



COURAGE AT THE CROSSROADS

Season I: Run Rabbit Run

By Matt Goetz

“Crossroads of Courage” is the narrative league for WARMACHINE & HORDES, beginning this September and ending at Lock & Load GameFest 2017. The league is broken down into four seasons, each four weeks long, with a special finale event to be held at Lock & Load. Over the course of this story-driven event, players will influence the fate of a new hero (or villain) within the Iron Kingdoms, Holden. Each season’s results will shape Holden’s fate, with the Lock & Load finale event determining his final form.

Holden isn’t just a league character; he will be released as an actual model for WARMACHINE & HORDES after “Crossroads of Courage” has ended. Whether Holden is a brave hero, a sinister villain, a coward, a rebel, or anything in between is up to the players to decide. Each league season is accompanied by fiction telling Holden’s tale as he progresses through war-torn western Immoren. We’ve included the first season’s fiction here for your enjoyment. If you’re looking for a good time with friends, great story-driven casual play, and the chance to make your mark on a citizen of the Iron Kingdoms, then look no further. The first season of “Crossroads of Courage” begins September 1 at a game store near you!



*Since this land was first turned for the bounty it’d grow,
Stood fast one truth that all mortal men know,
Choose ye wrong or choose right,
Feed ye darkness or light,
At the end of your days, you shall reap what you sow.*

The rabbit loped in the late afternoon sun, stopping along its path to sniff at the air with a twitching nose or to wheel its ears in the direction of distant sounds. In the golden light of dusk, its tawny fur blended in with the field of late-summer grass. Two smaller rabbits emerged a moment later, following the larger rabbit’s trail.

Holden lay on his belly fifty yards away, controlling his breathing as the wind ruffled the field. Squeezing his left eye down to a slit, he lowered his cheek onto the worn stock of his rifle. Keeping his grip loose, he nudged the barrel up until the leading rabbit stood dead center atop the weapon’s front sight like it was performing an acrobatic trick.

Holden breathed slow, balancing the rabbit atop the sight. His right finger slid into the iron loop of the rifle’s trigger guard and rested on the brass trigger, polished smooth from years of use. As he eased the trigger back, the calm of the moment broke under the piercing shriek of a train’s whistle to the southeast—one low, long blast followed by a shrill, short one. The leading rabbit let out a chirp of warning to its companions, then it and the smallest at the rear dashed off in zigging lines to disappear into the field. The third rabbit snapped up to its haunches and froze. Its nose twitching, it locked eyes with Holden across the rifle’s barrel.

Cursing under his breath, Holden traveled the trigger back before his target could bolt. The pin snapped, the rifle barked, and the rabbit flipped into the grass a few feet from where it stood. Holden rose and started winding open the neck of a canvas sack on his hip. Within, several other skinned rabbits awaited their new companion.

Near where Holden stood, a stout young man whooped and sprang up from a blind of dry grass. Grinning, he jogged over to Holden through the cloud of blasting powder smoke. His wide face flushed from the short distance, he slowed to a walk to help look for the kill.

"I thought you were gonna lose him when that train whistled!" Wyatt exclaimed as Holden moved forward and swept the grass this way and that with a foot. "Sounded like it came from the south. What'd this one say?"

"Long, then short. Means another train is headed up that track." Holden jerked a thumb over his shoulder without looking. Wyatt turned and squinted south at a stand of chestnut trees where the top of a water tower protruded above the tree line. A thin strand of smoke floated up there, disappearing in the sky. He grunted and then continued helping the search for the rabbit. A moment later his hand shot down and plucked it from the ground, holding the prize aloft.

"Damn but that was a good shot. I couldn't even see the little critter. You nailed it right in the head." He twisted the rabbit in his hands to appraise the damage. "Right between the ears! Your granny'd sure be proud!"

"Thanks." Holden's quick, flat response cut off Wyatt as he accepted the carcass, squatted down, and pulled his belt knife to dress it.

"Aw . . . I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Holden avoided his friend's face, staring instead at the rabbit as he dispassionately skinned it.

"It wasn't your fault. Nothing you coulda done."

"Nothing is what I did," Holden snapped, jabbing the knife into the dirt in front of him. He paused, his jaw working. Then he held up the carcass of the rabbit, shaking it before tossing it into the sack hard. "Nothing is what this rabbit did. But the difference is he wasn't holding a gun."

