



# COURAGE AT THE CROSSROADS

## Season 4: And There Was a Great Calm

By Matt Goetz • Art By Carlos Cabrera

Holden pushed open the cottage door. It swung smoothly on oiled, black-iron hinges, causing a curtain of yellow light from within to spill out over him. He hesitated, letting the light of the cottage inside and the darkness of the forest outside mix as he listened to the chirp of distant frogs counterpoint the noises coming from the interior.

The cottage was warm with light. Pale, fat candles hanging by crude chains from the rough-cut timbers sputtered thin trails of smoke to the ceiling. The small space was worn and well used. Handmade patchwork blankets were draped over many surfaces, and stacks of old tomes teetered in the corners. On one pile of leather-bound volumes a shabby raven slumbered with its beak tucked beneath a wing. In a corner, a cluttered kitchen radiated warmth and spiced air throughout the cramped space.

In the center of the cottage, the chassis of a strange 'jack occupied most of the space, propped up on a scaffold of hewn timbers. It was partially disassembled, its pieces scattered on the cracked clay tiles of the floor.

An unseen woman somewhere behind the 'jack hummed a foreign-sounding lullaby that filled the room. It was a gentle song performed on a rough instrument. Her voice lilted and fell in a pattern of unusual tones as it crept across the room. With the rise and fall of the

song, the light of the candles grew brighter and dimmer, seeming to tug toward each crooned note.

Holden swallowed and stepped into the cottage. When he crossed the threshold, the 'jack's head swiveled up to meet him, green eyes glowing in its featureless face. It was wary despite its disassembled state. Its top access hatch hung open to reveal its cortex sphere surrounded by disordered mechanika, a tangle of conduits reminding him of a bird's nest cradling a large metal egg. The 'jack had no limbs attached to it, only a bulky torso and neck supporting an inscrutable head that fixed him with a glowing stare. Despite the fact it had no means to attack him, Holden remained cautious.

Watching the disassembled steamjack's gaze track him as he took another step into the cottage, Holden cleared his throat. "Excuse me?"

Five long blades curled over the strange 'jack's hull, caressing the chipped enamel of its iron skin. They scraped down toward its head in a long stroke that let out a squeal of metal on metal, revealing a knobby wrist wrapped in strips of dingy linen. From behind the 'jack, a stooped old woman emerged.

She walked with a gnarled staff of dark wood and bore the heavy burden of an iron furnace on her back; its disordered stacks streamed wisps of black smoke to mix with the haze of the candles

in the rafters. The fingers and thumbs of both her hands were long blades with a single curling edge. Her face was creased and ruddy like the face of someone left out in a winter storm. A studded patch of leather covered one of her eyes, and the other sparkled at Holden in the candlelight.

Her wrinkled features twisted as she grinned, revealing a mouth of crooked teeth. "I've been waiting."

The sound of her voice with its thick northern accent startled him. Her song had been gentle, oddly comforting, but her voice bore the deep scars of age. It was an old voice from an older world.

"Who are you?" Holden asked.

Her fingers twitched, making a noise like a butcher honing his blade. "You question an old woman, Holden? I am she who summoned you."

"You must have a name. Tell me." Holden tried to sound braver than he felt. As he spoke, though, the 'jack's eyes flashed at him. Thin vanes of green light glowed in a device mounted to its back, filling the air with the smell of ozone.

The old woman cooed and stroked a bladed hand on the 'jack's head to calm it. "*Ne, ne*, little one. This one might still have a purpose."

She walked to Holden, her staff tapping a steady rhythm on the clay tiles. Up close she smelled like a steam engine, an odor of hot iron and burning coal. He was taller than she was, but somehow still she cast him in her shadow. She *loomed*.

"What purpose?" Holden asked. Her comment about summoning him was equally vexing, but Holden resolved to deal with one vexing issue at a time.

"An uncertain one," the woman replied. Extending a hand, she brushed the back of her metal claws down his jaw, pushing his face first one way then the next as she appraised him. "Is always the way with men like you."

"Like me?"

"Cowards. Heroes," she said, seemingly distracted as she studied his features.

"I'm not a—" He hesitated.

"Not a coward? Then why do you run? Not a hero? Then why do you fight?" The old woman's eye locked with his. She gripped her staff to jab him in the chest. "You are *both*. This makes you useful."

"Useful to you," he said. The old woman made a frustrated noise at this and flapped one of her bladed hands in a swirling gesture.

"To the world!" she grumbled. "Stop saying stupid things and sit. You haven't eaten since the train. I need you strong."

She grabbed a rough carved stool from the little kitchen and pointed to it with an iron claw. Not knowing what else to do, he sat.

She moved about the kitchen, brusquely grabbing a wooden bowl and spoon. She filled the former from a bubbling pot of fragrant stew and thrust it into Holden's hands. She glared at him until he took a tentative sip, then she nodded in contentment. She went back to work on her steamjack while he ate. Resting her staff against its strange hull, she began cooing and clucking at the construct as she adjusted its inner workings.

Holden finished the oddly pungent meal and set the bowl on the floor next to his chair, rising to study the woman while she worked. Despite her iron talons, her fingers were nimble. Watching her work, he was

reminded in a strange way of his grandmother in her shop. It was the confidence she exuded—and her aura of impatience with him.

Holden considered what to say before he spoke again, carefully avoiding any uncertainty in his voice. "You brought me here for a reason."

