DAN JONES

WOLVES OF WINTER

An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2023 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Dan Jones, 2023

The moral right of Dan Jones to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of both the copyright owner
and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781838937942
ISBN (XTPB): 9781838937959
ISBN (E): 9781838937898

Lyrics from "I Am the Wolf" by Mark Lanegan, copyright © 2014.
Printed with permission of the Mark Lanegan Estate.

Cover by Ben Prior
Map design by Jamie Whyte

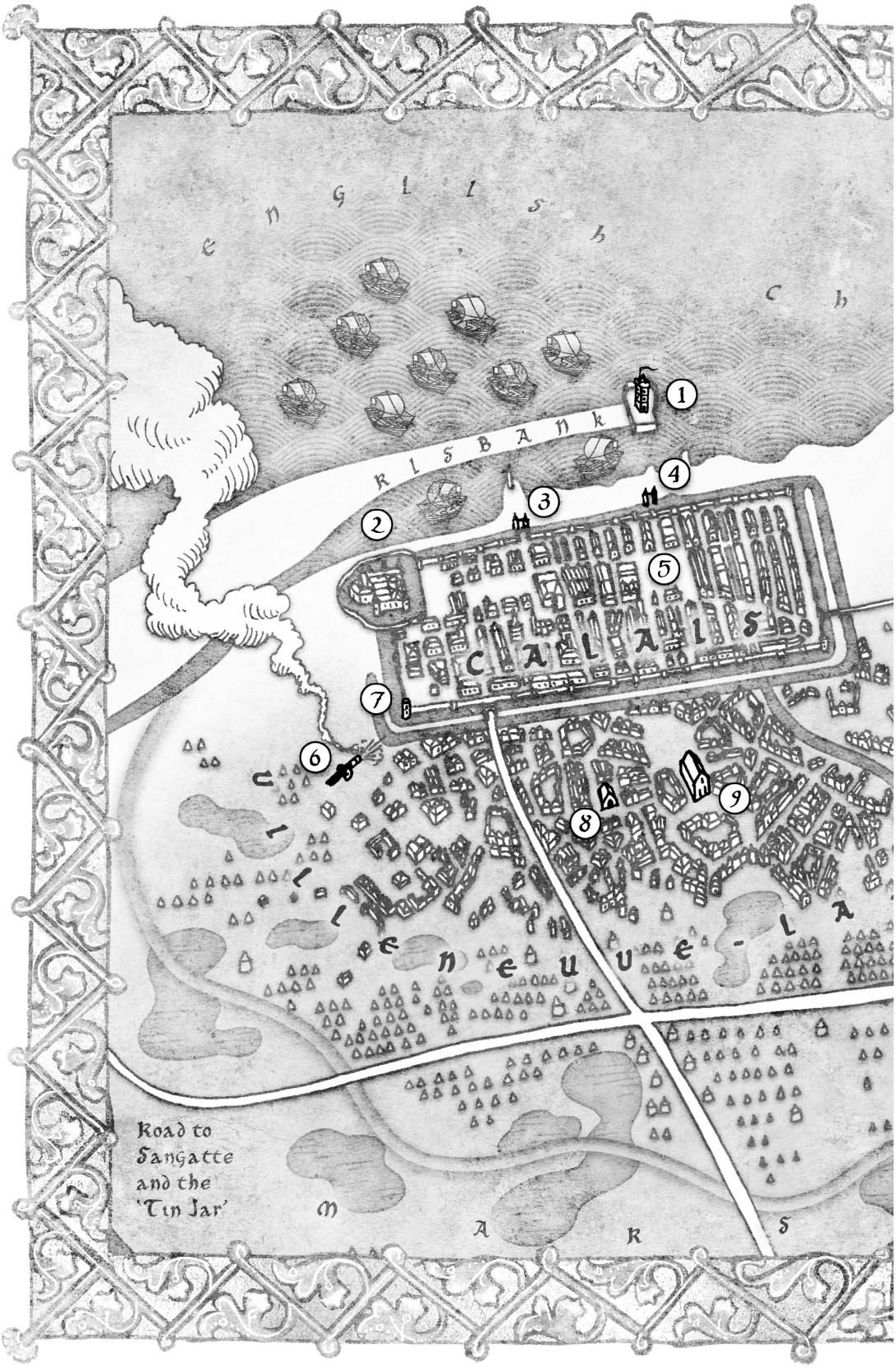
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C171272
FSC
www.fsc.org