Wyatt stepped back with a look of surprise. Holden sighed and rubbed his hand over his eyes, oblivious to the red streaks he left behind.

"It's fine," he said again, this time earnestly. He looked up and gave Wyatt a lopsided smile. "I'm fine."

Wyatt watched him for a moment, and then dropped his hands to tug a handkerchief out of his back pocket, grinning.

"Like hell you are. You got rabbit blood all over your damn face."



Ten minutes later, twilight encroached on the sky above, framed by the bare branches of the trees overhead. Moonrise was still hours off, but the prickle of early stars glowed above. The two reached a wooden trestle bridge, a thin branch of the larger southern line that crossed a defile in the woods. To the north the bridge curved closer to the defile's opposite edge, making an easier path than scrabbling up the thick brush of the defile's far side and drier than the marshy bog in its center. First Wyatt then Holden climbed up the wooden planking of the bridge's side and up onto the ties. Ahead, a string of mine carts were visible through the trees, flanked by large clapboard buildings ringed with wooden boardwalks. The buildings and boardwalks stood on wooden piers a few inches above the damp soil of the town.

"Just enough daylight to get one more," Holden said as he squinted at the sun, sitting right above the tree line.

"Don't you think ya bagged enough already?" Wyatt asked. "Annie's kids don't eat that much."

"We don't make it out to her place that often. I want to be sure."

"I'm sure, you half-head. Seven will feed them for a week."

As they approached town, three clear gunshots rang out, echoing through the woods and sending night birds fluttering from their perches. Both young men froze. Furrowing his brow, Holden looked back and forth, scanning the tree line.

"You think Marley's boys are hunting around the mine again?" Wyatt scowled. "Pritchard's gonna give them a thrashing when he finds out." Wyatt started moving again when a flurry of shots fired like a pine log crackling in a hot fire. Then there was another noise, a raw, animal howl of pain and panic just as shrill as the train's whistle had been.

"That sounded like a scream." Wyatt's eyes were as wide as copper farthings.

Both young men sprang to life, sprinting down the trestle track to the little mining village. As they ran, more gunshots snapped off in the dark, and a rising cloud of blasting powder smoke wafted over the rooftops. Somewhere in town there came a deep and primal roar. Veering from their path, Holden and Wyatt slammed into hiding just inside the left-hand buckboard shed, a place where the town's miners hung their tin helmets and stored their tools. The wall facing the town shook under a heavy impact, knocking dust from between the boards and causing Holden to scramble back. Wyatt crept forward to peer between two slats in the wall. If he meant to tell Holden what he saw, his words died before he could speak them. Wyatt's eyes flared open, his jaw slackened, and his breath came out as a thin, reedy whisper. Struggling to keep below the windowsills, Holden crawled on his hands and knees next to Wyatt and pressed against the wall, snatching a glimpse through the slats of the street beyond.

On the packed dirt of the town's main street, crumpled bodies lay in pools of blood made black by the rising moon. One of them was in a heap at the base of the wall with a broken neck. It was Pritchard. His sightless eyes started up at Holden, causing him to flinch away from the sight. Next to him, Wyatt found his voice again.

"Who's doing this?" he asked in an urgent whisper. "Khadorans? Trollkin?"

Holden shook his head. Breathing fast and shallow, he looked outside again as a man howling in pain came crawling around a building across the street, dragging a mangled leg. Farther into town, figures obscured by white clouds of smoke ran from unseen pursuers and fell with crossbow bolts in their backs or were chased down by enormous loping beasts. Silhouetted figures emerged from the rows of miners' homes to the right of the mining shack. Behind them, the low cherry-glow of fires in the houses started to flicker, quickly turning into blazing yellow light.

The fires of burning homes illuminated the nearest of the figures. It was tall, corded with muscle, and covered with a network of thick scars. The thing's face was inhuman, its mouth distended by oversize teeth and skin stretched into a beastlike snarl. Gore slicked its body and the rough-stitched hide clothes and patchwork armor it wore, and blood dribbled off the edge of an enormous axe it held in one massive fist. Lapping at the slick of blood on its face, the thing began stalking closer to the injured man, dragging in great snorts of air. Sniffing for fresh prey.

