slid off the tilting deck of the train to bash into the wall, then the ceiling, and then the opposite wall as the train pitched and rolled down the hill next to the tracks. Once again, his world was upended as he fell, face first, into a wall of steel.

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*The other him stood in a vast battlefield. Behind the gaunt frame of his other body, black clouds flickered with flashes of orange fire, illuminating towering silhouettes that grappled in the distance. Cannons thundered atop impossibly high walls, raining down explosions on waves of soldiers who ran to their deaths.*

*The ground all around him was puckered with craters both old and new. Each crater was a black pit in the earth filled to the rim with shadows, but glistening eyes blinked up at him like bubbles in foam. From the shadows of the battlefield, dark figures clawed to the surface. Hunchbacked shapes and gaunt soldiers pulled themselves up into the real world from some other, darker place.*

*"This is where it ends," the other him cried with glee, but his toothless pit of a mouth did not move. Holden heard its words jangling in his teeth and his bones. "Where you run out of places to hide. This is where you join us."*

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Holden was dizzy and bruised when he regained consciousness. A deep gash in his forehead filled his left eye with blood. Struggling against debris that was piled on him, he picked himself off the ground.

Dorothy was nearby, pinned beneath a wooden crate. It had burst open, spilling its contents of straw and bottles of sanitizing solution. He stumbled to her and clawed the splintered wood and straw away to free her. As he did, her eyes twitched open.

"My arm," she said in a weak voice, looking down to her left shoulder. It hung low, popped free from its socket. She touched it with her other hand and winced. "Do you know what to do?"

Holden swallowed. "I think so."

She grabbed his wrist with her other hand and guided it to her shoulder. As he took hold of her, she fished the medical ledger out of her apron with the other hand. Biting on the leather cover, she squeezed her eyes shut and nodded for him to proceed.

He grasped her injured arm and pulled away from her body with slow, steady pressure. Dorothy screamed in pain around the book as he pulled. The sound of bones scraping turned his stomach before the joint slipped back into place with a wet, gut-twisting pop.

Dorothy's mouth sagged open, and the book slid out, a ring of deep tooth marks embedded in the leather. She grabbed the back of his head and pulled on him to bring herself off the floor.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Tears streamed from her eyes. "I will be. Help me up."

He guided her to her unsteady feet. Dorothy touched his chin and tipped his forehead down so she could examine the gash on his skull. "It's deep but not too deep. Remind me to get you a green tag later."

He smiled weakly at her joke before looking around at their surroundings. The train car lay on its side, its precious contents scattered everywhere. Dorothy picked up a bandage and tied a crude sling for her left arm, tightening the knot at her shoulder with her teeth. Despite her own injury, she picked her way to the back of the car. The door there led to the nearest group of the wounded.

"I need to see if anyone is still alive back there. You get a weapon. Your rifle should still be ahead." She indicated the opposite door with her chin. "We need to be ready if there are Khadorans still out there."

"I don't think it was them. The rocket didn't look like one of theirs," he said. It was too ugly and too loud.

"Well, before *whoever* shows up, then." She didn't give him a chance to protest. Instead, she kicked at the rear door and climbed through when it banged open. Holden hesitated, wanting to follow her, but he followed her instructions instead.

The next car was in a similar state. The walls were lined with storage lockers containing the personal effects of the wounded. Those lockers had popped open in the crash, and their contents were tossed everywhere. Near the front of the car, a medic half-buried in a drift of objects lay in an ugly heap, his neck bent sideways at a sharp angle.

Holden picked through the contents on the floor, tossing aside bundles of letters from home, locks of women's hair, and other such sentimental objects. As he searched for his rifle, the muffled voices of people approaching the train started to filter through the broken windows of the car. The voices were deep and rough. Something about them didn't sound right.

Putting it out of his mind for the moment, he kept digging. At last he found the rifle, partially tucked under the body of the dead medic.

"Sorry," he muttered as he pulled it clear. If the medic minded, he didn't say so.