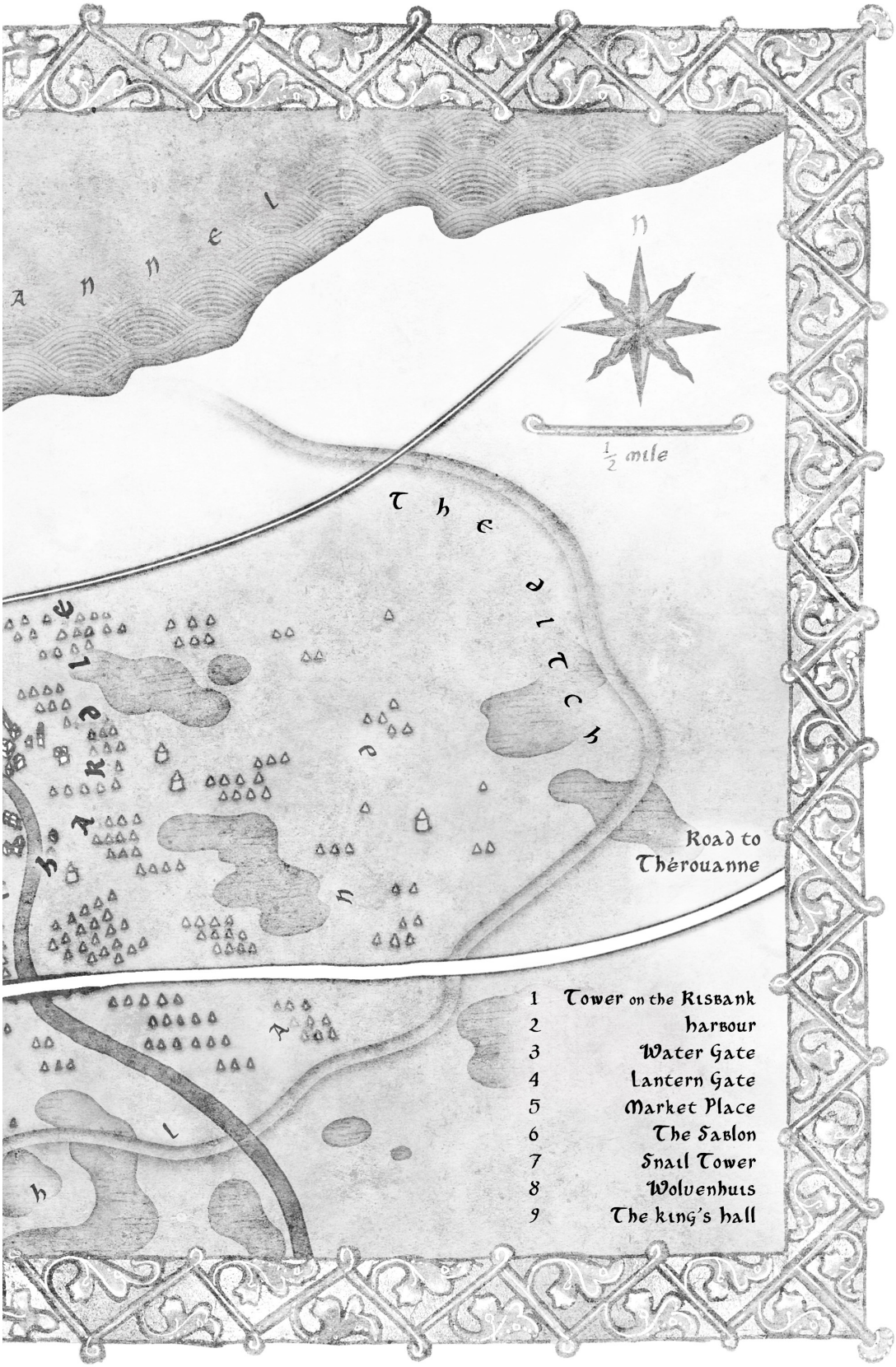
Head of Zeus
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For Ivy



Road to Sangatte and the 'Tin Jar'



Road to Thérouanne
1 Tower on the Risbank
2 harbour
3 Water Gate
4 Lantern Gate
5 Market Place
6 The Sablon
7 Snail Tower
8 Wolvenhuis
9 The king's hall
½ mile

‘Our expedition has been very long and continuous. But we do not expect to depart the kingdom of France until we have made an end of our war…’

Edward III, Calais, 1346

‘There is nothing left here which has not been eaten, unless we eat the flesh of men.’

Jean de Vienne, Calais, 1347

Prologue

July 1345

Dusk was falling as the Captain peeled away from the thinning crowds on the Pont au Change and slipped between two wooden shop fronts, down a narrow alley that led to the barrier at the bridge's edge.

He leaned on the rail and looked out. *Paris*. On his left, the dying sun's last light bathed the Île de la Cité, on which stood the royal palace, Sainte-Chapelle and the cathedral of Notre-Dame. To his right, it lit up the sprawl of the city proper: a vast, seething metropolis of thousands of houses, shops and churches, all crammed within the old defensive walls.