"We gotta help him," Wyatt hissed, barely audible over the howls and screams emerging from the town. "Shoot it. Shoot that . . . thing." He jerked his head up to the storage shack's window on their left.

But Holden didn't move. He clutched his rifle against his breast, watching with ever-widening eyes as the gory creature stalked closer to the wounded man, cocking its head like a curious dog. With one foot it pinned the man by his crippled leg, eliciting a howl of pain and causing the thing's ugly lips to curl back from its teeth in a jagged smile.

"Shoot it! "Put one right in its eye! I know you can do it!" Wyatt whispered, his voice rising with panic. Holden remained fixed in place, sheened with sickly sweat. Wyatt looked back and forth, first at his friend, then at the bestial figure. When Holden didn't react, Wyatt's face fell. Wrenching the rifle from Holden's hands, his expression was a mixture of disappointment and fear. "If you're not going to help him, I will."

Holden reached for Wyatt, his soft plea for his friend to stay dying in his throat. Wyatt stepped to the corner of the shack as the beast lifted its axe high for a killing blow. Wyatt quivered as he raised the rifle and took aim at the hulking beast, but before he could pull the trigger, the thing's eyes snapped up from its wounded prey, glinting brightly in the reflected glow of fires.

The beast hurled its axe through the air as Wyatt's shot went wide. The weapon cleaved into Wyatt's chest, splitting his breastbone open and slamming him back. Wyatt skidded to a stop on the wooden boardwalk a few yards from Holden's hiding place, staring up at the night sky. Holden curled into a ball and tried to cram himself beneath a table in the storehouse's corner, tears running down his cheeks. He breathed in shallow, quiet breaths as the thing outside moved toward Wyatt's broken body. If it looked to its left, it would see Holden hiding there.

The beast leaned over Wyatt and sniffed him twice. It began to rise, its head turning to where Holden struggled to stay quiet. He tensed, terrified he would be discovered, when the injured man in the street yowled in pain. The thing turned and uttered a guttural, ugly laugh. Another of the things was poised with a short bone dagger over the wounded man. Uttering a low growl, Wyatt's killer grabbed the axe by its handle and stalked toward the other creature in the street, not bothering to free its weapon from Wyatt. The lodged weapon dragged Wyatt's body along, his boots clattering on the wooden boardwalk a few short paces before the blade firmly wrenched free of his chest with a wet noise.

The creature with the axe snapped a powerful backhand across the other one's face, driving it away from the wounded man. The two growled and snapped at one another in a brutish language. Eventually the one with the dagger backed away, cowed, while Wyatt's killer shook blood from its weapon and chopped down at the man in the street. Holden flinched at the axe crunching down into the wounded man's skull. The creature knelt down and scooped up the body with one bloody hand, howling, and hoisted it aloft like a trophy. It and the other creature, their ritual display complete, ran off toward the chaos in the center of town.

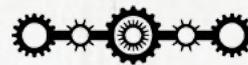
Holden's stifled sobs were indiscernible from the grotesque noise of slaughter. Townsfolk screamed and beasts bellowed, and the cries of the dying rang through the streets. He huddled there for minutes trying to breathe quietly when a gurgling voice softly called out his name. Opening his eyes, he looked toward the sound.

"Holden. Help me." Lying half in the dirt road where he'd been dragged, his chest a ruin, Wyatt's mouth bubbled with blood. His

tone was flat, his words thick. His fingers twitched in the dirt as he weakly reached for Holden. "Help me."

Holden clenched his eyes shut again and bit hard on his fist to stifle the sobs that wracked his body. Pulling his shoulders tight and his knees to his chest, he wept for his dying friend.

"Help me, Holden."



Hours after Wyatt's pleading stopped, hours after the last strains of dying that echoed through the town fell silent, Holden crept out of hiding. The heat of the day had been replaced with the biting chill of a clear night. Only the dying coals of the charred buildings nearby gave any warmth. A flattened shop on his right had collapsed under the three-ton weight of Divot, the town's run-down laborjack. Divot's hull had huge rents in its plating and its left arm was twisted off, spilling a pool of hydraulic fluid and oil into the street.

Looking out for signs of danger, Holden approached his fallen friend. A sudden noise made him freeze and jerk back toward his hiding place, but it was only a support beam collapsing inside one of the burned homes. Biting his lip, he continued on to Wyatt's side. Wyatt lay near a tangle of other corpses whose chests had been ripped open and something torn out, leaving deep and bloody voids. Only Wyatt had been saved from the bloody work: the wound in his chest ruined whatever prize the creatures were after.