Rifle in hand, Holden crawled out of the train. The storage car behind him was tipped on its side more than ten feet away. Beyond it was the passenger car full of the wounded, where Dorothy likely was. Keeping the train cars between himself and the direction of the ambush, he crept forward, whispering her name.

As he advanced on the passenger car, the voices of the attackers grew louder. It sounded as if they were just on the other side of the train. Some were close enough for Holden to make out their thick, wet breathing. Bizarrely, the voices were speaking Cygnaran or at least something close to it. A few of the words were mushy and pronounced with a thick tongue, but he could make out what they were saying.

"Bring little brother down. Have him rip the door off."

Holden dropped prone. The passenger car had managed to roll back onto its wheels before coming to a stop, so he peered underneath it. A dozen jointed legs, shaggy with fur and ending in split hooves, stood on other side of the train.

Farrow. The bestial boar-like species prowled the barren stretches of the Iron Kingdoms, opportunistically raiding for weapons, equipment, and food. Holden had a sneaking suspicion which they were after now.

He rose, careful to keep the train's large wheels between his body and the farrow on the other side of the carriage. As he did, one of the farrow shouted to its unseen companions somewhere up the hill. "I smell 'em! Over here!"

Creeping to the corner, Holden held his breath and chanced a look in that direction.

A pair of figures picked their way down the upturned soil of the hillside. One was a brutish farrow, its body muscled under layers of fat. It wore a patchwork of leather, fur, and metal armor, and two crude firearms hung at its waist.

Next to it was an even more alarming beast. Shaped like a farrow but far larger, it towered over its companion. It wore little in the way of clothing—just a pair of manacles on its wrists, a heavy wooden yoke around its neck, and a filthy loincloth held in place with rope. The larger creature blinked around with dim little eyes and snorted unhappily at the dust in the air, swiping uselessly with its thick fingers. Its actions reminded Holden of a young child.

The pair strode up to the carriage, and the smaller one kicked the other once in the leg.

"Open. Now." It gave the order loud and slow, but the bigger one still needed to process it. A few harder kicks, and it trudged forward.

Holden ducked back as the big creature moved to the front of the carriage, and he slid down the side of it to avoid the creature catching sight of him. He didn't know how the simple-minded beast would react if it spotted him, but he wasn't eager to find out.

The whole carriage shifted in the soil, rocking to one side, as the beast took hold of the door set on the end. He could hear it snuffing and grunting with effort as it strained against the train; he could also hear the loud popping of bolts and rivets breaking under the thing's great strength. With a final shrieking roar of resistance the door tore free.

Holden heard Dorothy screaming from inside the train for men to back away from the door. From his paltry cover, he watched in horror as the big beast reached in and grabbed one of the men within, cot and all, and yanked him out onto the grass. The beast looked down at his prize, turned its back on Holden, hunched over the injured man, and opened its massive boar-like jaws.

He brought his rifle up to fire, but before he could, the farrow with the guns ran up and kicked it in the snout. "No! Mine!"

The big thing whimpered and knuckle-walked away, pausing only to rub at its snout indignantly.

Holden didn't have any more cover to move to. He squeezed himself flat against the train car. If the farrow turned in his direction, it would surely see him.

Holden checked the ammunition in his pocket and made a mental note of the farrow he'd seen. With the big thing distracted by its bruised nose, he might be able to take down enough of the others that they'd fall back. Or maybe he could kill enough of them that they would leave the soldiers alone. He'd more than likely die for the effort, but he was prepared to face that consequence. He refused to just watch as yet more people died.

Raising his rifle to his cheek, he sighted on the farrow. It was squatting next to the soldier on the ground, its back still turned to him. Holden took a breath as his finger slipped into the trigger guard and he slowly let it out.

Before he could fire, he felt cold metal press against his neck. A low rough voice behind him said, "None of that."

Holden's heart sank. One of the farrow had snuck up behind him around the back side of the carriage. Defeated, he let the barrel of his rifle drop away from his target. The farrow took it from his slack grip and chuckled. And then it swung the rifle like a club to bash Holden over the head.

