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Opening Extract from...

Half a War

Written by Joe Abercrombie

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For Teddy

The man who stands at a strange threshold
Should be cautious before he cross it,
Glance this way and that:
Who knows beforehand what foes may sit
Awaiting him in the hall?

From Hávamál, the Speech of the High One



I

WORDS ARE WEAPONS

THE FALL

'We have lost,' said King Fynn, staring into his ale.

As she looked out at the empty hall, Skara knew there was no denying it. Last summer, the gathered heroes had threatened to lift the roof-beams with their bloodthirsty boasting, their songs of glory, their promises of victory over the High King's rabble.

As men so often do, they had proved fiercer talkers than fighters. After an idle, inglorious, and unprofitable few months they had slunk away one by one, leaving a handful of the luckless lurking about the great firepit, its flames guttering as low as the fortunes of Throvenland. Where once the many-columned Forest had thronged with warriors, now it was peopled with shadows. Crowded with disappointments.

They had lost. And they had not even fought a battle.

Mother Kyre, of course, saw it differently. 'We have come to terms, my king,' she corrected, nibbling at her meat as primly as an old mare at a hay-bale.

'Terms?' Skara stabbed furiously at her own uneaten food. 'My father died to hold Bail's Point, and you've given its key to Grandmother Wexen without a blow struck. You've promised the High King's warriors free passage across our land! What do you think "lost" would look like?'

Mother Kyre turned her gaze on Skara with the usual infuriating calmness. 'Your grandfather dead in his howe, the women of Yaletoft weeping over the corpses of their sons, this hall made ashes and you, princess, wearing a slave's collar shackled to the High King's chair. *That* is what I think "lost" would look like. Which is why I say *come to terms.*'

Stripped of his pride, King Fynn sagged like a sail without a mast. Skara had always thought her grandfather as unconquerable as Father Earth. She could not bear to see him like this. Or perhaps she could not bear to see how childish her belief in him had been.

She watched him swill down more ale, and belch, and toss his gilded cup aside to be refilled. 'What do you say, Blue Jenner?'

'In such royal company as this, my king, as little as I can.'

Blue Jenner was a shifty old beggar, more raider than trader, his face as crudely chiselled, weathered and cracked as an old prow-beast. Had Skara been in charge

he would not have been allowed on her docks, let alone at her high table.

Mother Kyre, of course, saw it differently. 'A captain is like a king, but of a ship rather than a country. Your experience might benefit Princess Skara.'

The indignity of it. 'A lesson in politics from a pirate,' Skara muttered to herself, 'and not even a successful one.'

'Don't mumble. How many hours have I spent teaching you the proper way for a princess to speak? For a queen to speak?' Mother Kyre raised her chin and made her voice echo effortlessly from the rafters. 'If you judge your thoughts worth hearing, pronounce them proudly, push them to every corner of the chamber, fill the hall with your hopes and desires and make every listener share them! If you are ashamed of your thoughts, better to leave a silence. A smile costs nothing. You were saying?'

'Well . . .' Blue Jenner scratched at the few grey hairs still clinging to his weather-spotted scalp, evidently a place unknown to combs. 'Grandmother Wexen's crushed the rebellion in the Lowlands.'

'With the help of this dog of hers, Bright Yilling, who worships no god but Death.' Skara's grandfather snatched up his cup while the thrall was still pouring, ale spilling across the table. 'They say he lined the road to Skekenhouse with hanged men.'

'The High King's eyes turn north,' Jenner went on. 'He's keen to bring Uthil and Grom-gil-Gorm to heel and Throvenland . . .'

'Is in the way,' finished Mother Kyre. 'Don't slouch, Skara, it is unseemly.'

Skara scowled, but she wriggled her shoulders up the chair a little anyway, closer to the board-stiff, neck-stretched, horribly unnatural pose the minister approved of. *Sit as if you have a knife to your throat*, she always said. *The role of a princess is not to be comfortable*.

'I'm a man used to living free, and I'm no lover of Grandmother Wexen, or her One God, or her taxes, or her rules.' Blue Jenner rubbed mournfully at his lopsided jaw. 'But when Mother Sea whips up the storm, a captain does what he must to save what he can. Freedom's worth nothing to the dead. Pride's worth little even to the living.'

'Wise words.' Mother Kyre wagged her finger at Skara. 'The beaten can win tomorrow. The dead have lost forever.'

'Wisdom and cowardice can be hard to tell apart,' snapped Skara.

The minister clenched her jaw. 'I swear I taught you wiser manners than to insult a guest. Nobility is shown not by the respect one is given by the highest, but the respect one gives to the lowly. Words are weapons. They should be handled with proper care.'

Jenner waved any suggestion of offence gently away. 'No doubt Princess Skara has the right of it. I've known many men far braver'n me.' He gave a sad smile, displaying a crooked set of teeth with several gaps. 'And seen most buried, one by one.'