Wyatt's eyes were unfocused and his face ashen, lips parted slightly from the last time he'd called for help. Holden knelt down, closing his dead friend's eyes. Then he drew his rifle from Wyatt's stiffening fingers and rose to take tentative steps toward town. His shoulders were tight and his grip on the weapon tighter as he moved into the street.

"Hello?" he breathed, his voice hoarse and cracking from rawness. He took a few more steps forward and whispered again, a little louder this time. "Anybody there?"

He was waiting for a response when a crow cawed from atop a nearby roof. The harsh, barking sound made Holden freeze in the street. The bird hopped to the edge of the roof and cocked its head, regarding the pile of corpses with one glossy black eye.

"Don't you dare," he whispered. He made a shooping gesture with the barrel of his rifle, and the crow flapped away toward the center of town.

Once the bird was gone, Holden made his way to the noiseless main road, stepping around bodies. Ahead, his path brought him to The Chant and Cup, a common house, facing the barber-surgeon's on the left side of the street and the mine foreman's office across the way.

As he walked, he fished into his coat pocket and pulled out a handful of waxed paper cartridges. A few tumbled from his fingers to land near another corpse in the street. Swallowing hard, he left them there, trying not to look at the dead woman's accusing face. He slipped the others into leather loops on the rifle's stock. He tried to load his rifle, but his fingers slipped and he lost another cartridge trying to feed it into the open trap door on the back of his weapon.

This time, he stooped down to pick it up—this one hadn't fallen near anyone's corpse. Cursing under his breath, he blew dirt and ash off the cartridge before slipping it home and locking the breech with a soft click. He was ready to begin his search again when the crow uttered a series of sharp calls, three short croaks like a mocking laugh.

Looking up, Holden spotted the crow perched atop the foreman's office. Shapes moved in the shadows of the shattered front door of the office below it; three of the bestial men crouched in the shadows of the building, messily eating something fleshy and man-shaped. Holden held his breath and started to retreat when one of them ripped away a hunk of meat with a jerk of its head, the gory and ugly face now fully visible in the moonlight. The two of them locked eyes for a moment, Holden's wide in fear, the thing's narrow with rage. Throwing back its head, the thing uttered a guttural noise that pitched into something like a howl.

"Oh, god."

Holden bolted. He sprang for The Chant and Cup's door, hurdling the hitching post out front. The three things inside the foreman's office left their meal and came howling after him, crude melee weapons appearing in their hands. Once inside the common house, Holden jukeed to his right as his pursuers smashed through the shuttered windows facing the street. They crashed into the upturned tables and chairs littering the main room, struggling to get free of the clutter.

Holden leapt over the bar and shouldered through a sagging door into the kitchen and from there into an alley that ran behind the common house. His pursuers raised a terrible clatter as they barreled into the kitchen behind him. Holden sprinted south down the alley, chanting prayers under his breath as he passed the backsides of the town's familiar buildings.

He took a hard left at speed into a narrow gap between buildings, barely wide enough for him to run down. The sound of his footsteps changed from the flat slap of packed dirt to a hollow wooden thudding as he ran from the alley dirt to planking toward a railing that crossed his path on the other side of the gap.

When he looked over his shoulder to see if the pursuers were catching up, his boots struck one of the wooden boards and tangled up, tossing him gut-first into the railing and knocking out his wind. He nearly pitched over the side of a raised boardwalk built on the second level of the carpenter's shop into a steep valley on the southwest edge of town. A simple crane was affixed to his left, holding a payload of cut timbers in open air.

The sound of the creatures chasing him grew louder. The first followed Holden's path, trying to squeeze its way through the alley. A second jumped for the roof of the shop. Holden swallowed hard, his throat clicking, and climbed onto the railing. Clenching his hands into fists, he jumped as far as he could.

He landed on the load of timbers dangling from the crane and hauled himself up. The thing in the alley clawed at the walls and snapped its jaws trying to reach him. The one on the roof bounded forward, raising its weapon to pick him off his perch. Swaying crazily on his line, Holden whacked the belaying pin that held the thick rope in place with the butt of his rifle.