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*Holden's dark reflection cackled as it gunned down another soldier. Around it, a nightmare army of misshapen forms hacked and tore at the bodies of the fallen.*

*From across the battlefield, its hollow pits met his eyes, and it threw its arms wide in greeting. "We'll be together soon!"*

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The farrow marched them into the wilderness for miles. After plundering the train for medicine, weapons, and even the coal from the hopper, their captors piled as many men as possible in a few crude wagons hauled by the one called Little Brother and other similarly massive creatures. Dorothy and nearly two dozen soldiers rode in the wagons. The farrow left behind anyone who wouldn't survive the journey into the woods.

Holden and the other walking wounded were made to trudge along behind the caravan of stolen goods and stolen men. Each of them was locked in a crude iron collar attached to a length of chain. On the other end of Holden's was a fat farrow with yellow tusks poking out from under his lips. Called Atticus by the others, the farrow claimed Holden as his spoils—or more likely his dinner—after knocking him unconscious with his own rifle.

Atticus liked to mock him about this. Though Holden's grandmother's rifle was snapped, the stock cracked in half as it broke over his skull, the farrow kept it as a trophy and enjoyed jabbing him with it while he bragged about himself. He did so often.

"I fired the rocket at 'cher train. Right in the wheels. Boom!" Atticus poked Holden in the back as he mimicked the explosion. "Tangled 'em right up, slid the whole thing off 'em tracks."

Holden didn't respond to the jabs, figurative or literal. Without his weapons, the larger, more muscular farrow could overpower him without much trouble. Instead, he kept his eyes on his fellow prisoners and their captors. Dorothy was trying to keep the men in the wagon calm and tended to them as much as she was able.

The other farrow didn't seem very concerned about keeping a close eye on their prisoners. Instead, they squabbled among themselves over pieces of loot like pocket watches and small cameos. Most of all, they bickered about food. Holden had watched Atticus greedily stuff several days' worth of ration packs into his mouth and clumsily chew it down because a smaller farrow tried to take just one. The creatures seemed to enjoy spitefully taking things away from one another just to prove they could.

After a day of travel, the farrow forced the prisoners across the Black River. They crossed using crude barges of lashed logs and caulking the wagons into temporary rafts. The big beasts swam across, dragging the burdens across the water.

During the crossing, Holden and Atticus rode in Dorothy's wagon. She waited until the fat farrow dozed lazily before approaching Holden.

"Are you okay? Let me look at your head." He wanted to protest but leaned forward instead so she could inspect the gash on his forehead and the knot at the base of his skull. She took her time looking at his eyes. "Your left pupil isn't the same size as the right one. Holden, you have to be careful."

"What for? These farrow aren't taking us as hostages. We're a walking larder to them."

"Don't say that. We'll think of something."

As she spoke, Atticus belched in his sleep and rolled onto his side, pulling Holden's chain as he did and nearly pitching his prisoner off of the crude raft. The big farrow grumbled unhappily, and his stomach burbled. Looking at him, any fear Holden might have for the farrow distilled into acidic hate.

"You're right," he said. "Just not yet. There are too many of them. But we will. I promise."

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Holden spent the next two days looking for a chance to fulfill that promise. He watched the farrows' habits and movements. While the caravan marched deeper into the wilderness, leaving wider roads for smaller rutted tracks, he started to notice the crows.

They were silent. Perched in the trees, dozens of the black birds watched their progress west. Their heads swiveled slowly and smoothly to track them. To track *him*. He wasn't certain at first, but by the second day he was convinced the flock of crows that lined their path was watching him specifically. Remembering the crows that had haunted his journey so far, he hoped they were on his side.

The time to act had come.

Shortly before the farrow moved off on the third day, Holden turned back to Atticus with a question. "That little farrow with the white stripe. What's his name?"

"Shuddup," Atticus smacked the side of Holden's head with the broken rifle. Then he thought about the question. "Gutbucket. Why?"

"No reason. Just saw him trying to drink all the sweetwater you took." Holden pointed to a pile of alchemical antiseptic bottles on the nearest wagon. Caution labels were plastered on every bottle, but Holden suspected the farrow weren't avid readers.