'Bravery and long life rarely make good bedfellows,' said the king, draining his cup again.

'Kings and ale pair up no better,' said Skara.

'I have nothing left but ale, granddaughter. My warriors

have abandoned me. My allies have deserted me. They swore fair-weather oaths, oak-firm while Mother Sun shone, prone to wilt when the clouds gather.'

That was no secret. Day after day Skara had watched the docks, eager to see how many ships the Iron King Uthil of Gettland would bring, how many warriors would accompany the famous Grom-gil-Gorm of Vansterland. Day after day, as the leaves budded, then the leaves cast dappled shade, then the leaves turned brown and fell. They never came.

'Loyalty is common in dogs but rare in men,' observed Mother Kyre. 'A plan that relies on loyalty is worse than none at all.'

'What then?' asked Skara. 'A plan that relies on cowardice?'

Old, her grandfather looked as he turned to her with misty eyes and brewer's breath. Old and beaten. 'You have always been brave, Skara. Braver than I. No doubt the blood of Bail flows in your veins.'

'Your blood too, my king! You always told me only half a war is fought with swords. The other half is fought here.' And Skara pressed one fingertip into the side of her head, so hard it hurt.

'You have always been clever, Skara. Cleverer than I. The gods know you can talk the birds down from the sky when it pleases you. Fight that half of the war, then. Give me the deep cunning that can turn back the High King's armies and save our land and our people from Bright Yilling's sword. That can spare me from the shame of Grandmother Wexen's terms.'

Skara looked down at the straw-covered floor, face burning. 'I wish I could.' But she was a girl seventeen winters old and, Bail's blood or no, her head held no hero's answers. 'I'm sorry, Grandfather.'

'So am I, child.' King Fynn slumped back and beckoned for more ale. 'So am I.'

'Skara.'

She was snatched from troubled dreams and into darkness, Mother Kyre's face ghostly in the light of one flickering candle.

'Skara, get up.'

She fumbled back the furs, clumsy with sleep. Strange sounds outside. Shouting and laughter.

She rubbed her eyes. 'What is it?'

'You must go with Blue Jenner.'

Skara saw the trader then, lurking in the doorway of her bedchamber. A black figure, shaggy-headed, eyes turned to the floor.

'What?'

Mother Kyre pulled her up by her arm. 'You must go *now*.'

Skara was about to argue. As she always argued. Then she saw the minister's expression and it made her obey without a word spoken. She had never seen Mother Kyre afraid before.

It did not sound like laughter any more, outside. Crying. Wild voices. 'What's happening?' she managed to croak.

'I made a terrible mistake.' Mother Kyre's eyes darted

to the door and back. 'I trusted Grandmother Wexen.' She twisted the gold ring from Skara's arm. The one Bail the Builder once wore into battle, its ruby glistening dark as new-spilled blood in the candlelight. 'This is for you.' She held it out to Blue Jenner. 'If you swear to see her safe to Thorlby.'

The raider's eyes flickered guiltily up as he took it. 'I swear it. A sun-oath and a moon-oath.'

Mother Kyre clutched painfully hard at both of Skara's hands. 'Whatever happens, you must live. That is your duty now. You must live and you must lead. You must fight for Throvenland. You must stand for her people if . . . if there is no one else.'

Skara's throat was so tight with fear she could hardly speak. 'Fight? But—'

'I have taught you how. I have tried to. Words are weapons.' The minister wiped tears from Skara's face that she had not even realized she had cried. 'Your grandfather was right, you are brave and you are clever. But now you must be strong. You are a child no longer. Always remember, the blood of Bail flows in your veins. Now go.'

Skara padded barefoot through the darkness at Blue Jenner's heels, shivering in her shift, Mother Kyre's lessons so deep-rooted that even fearing for her life she worried over whether she was properly dressed. Flames beyond the narrow windows cast stabbing shadows across the straw-scattered floor. She heard panicked shouts. A dog barking, suddenly cut off. A heavy thudding as of a tree being felled.

As of axes at the door.

They stole into the guest-room, where warriors had slept shoulder to shoulder a few months before. Now there was only Blue Jenner's threadbare blanket.

'What's happening?' she whispered, hardly recognizing her own voice it came so thin and cracked.

'Bright Yilling has come with his Companions,' said Jenner, 'to settle Grandmother Wexen's debts. Yaletoft is already burning. I'm sorry, princess.'

Skara flinched as he slid something around her neck. A collar of twisted silver wire, a fine chain clinking faintly. The kind the Ingling girl who used to bind her hair had worn.

'Am I a slave?' she whispered, as Jenner buckled the other end about his wrist.

'You must seem to be.'