Below flowed the Seine. The river quickened and eddied where its waters rushed through the bridge's narrow arches. Thick brown foam bubbled on top. The Captain caught the stink of the public jakes, which emptied a short way upriver. Ripe on a summer's night. He covered his nose and inhaled through his sleeve. He counted breaths like paternosters. All around the city, he heard vespers bells tolling.

'So he's dead.'

He knew the voice so well that he did not bother turning. And when he pulled his sleeve down from his face he knew the breath, too. Meat rotting between yellow teeth.

'He seemed so when I left him,' said the Captain. 'I've never known a man have his brains trampled out of his ears and live to hear another Mass.'

He was still staring downriver. A week ago, on another night and in another city, he had watched a mob stab and

stamp to death Jacob van Artevelde: Flemish autocrat, political firebrand, friend of kings and double-dealing charlatan known as the Brewer of Ghent.

'How did you get out?'

The Captain turned at last to look up at the speaker. The man stood a clear head taller than him. A thick brown beard, flecked here and there with grey, covered his face so fully it almost skirted his eyeballs. He was missing a portion of one eyebrow, and his nose had been broken many times. His moustache drooped long at the corners of his mouth, like a carp's barbels.

'Getting out is never hard,' the Captain said. 'If you work alone. And if you do not tarry to admire what you've done.'

'Of course. You work alone now.' The man smiled wryly. 'Our king will not thank you.'

'Nor was he meant to,' said the Captain. 'Artevelde was the last man who believed King Edward could force his son the prince on Ghent as Count of Flanders. Now that's over. The Italians will take control. For a time.'

'Indeed.'

The two men said nothing for a moment. The Captain broke the silence.

'Are *you* here to thank me?'

The bearded man broke into a short laugh. 'No,' he said. 'I am here to pay you.'

He handed the Captain a purse made of fine calfskin. The Captain weighed it in his hand. When he opened it, gold coins caught the fading light. English nobles, minted very recently. The Captain held one up. It was stamped with an image of a galley at sea, and, on the reverse, King Edward's bold new coat of arms: English lions quartered with French fleurs-de-lis. His

heart fluttered at the sight. He put it back in the purse and kept his face set cold.

'War gold,' he said. 'Not popular here.'

'Do you mean to stay in Paris?'

'Perhaps.'

'Gold is gold. Either keep it or come back tomorrow and exchange it for something you like better.' The big man gestured with his head back towards the alley. The bridge was lined with money-changing houses, now shuttered for the night.

'Changers have no stake in the squabbles of kings. Except as it touches their own profit. Any one of them will give you deniers or pennies. They will give you Saracen bezants if that is what you want. Of course, they will punish you with their rate of exchange, but…'

The Captain shook the calfskin purse gently and finished the man's sentence for him: '…it is as it is.' He shook the purse again, then put it in the leather bag at his side. 'Tell Pulteney—'

The bearded man cut him off. 'Sir John sends his greetings. Naturally, *he* thanks you – and God – for this… fruitful development.'

'He has more work for me?'

'Not now. But you know how things are. We are at war. In war there is always work. And this war will last a long time. Don't worry. By the end of it, you'll be the rich man you've always wanted to be.' He paused. 'When we need you, we will find you.'

'So be it.' The Captain did not ask how they would find him. They always did.

He made to leave, but the bearded man put a hand firmly on his shoulder. Something shifted in the man's eyes. He flashed a glance behind him.

'Don't—'

The Captain shoved the bearded man hard in the chest. He stumbled two paces backwards, but he regained his balance and managed to block the alley. He grabbed the Captain's wrist and, surprisingly deftly, spun the Captain around and held him with his arm pinned tightly behind his back. Twisted him so he was once again facing the river. He whispered into his ear, 'Don't look.' Then he pulled hard on the Captain's arm, forcing his hand up towards the nape of his neck.

The Captain's shoulder burned. His eyes stung. He tried to keep his voice level and spoke through his teeth. 'What is this?'

The bearded man moved even closer. 'We've been followed. Head for the island. Someone will open the gate. You understand?'

The Captain nodded. 'What— Who—'

'Just do it.' The man jerked his arm again. 'Now tread on my foot.'

The Captain lifted his right boot and drove it down behind him.

The bearded man gave a yelp, let go of the Captain's arm and hopped about theatrically. At the same time, he turned the Captain roughly around and shoved him down the alley. 'Go,' he whispered. 'And Godspeed.'

The Captain did not stop to argue. He sprinted, running lopsided as he held his aching shoulder, back along the alley towards the main thoroughfare of the bridge.

When he got there, he knew something was wrong.

The Pont au Change was lit by the bone-yellow light of a rising moon. It was completely deserted. At dusk it had been bustling. Now it was silent.

The Captain felt blood pumping in his ears. He reached for

his bag and the purse. It was still there. He pulled out a handful of the coins and stuffed them into his breeches.