Atticus sneered at Holden.

"Bet he didn'. Bet you jus' want me to get a bottle for you for being such a good helper." The farrow yanked on his chain until Holden's face touched his gummy snout. "But spoils go to the winners."

To punctuate his statement, Atticus dragged Holden to the cart and grabbed one of the bottles. He smashed the neck off on the rim of the wagon and chugged the contents, following it up by drinking another. Atticus smacked his chops and blew sweet smelling vapor in Holden's face.

"Point taken," Holden said.

They hadn't been marching for more than an hour when Atticus' body started to protest. The farrow kept gulping back saliva and having to pause to catch his breath. His stomach made loud gurgling noises as the alchemical solution worked its way deeper into his system. In time, Atticus and Holden fell to the rear of the farrow column. Other farrow slung jibes at Holden's captor as they passed.

The farrow brigands didn't seem to notice or mind as the gap between Atticus and their group steadily widened, nor did they seem to care when the fat farrow stumbled to the side of the road, pulling Holden with him, and started heaving up his breakfast. Holden watched the other farrow rattle on down the uneven trail, disappearing among the foliage up ahead. Atticus made a weak gesture for his fellow brigands to wait for him and returned to vomiting on the road.

When he was certain the others could no longer see him through the trees, Holden launched himself at Atticus. He smashed into the farrow's back, knocking him onto the ground. Atticus started to squeal in alarm and choked on his own sick as he swiped back at Holden.

He swatted Holden off his back, sending him flying into a patch of greenery. The collar around Holden's neck stopped him short, choking him. The farrow was stronger than he was, but Atticus' condition made him unable to fight effectively. Holden picked himself and brought both fists down on the farrow's head. The hulking Atticus' neck and skull were too strong. Pushing the farrow down with one hand, Holden flailed for a weapon. He found a branch that exploded into rotten splinters as he smashed it into Atticus' snout.

Choking and blinded by the rotten wood, Atticus grabbed at the weapon hanging from his belt. If he freed it, Holden was a dead man. While the farrow struggled with his weapon with one hand and wiped the debris from his eyes with the other, Holden clawed a rock out of the soil.

He whipped it into Atticus' head. The farrow's skull crunched under the impact and he dropped to one knee. Holden followed up with another blow, bringing the rock down on the bridge of Atticus' snout. Bone and cartilage popped. He brought it down again, snapping off one of the farrow's yellow tusks. Atticus fell, and Holden hammered at him with the stone until he was out of breath. The farrow's face was reduced to a bowl of red ruin.

When he was sure Atticus was dead, Holden knelt over the corpse and stripped the body of weapons. The farrow had taken his trench knife, which Holden strapped to his own belt. His confiscated rifle was useless now, but Atticus' own scattergun was in decent repair. The farrow had nearly a dozen cartridges for the weapon tucked into loops on his belt. Holden pocketed them.

He rose, coming eye to eye with an old crow perched on a low branch. The bird blinked at him with one black eye, its head snapping up and down as it regarded him. He thought of the crow that had pecked at Wyatt's corpse and the crows he had seen on the battlefield.

"Thanks for the help," he muttered bitterly as he started after the caravan. Before he could go far, the crow swooped down into the path in front of him and cawed. It hopped forward twice, looked at him, and then looked south, away from where the farrow had taken Dorothy and the others.

Holden moved to step past it. The crow cawed again and beat its wings, then stared at him and south once more. It flew a short distance and landed on a branch, hopping around to face him again before making an irritated rattling noise.

Holden blinked. His head started to throb. "You... you're trying to get me to follow you."

He heard the flutter of wings. Other crows landed in the branches overhead and in the trees flanking the path. They began to croak and caw at him as a flock, making the pain in his head magnify. The first one flew back to the path, hopped to him, and took the hem of his trousers in its beak, tugging twice in the direction it wanted him to go.

Holden pressed the heel of his hand into his eye, trying to subdue the pounding in his head. When he pulled it away, Rogers' golden coin rested within his palm. He didn't remember pulling it from his pocket.