Skara shrank back at a crash outside, the clash of metal, and Jenner pressed her against the wall. He blew his candle out and dropped them into darkness. She saw him draw a knife, Father Moon glinting on its edge.

Howls now, beyond the door, high and horrible, the bellows of beasts not the voices of men. Skara squeezed her eyes shut, tears stinging the lids, and prayed. Mumbling, stuttering, meaningless prayers. Prayers to every god and none.

It is easy to be brave when the Last Door seems tiny for its distance, a far-off thing for other folk to worry about. Now she felt Death's chill breath on her neck and it froze the courage in her. How freely she had talked of cowardice the night before. Now she understood what it was.

A last long shriek, then silence almost worse than the noise had been. She felt herself drawn forward, Jenner's breath stale on her cheek.

'We have to go.'

'I'm scared,' she breathed.

'So am I. But if we face 'em boldly we might talk our way free. If they find us hiding . . .'

You can only conquer your fears by facing them, her grandfather used to say. *Hide from them, and they conquer you.* Jenner eased the door creaking open and Skara forced herself through after him, her knees trembling so badly they were nearly knocking together.

Her bare foot slid in something wet. A dead man sat beside the door, the straw all about him black with blood.

Borid, his name. A warrior who had served her father. He had carried Skara on his shoulders when she was little, so she could reach the peaches in the orchard under the walls of Bail's Point.

Her stinging eyes crept towards the sound of voices. Over broken weapons and cloven shields. Over more corpses, hunched, sprawled, spreadeagled among the carved columns after which her grandfather's hall was called the Forest.

Figures were gathered in the light of the guttering firepit. Storied warriors, mail and weapons and ring-money gleaming with the colours of fire, their great shadows stretching out across the floor towards her.

Mother Kyre stood among them, and Skara's grandfather too, ill-fitting mail hastily dragged on, grey hair still wild from his bed. Smiling blandly upon his two

prisoners was a slender warrior with a soft, handsome face, as careless as a child's, a space about him where even these other killers dared not tread.

Bright Yilling, who worshipped no god but Death.

His voice echoed jauntily in the vastness of the hall. 'I was hoping to pay my respects to Princess Skara.'

'She has gone to her cousin Laithlin,' said Mother Kyre. The same voice that had calmly lectured, corrected, chastised Skara every day of her life, but with an unfamiliar warble of terror in it now. 'Where you will never reach her.'

'Oh, we will reach her there,' said one of Yilling's warriors, a huge man with a neck like a bull's.

'Soon enough, Mother Kyre, soon enough,' said another with a tall spear and a horn at his belt.

'King Uthil will come,' she said. 'He will burn your ships and drive you back into the sea.'

'How will he burn my ships when they are safe behind the great chains at Bail's Point?' asked Yilling. 'The chains you gave me the key to.'

'Grom-gil-Gorm will come,' she said, but her voice had faded almost to a whisper.

'I hope it will be so.' Yilling reached out with both hands and ever so gently eased Mother Kyre's hair back over her shoulders. 'But he will come too late for you.' He drew a sword, a great diamond in a golden claw for a pommel, mirror-steel flashing so bright in the darkness it left a white smear across Skara's sight.

'Death waits for us all.' King Fynn took a long breath through his nose, and proudly drew himself up. A glimpse

of the man he used to be. He looked about the hall and, through the columns, caught Skara's eye, and it seemed to her he gave the slightest smile. Then he dropped to his knees. 'Today you kill a king.'

Yilling shrugged. 'Kings and peasants. We all look the same to Death.'

He stabbed Skara's grandfather where his neck met his shoulder, blade darting in to the hilt and back out, quick and deadly as lightning falls. King Fynn made only a dry squeak he died so fast, and toppled face forward into the firepit. Skara stood frozen, her breath held fast, her mind held fast.

Mother Kyre stared down at her master's corpse. 'Grandmother Wexen gave me her promise,' she stammered out.

Pit pat, pit pat, the blood dripped from the point of Yilling's sword. 'Promises only bind the weak.'

He spun, neat as a dancer, steel flickering in the shadows. There was a black gout and Mother Kyre's head clonked across the floor, her body dropping as though it had no bones in it at all.

Skara gave a shuddering gasp. It had to be a nightmare. A fever-trick. She wanted to lie down. Her eyelids fluttered, her body sagged, but Blue Jenner's hand was around her arm, painfully tight.

'You're a slave,' he hissed, giving her a stiff shake. 'You say nothing. You understand nothing.'

She tried to still her whimpering breath as light footsteps tapped across the floor towards them. Far away, someone had started screaming, and would not stop.

'Well, well,' came Bright Yilling's soft voice. 'This pair does not belong.'

'No, lord. My name is Blue Jenner.' Skara could not comprehend how he could sound so friendly, firm and reasonable. If she had opened her mouth all that would have come out were slobbering sobs. 'I'm a trader carrying the High King's licence, lately returned up the Divine River. We were heading for Skekenhouse, blown off course in a gale.'