Nothing happened.

With a scream of rage and panic, Holden smashed his rifle's stock against the pin again, and it snapped free with a loud crack. He fell in a shower of logs as the creature's broadaxe sailed through the air overhead.

Holden hit the ground hard, wrenching his right ankle, and began to tumble down the slope of the valley to the trees below. Bouncing timbers rained around him as he crashed to a halt at the edge of the trees. In the darkness above, his pursuers snapped and growled as they broke off their chase to tear down the alley past the carpenter's shop and toward the southern edge of town.

Groaning in pain, Holden used his rifle as a crutch to stand up. He scanned the town above for signs of the creatures, trying to quiet his rapid breathing. When there was no further hint of them, he took a few tentative steps up the hill, back to town. A low and rumbling growl sounded in the trees behind him. Holden spun and saw two bestial men emerged from the shadow of trees in the valley, their lips curled back from their long and glistening fangs. They were only a few yards from him, blocking off any path into the trees.

One jerked forward, startling him. He shouldered his rifle and snapped off a shot, hitting it in its eye. As it fell, Holden broke into a run back to town. The other creature howled in rage and made chase. Holden snatched another cartridge from the rifle's stock and jammed it home as he clambered up the slope of the valley into town. At the top of the grade, he spun and shot at the thing chasing him, but the bullet ricocheted harmlessly off an armored plate.

Stumbling backward, Holden fumbled for another round, dropping it in a panic. The thing below fell into a crouched, animalistic run up the hill. Backpedaling, Holden reloaded before tripping on the irregular ground and crashing onto his back. The thing transitioned from a crouch to a leap and flew at him. Holden fired without aiming.

His blind shot took the thing in its throat. He rolled out of the way as it crashed down where he had been, its clawed feet and hands digging at the dirt as its life seeped out of the hole in its neck. Without waiting to see if it would die, Holden picked himself off the ground and ran for his life.



He had been sprinting down the railroad tracks, the gloaming of a distant dawn edging onto the eastern sky. He stopped to catch his breath, doubled over and gulping for air, sweat pouring off his face. Two noises in quick succession got him moving again: the snapping of branches and barked shouts echoing through the trees behind him, and the low whistle of a train ahead.

"One whistle . . . means standby," he gasped between breaths as he broke into a lopsided run. Mustering the little speed he had left, he ran away from the unseen menace in the woods.

He ran until his legs trembled, stumbling on the railroad ties and hauling himself back up more than once, cutting his hands on the sharp edges of the ballast rocks. Holden ran until his lungs wheezed with every breath, until his jaw hung open and limp, until his whole body poured sweat and sagged on the edge of collapse.

Eventually he ran into the edge of a pool of light: gas lanterns hanging from the cars of two trains on the north-south main line, one train parked behind the other. Standing between the two trains, a secondman examined one of the engines, holding aloft a red lantern that cast his face into pools of unsettling shadow. A line of men emerged from the southern train and stood in single-file to board the waiting northern one, a large military train heavy with armor plates and blistered with cannons. The golden swan of Cygnar stood out against the iron hull of the military train. A thick column of black smoke vented from its stacks, and a rhythmic chugging from the engine indicated that it was building steam, preparing to head out.

Holden rushed headlong to the line of men waiting to board the military train. He clambered onto the wooden platform between the two trains and almost fell again, but an arm shot out and hauled him up to his feet.

"Steady there," a slightly older man said, scrutinizing Holden as he nudged him into line. A thick man about Holden's age peered around the shoulders of the one who'd grabbed him.

"What've you got there, Rogers?"

"Local boy with a damn fine rifle. You know you didn't need to bring your own weapon, right kid? They're gonna kit you out with standard issue. Say, you get in a fight with one of those Caspian jerks or something? You're a mess."

"What . . ." Holden stammered.

"Rifle. The armory will set you up with a military piece when we get to the front. Bayonet and everything." Rogers pantomimed stabbing a rifle at Holden, grinning as he flinched.

"Military? I don't . . ."

"Yep, next stop, Corvis. Then it's on to the front! Brinn's sure we're joining up with Lord General Stryker's army! Can you imagine?" Rogers beamed with pride as he spoke. The shorter, chubbier man behind him pushed forward to look at Holden as the line shuffled forward.

"Show him, Rogers."