He held the coin up, looking at the worn profile stamped onto its surface before he gripped it tightly.

"No." He looked at the birds, speaking this time with more confidence. "No. No, all right? Those people are going to die, and if I don't do something it's my fault. So if you want me to go anywhere, you're going to have to help me first."

Holden brushed past the bird in the road and moved to save the others. It clacked its beak in annoyance.

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The farrow weren't hard to track. Their wagons left clear ruts in the soil even after they traded the narrow path for an even smaller one. The woods became denser and swampier as Holden went deeper, the black pines and birch gradually giving way to willow and cypress dripping with sheets of moss. Holden kept to the foliage, stalking the farrow as if he were hunting a rabbit back home. While he moved, one of the crows kept pace with him with short flights from branch to branch.

Holden didn't have to go far. The walking wounded slowed their captors down, and the brigands maintained a lazy pace. Keeping low, he picked his way through the undergrowth until he could make out Dorothy among the others. She was binding a trencher private's fresh wound, a hand that had been cut off at the wrist. Holden couldn't help but notice that one of the larger farrow was chewing something.

His mind raced as he tried to form a plan. If he waited too long, another trencher was sure to be hurt, possibly even killed. As he'd been at the train, he was faced with far too many enemies. He had numerous allies, but they were in no position to help him. The best he could do was draw off as many farrow as he could, trusting the other captives to seize the opportunity to strike at their captors.

He scanned the farrow for a likely target and spotted the brutish warlord with the two long pistols. He sat atop the lead wagon with the arrogance of a king in a palanquin, chomping on chunks of an apple. He would occasionally kick at the bigger beast hauling the wagon to keep it moving. Holden took a breath and aimed at the farrow. The scattergun was heavier than his rifle, but he had no problem settling it on his target.

Above him, the crow made a sound like an old woman chuckling.

He fired as the farrow brought up the apple for another sloppy bite. The spray of shot destroyed the farrow's head. His lifeless body pitched sideways off the wagon to thud on the ground. The other farrow let out alarmed squeals as they drew their weapons. The big ones clapped their hands over their ears and whimpered.

Holden sprang from cover, reloading and firing as he ran. He aimed well ahead of the prisoners, dropping another two brigands with a spatter of lead. As he ran, the farrow opened fire, clipping the shrubs and trees around him. The smell of blasting powder and clouds of smoke filled the air.

He blindly fired one more time as he sprinted away from the caravan. Many of the brigands followed him. He hoped he'd lured enough of them away that Dorothy and the others had a chance to escape. He couldn't outrun the farrow for long.

A deafening noise erupted overhead. Crows punched through the trees and dived at the farrow, sweeping to either side of Holden in a great black wave of beating wings. He looked back and saw the farrow being torn with beaks and talons. Some of them simply *vanished*. A cloud of black birds would encircle them one moment, and in the next they would be gone.

He didn't have much time to think about it. Soon the birds were upon him, their black wings blotting out his vision. He could hear only the sounds of their calls. They circled him like a tornado, cawing madly...

... And then they were gone. His next footstep landed on ground inexplicably different than it had been, and he nearly pitched over.

He was somewhere else. The woods had become darker. The farrow were gone. The caravan was nowhere in sight.

Holden looked around, trying to get his bearings, when the orange light of fire blazed through the trees. Within the dark forest to his right was a farm. It was burning. The farmhouse and its tiny field of crops were hemmed in by trees on all sides, as if it had been scooped out of the countryside and dropped into the middle of the forest.

Holden saw a farmer holding a torch, screaming with laughter. The crops blazed and smoked as the man doubled over, choking on the smoke. Confused, Holden stepped toward the man as he choked and laughed, rocking on the ground while his farm burned.

Before he could reach the farmer, the roots of the nearest trees slithered out of the soil, and the entire line of trees surrounding the farm took creaking steps together, tangling their roots and branches to create a wooden wall he could not pass.

Another storm of crows buffeted him from the darkness. They knocked him off his feet. He fell to his side, falling farther down than he expected. The soil was soft and wet when he struck, though it had been dry just moments before. It was even darker when the crows flew off again.