'You must have been fast friends with King Fynn, to be a guest in his hall.'

'A wise trader is friendly with everyone, lord.'

'You are sweating, Blue Jenner.'

'Honestly, you terrify me.'

'A wise trader indeed.' Skara felt a gentle touch under her chin and her head was tipped back. She looked into the face of the man who had just murdered the two people who had raised her from a child, his bland smile still spotted with their blood, close enough that she could count the dusting of freckles across his nose.

Yilling pushed his plump lips out and made a high, clean whistle. 'And a trader in fine goods too.' He brushed one hand through her hair, wound a strand of it around his long fingers, pushed it out of her face so that his thumb tip brushed her cheek.

You must live. You must lead. She smothered her fear. Smothered her hate. Forced her face dead. A thrall's face, showing nothing.

'Would you trade this to me, trader?' asked Yilling. 'For your life, maybe?'

'Happily, lord,' said Blue Jenner. Skara had known Mother Kyre was a fool to trust this rogue. She took a breath to curse him and his gnarled fingers dug tighter into her arm. 'But I cannot.'

'In my experience, and I have much and very bloody . . .' Bright Yilling raised his red sword and let it rest against his cheek as a girl might her favourite doll, the diamond pommel on fire with sparks of red and orange and yellow. 'One sharp blade severs a whole rope of cannots.'

The lump on Jenner's grizzled throat bobbed as he swallowed. 'She isn't mine to sell. She's a gift. From Prince Varoslaf of Kalyiv to the High King.'

'Ack.' Yilling slowly let his sword fall, leaving a long red smear down his face. 'I hear Varoslaf is a man a wise man fears.'

'He has precious little sense of humour, it's true.'

'As a man's power swells, his good humour shrivels.' Yilling frowned towards the trail of bloody footprints he had left between the columns. Between the corpses. 'The High King is much the same. It would not be prudent to snaffle a gift between those two.'

'My very thought all the way from Kalyiv,' said Jenner.

Bright Yilling snapped his fingers as loudly as a whip-crack, eyes suddenly bright with boyish enthusiasm. 'Here is my thought! We will toss a coin. Heads, you can take this pretty thing on to Skekenhouse and let her wash the High King's feet. Tails, I kill you and make better use of her.' He slapped Jenner on the shoulder. 'What do you say, my new friend?'

'I say Grandmother Wexen may take this ill,' said Jenner.

'She takes everything ill.' Yilling smiled wide, the smooth skin about his eyes crinkling with friendly creases. 'But I bend to the will of one woman only. Not Grandmother Wexen, nor Mother Sea, nor Mother Sun, nor even Mother War.' He flicked a coin high in the hallowed spaces of the Forest, gold flashing. 'Only Death.'

He snatched it from the shadows. 'King or peasant, high or low, strong or weak, wise or foolish. Death waits for us all.' And he opened his hand, the coin glinting in his palm.

'Huh.' Blue Jenner peered down at it, eyebrows high. 'Guess she can wait a little longer for me.'

They hurried away through the wreckage of Yaletoft, flaming straw fluttering on the hot wind, the night boiling over with screaming and pleading and weeping. Skara kept her eyes on the ground like a good slave should, no one now to tell her not to slouch, her fear thawing slowly into guilt.

They sprang aboard Jenner's ship and pushed off, the crew muttering prayers of thanks to Father Peace that they had been spared from the carnage, oars creaking out a steady rhythm as they slid between the boats of the raiders and out to sea. Skara slumped among the cargo, the guilt pooling slowly into sorrow as she watched the flames take King Fynn's beautiful hall and her past life with it, the great carved gable showing black against the fire, then falling in a fountain of whirling sparks.

The burning of all she had known dwindled away, Yaletoft a speckling of flame in the dark distance, sailcloth snapping as Jenner ordered the ship turned north, towards Gettland. Skara stood and looked behind them, into the past, the tears drying on her face as her sorrow froze into a cold, hard, iron weight of fury.

'I'll see Throvenland free,' she whispered, clenching her fists. 'And my grandfather's hall rebuilt, and Bright Yilling's carcass left for the crows.'

'For now, let's stick to seeing you alive, princess.' Jenner took the thrall collar from her neck, then wrapped his cloak around her shivering shoulders.

She looked up at him, rubbing gently at the marks the silver wire had left. 'I misjudged you, Blue Jenner.'

'Your judgment's shrewd. I've done far worse than you thought I might.'

'Why risk your life for mine, then?'

He seemed to think a moment, scratching at his jaw. Then he shrugged. 'Because there's no changing yesterday. Only tomorrow.' He pressed something into her hand. Bail's armring, the ruby gleaming bloody in the moonlight. 'Reckon this is yours.'