Rogers laughed and dug into his back pocket, liberating a well-worn folded broadsheet. He pushed it into Holden's baffled face. At the top in block capitals was one word: **WAR**. Beneath it was a stern-looking woman, her face framed by a crop of white-blonde hair. Behind her a column of Cygnaran soldiers and towering warjacks stretched out down the promenade of a major city street. The rest of the print below the picture was too small to read in the dim light streaming out of the train's windows.

"I plan to get Major Maddox to sign it when we get to the front."

"This guy thinks we're gonna be anywhere close to the warcasters. He's got a load of mud where his brain should be." At that Rogers laughed and gave Holden a sheepish shrug before turning back to his companion.

"Hey, you never know. The Lord General was just a soldier once."

"A soldier who became a warcaster."

Holden looked at his surroundings again, realization dawning on him. The line was pushing him back toward the open maw of the military train, a troop transport car that the men filed into where a red-faced sergeant barked at them for their names as they boarded. His assistant wrote them in a ledger as the sergeant counted each man with a handheld tally counter.

Beginning to protest, Holden hazarded a glance back at the tree line he had escaped from, where the thin railroad spur headed back to the ruins of his former home. The tops of the trees shuddered as things moved through them—things large enough to make the trees quake. At the edge of the trees, hulking shadows lurked, some almost double the size of the things in the village.

Swallowing hard, Holden exhaled sharply and stopped pressing back against the push of the line. Rogers noticed and tried to reassure him that things would be fine. Holden didn't move, so Rogers and Brinn joined the forward press, taking their place in line. Before they departed, Rogers gave him another grin.

"Don't take too long, kid. Brinn and me will save you a seat."

Holden walked back slowly, his head swiveling between the moonlit trees and the blustering sergeant. He looked at the southern train,

another possible path of escape. It was crawling with workers preparing it for its return journey to the south. At the rear, an older man stood on a short ladder to check a hanging red lantern. Before the old man could reach it, a thick, clawed hand slashed out from an unseen thing lurking in the darkness behind the train and snagged the man from his perch. There was no cry of panic or of pain; the old man simply disappeared. Shadows moved beneath the southern train as something stalked forward, toward another solitary figure.

Before he could witness those things taking another life, Holden backpedaled toward the troop transport's door. The sergeant's calloused hand grabbed his shoulder and hauled him up into the noise and smoke of the troop car, clicking his thumb on the tally counter.

"Name?" When Holden didn't respond, he repeated the question.

"Holden. Uh, sir."

"We're here to pick up three hundred." The sergeant scowled and turned his counter for Holden to see the numbered dials. "We have three hundred."

Holden looked over his shoulder to where the creature had snatched the old man and back to the sergeant. He stammered uselessly trying to find his response.

The sergeant's assistant with the ledger hovered his pen above the page, waiting to see if he should add Holden's name. He began slowly pulling it away. Before Holden could find his words to come up with any excuse why he should be allowed to the safety aboard the train, the man named Rogers reappeared at the train car's doorway peering over the sergeant's shoulder.

"I think you hit the ticker twice when I stepped on, sir."

The sergeant glowered at Rogers and lunged forward until their noses were nearly touching. "You think I'm simple, son? That I don't know my own business?"

"No, sir."

"See you don't!" The sergeant turned to Holden and barked for the young man to take a seat aboard the train. At first Holden didn't move, still agape and uncertain.

Rogers extended his hand with a grin. "You coming, kid?"

Holden stared at the hand, still unsure, until the unpleasant calling of a crow echoed from the distant trees. The noise snapped him to action. He jumped aboard the train as the sergeant angrily stuffed the counter into his pocket and bellowed forward that all were counted and aboard. Another man picked up the cry, and another, until the engineer rang a bell to signal his readiness. The train whistled again and pulled forward, picking up speed. The men in the train car started to jabber at one another, smoke noxious cigars, or stare blankly ahead. Some of them looked reluctant to be aboard, but most had a cheerful air about them as they shouted raunchy songs that frequently rhymed "red" with "dead." Holden stumbled along the cramped walkway of the train car until Rogers grabbed him and pushed him down onto a bare wooden bench, pressing Brinn against the window to make room. They talked, but Holden didn't listen. Instead, he pressed himself into the seat as tight as he could, closed his eyes, and choked back his tears.

The train moved north to war.