The sound of a hog grunting drove him back to his feet. He looked around the woods, terrified that the farrow might be near. Instead of the brigands, though, he saw a small herd of swine snuffling in the twisted roots of the trees, chewing on something he could not see. Each wore a collar with a simple bell, but there was no pigpen in sight.

Confused, Holden took a step toward them. When he did, one turned its snout in his direction and grunted. It shuffled to him, leaving its meal behind. The gap between the pigs revealed a mangled corpse on the ground.

"Hol. Den," the pig grunted.

Holden gasped and backpedaled. The pig began to shriek like it was being dragged to the slaughterhouse. The noise was long and drawn out. As the pig screamed at him, it worked its jaw, and the noise began to sound like a man screaming.

"Hol. Den," it squealed with a noise that made his ears ache. Its body began to lift up from the ground as it pushed itself on its rear hooves. Its fat torso hung to one side but gradually lifted higher. One by one, the other pigs left their grisly meal behind and rose in turn. Each added its shrieking voice, turning his name into a chorus of screams.

"Hol. Den," they screeched as they took ungainly shuffling steps toward him. As they did, small, withered figures dug up from the soil. They looked like tiny hunchbacked men with muzzles and blindfolds of filthy cloth. The pigs climbed atop them to ride. *Piggy back rides.*

Holden backed away in horror, tripping and falling onto his back. The pigs circled around him, their breath stinking and saliva flying as they cried his name. Through the dark branches overhead, he saw a cloud of crows dive down at him as the pigs atop their whimpering mounts fell upon him.

The birds left him once more. The forest they deposited him in didn't seem real anymore. The trees stretched up to the starry sky, and the soil rose and fell like slow and steady breathing. As he picked himself up off the ground, mocking laughter filtered out from tangled thorn bushes and shuddering branches all around him. Patches of black eyes blinked up at him from pools of oil on the ground. Bloated fallen trees inched along the ground like swollen maggots.

A hand fell on his shoulder and spun him around to meet his own mutilated face. The black pits where his eyes and mouth should have stood were twisted into something like a smile.

"We've been waiting for you, Holden." When the other him said his name, unseen things in the shadows began to whisper and chant it.

"Wuh- Why—?"

"Because you belong to us!" The other him turned him around again and held his head in a choke. Its bony fingers tangled in his hair while its arm curled under his jaw. "Look!"

Figures emerged from the darkness of the trees while his reflection forced him to watch.

They came one at a time. Wyatt was first, his chest split open and his heart missing. Brinn, with holes punched through his armor by Khadoran bayonets. Rogers, a bloody hole in his throat that bubbled up black fluid as he tried to speak.

Dorothy, half her face caved in by a farrow club.

"No," Holden said. "She's not dead."

"You'll never know! You ran off like you always do. If she is or isn't, her blood lingers on your hands! These people trusted you, and you failed them. You're a coward! A miserable, worthless coward!"

The dark Holden pushed him toward his dead companions. Holden fell to his knees on the sticky black ground. Helpless, he looked at the corpses walking toward him. He wanted to tell the others he was sorry. He wanted to say anything.

He couldn't.

The dark Holden leaned down and ran a finger across Holden's cheek. It rubbed together its thumb and finger. Its toothless mouth widened into another ugly smile. "Dry. No tears, Holden? Won't you cry for them? Won't you weep for me?"

Holden shook his head. "No. I won't." He grabbed the trench knife out of his belt. "I'll die first."

He thrust up, stabbing the blade under his reflection's jaw. The other him shrieked, but the roar of its voice became the calling of crows and the beating of their wings.

And then Holden was alone in the forest. A real forest. It was cold, and the sky was dark overhead. No birds stood in the trees.

Shaking, he rose. As he did, a warm yellow light began to flicker in the darkness: the glowing window of a cottage with walls of rough stone and a roof of thatch. From a distance, he could smell spices on the air and hear the soft humming of some strange lullaby. The singing voice was old, but the song seemed somehow older.

Holden walked toward the light.