He reached for the short-bladed dagger he wore in his belt. That was gone.

Of course.

He edged out of the alley and pressed himself into a doorway. He pulled up his hood and peered cautiously from under it, towards the palace complex on the royal island. The grand buildings there now loomed huge and grey in the moonlight. The gates to the island flickered with the sickly orange glow of torches.

The Captain rubbed his shoulder, trying to restore some life to it. He reckoned the torchlit gates to be about a hundred paces away. It would not take him long to cover the ground. The bearded man had told him one of them would be opened.

Yet he also took my knife.

The Captain cursed. Time was against him. He had to choose. He decided to trust his instinct.

He buried his chin into his chest, pulled his hood even tighter around his face and set off back towards the city, sliding stealthily from doorway to doorway.

Straight away he heard the echo of footsteps. Several sets, coming towards him. Moving fast. Cutting him off.

Again he cursed and switched direction, now heading back towards the palace.

The footsteps behind him quickened.

The Captain did not bother looking back. He just ran, as fast as he could. His feet pounded the boards of the bridge, the clatter of his boot soles bouncing crazily off the deserted shop fronts.

His palms were slippery with sweat. His lungs burned. But

he kept running. And he kept his eyes fixed on the palace ahead of him. With every pace, the lights were getting closer. Seventy paces. Fifty. Forty. He was almost there.

Twenty.

A guard in plate armour, wearing King Philippe's royal livery, stepped out of the porterhouse beside the gate. He bellowed something, calling to some other guard. It did not sound like an order to unbar any gate.

The guard drew a sword. And the Captain knew for certain.

He had been set up.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another alley leading between the bridge's shuttered buildings. He hurled himself into it and crouched for a moment, breathing as silently as he could through his nose. His chest felt as though it was about to burst.

He strained his ears to listen over his heartbeat. He could no longer hear any footsteps. He edged deeper down the alley, hoping that it might cut behind the shops. Hoping it might lead anywhere. He moved by touch alone, allowing the wall's rough timber to scratch his back through his shirt. The alley was so dark that the void danced with bright colours he knew were not there. Green and red. Sparks of yellow.

He heard the footsteps once more. They passed the entrance to the alley. He heard the guard call again. Then a rapid conversation. After that, the footsteps retreated, getting quieter as they headed back towards the city.

The Captain puffed out his cheeks in relief.

And felt the point of a dagger at his throat.

The putrid breath told him who was holding it. The Captain froze.

'Sorry, my friend,' said the bearded man's voice. Then he

lifted his foot in the blackness and slammed his heel into the side of the Captain's right knee.

White pain shot through the Captain's leg. He tried to keep silent. He bit through the tip of his tongue. Blood flooded his mouth. In the blackness he saw the Brewer of Ghent, his head cracked open like a marrow. Eyes bulging impossibly out of the skull like the slick orbs of a skinned rabbit.

The Captain collapsed sideways over his broken leg. Two pairs of hands grasped him roughly below the armpits. One of the hands reached inside his bag and removed the calfskin purse. Blood was leaking from his mouth. Green stars danced around his eyes.

In the blackness, he heard another voice. A woman's.

'*Dépêchez-vous!*' she said. '*J'ai froid*.'

Hurry up. I'm cold.

The Captain coughed and drooled more blood. He felt the arms beneath his shoulders heave him upright. Each rough jolt sent pain coursing down through his knee. The arms dragged him fifteen paces backwards, until he felt his back pressed against the rail at the bridge-side.

Then he felt a face beside his, and smelled a new mouth. The woman's. Fragrant with good wine. She whispered in his ear, '*C'est vrai. Le roi ne vous remercie pas*.'

It's true. The king does not thank you.

She kissed him on his cheek. '*Mais je vous remercie*.'

But I do.

Then she was gone, and the rougher arms heaved the Captain upwards and backwards once more, hauling him so his upper body was now all the way over the rail. He dangled there a moment, half on the bridge and half off.

The hands let him go.

For an instant, the Captain felt weightless. As though he were an angel in flight. As though he might rise, high above the bridge. Above Paris. Above it all. He flapped his arms frantically, trying to grab something. Anything. His fingers gripped only cold air. And suddenly he was no longer weightless. His stomach churned. His bladder gushed empty.

He was falling, fast, hurtling towards the reeking Seine.

As he somersaulted through the blackness, the Captain saw the lick of a single lantern above him, dancing wild circles. Flame-lit faces swirled together, stretching and collapsing into one. The fire of the torch between them turned around and around, switching places with the frozen blaze of the night's first stars. Each one winking like a tiny, polished coin.

The Captain thought once more of the Brewer of Ghent. He thought of the life he had chosen. Of the men he had left behind.

As the water rushed towards him, he could hear somebody screaming.

As he slammed through the surface, he realized it was him.