The old woman paused and peered over her left shoulder with her one good eye. Her coy grin made that eye twinkle. "I did."

"And it has something to do with those things I saw. In the forest."

"And before, yes."

"The thing on the battlefield. The man in the smoke."

The old woman turned and clapped her hands together with a menacing metallic ring. "The hollowman. Do you know this word? Hollowman?"

Holden shook his head. "No, but I think it was after me. I started to have visions of it. Nightmares."

The woman muttered something foreign under her breath before responding. "That is *her* touch on you. Trying to break you. Perhaps they have an inkling of your greater purpose."

"Whose touch?" he asked. He was struggling to make sense of the woman's mysterious words, and he wanted straight answers.

She scowled up at him for a moment with another appraising look. "The one who lives in dreams. If they have her poisoning your dreams, it is from fear. Of you, or what you might become. I chose you for that potential."

"What might I become?"

"Who can say? Your days are not yet ended. But I set this path in motion. I saved you from living like a fat cow, wedded to a widow, with children who would never respect you. From one day lying in a grave that no one visits before the forest swallows it. I gave you the chance to be something special. I chose you. But I cannot choose *for* you, Holden." She scowled. "You have to do that."

"What choices do I have?" If he had stood here months ago and had this same conversation, he would have thought the woman insane, but between the thing she called the hollowman, his nightmares, and the strange journey that placed him outside her cabin, he wasn't even certain of his own sanity anymore. Mostly he just felt tired.

"Save lives or damn them." Before he could ask the obvious question, she pointed to the cabin door. "Out there, soon, old and wicked things that are neither gods nor mortals will walk once more. Perhaps they are a bit of both. And they plan a great harvest of humankind."

"How do you know?"

She smiled again, her ugly teeth those of a predator. "Because I intend to let them. But Zevanna is no fool. I may open a gate and let a wolf among the lambs, but there is a plan." She poked his breastbone with one talon, pricking the skin through his shirt. "*You*."

Holden chewed on her words. The woman's name didn't mean anything to him, but he knew there was something to her. She was more than just a mad old woman of the woods. If she truly had caused him to stand here, he wanted all of the pain and confusion in his life to have some meaning. Some purpose.

"Suppose I agree. You said these... these *things* were like gods. How am I supposed to do anything against that?"

Zevanna gestured for him to follow her. "Come. I will show you."

She moved deeper into the little cabin, past stacks of mechanical parts and through curtains of elaborate schematics and unsettling diagrams. Beyond the front room the space seemed to stretch far back, larger than the modest exterior suggested was even remotely possible.

The larger, darker space at the back looked like it was part warehouse and part tomb. Towers of old gold coins and cups and piles of older armor stood next to 'jack hoists and benches covered in rune plates. A skeletal horse atop a plinth stood next to a towering pair of mechanical legs topped with a strange little building. In the dim corners, Holden could make out statues of kings in baroque armor that stood like sentinels over the strange space.

Zevanna led him through the maze of oddities until they reached a long workbench backed by an open furnace and a great black anvil. Lying on the bench was a rifle. His grandmother's rifle. *His* rifle.

She grabbed it and offered it to him. "This is how."

As he took it, he felt warmth spread across his skin. It seemed impossible: he'd left his rifle broken by the side of a muddy forest road next to the corpse of a farrow brigand. Yet here it was, as gleaming and perfect as the day it was new. A line of strange runes was carved into the metal of the barrel.

"How did you—?"

"No," she said. "No stupid—"

"Questions, I know. If you brought me here, you must have brought it, too."

"And made it better. Like you, I have a greater purpose for this. With this, you can kill a god... or something like one."

He held the weapon and could feel tingling in his fingertips, like a pulse deep in the gun's wood and steel. Just holding it made him feel flush and almost giddy.

"I'm your assassin."

"Perhaps, perhaps no. That is to be seen. But you might be." Her expression was inscrutable, but her voice was tinged with regret. "You might also become the other. The dark one. I cannot see your fate."

He ran his thumb over the rear sight. "I'm guessing that's not normal."

She shook her head. "Only some men can duck beneath its scythe. When I changed your course, it was lost to you. This is your greatest blessing. If I cannot see it, neither can they."

"And if I agree to help you, what am I supposed to do?"

Zevanna nudged him with her staff back toward the front room. As they threaded back through the maze of objects, she said, "Once my Scrapjack is complete, I will go south. When the moons are full, I will open the door to these things. You must go west. Outside Boarsgate."

"Why Boarsgate?"

She nudged him to move faster. "I once gave a proud fool there an idea. That idea led to a bloodbath. Blood on my soil gives me power. I can watch over you while you are near it. A battle comes, and it draws them close, like flies to a corpse. You be there. If you are the one I need, you will know. You will remind a god that once he was a man."

They had reached the threshold of the little cottage. Holden paused and looked back at the strange old woman. "And if I fail, what then?"

"Take comfort. You won't know or care what happens next." She pushed the door open for him with one of her clawed hands.

"But—"

For a moment, an expression crossed her face that fit ill there: one of sympathy. "Go. Boarsgate. Be there by the Longest Night. After, it is too late."

Holden stepped from the strange warmth of Zevanna's cottage back into the cool, crisp air. The trees swayed, rattling their branches together and knocking loose autumn leaves to spiral down toward him. He wondered what month it had been before he climbed on the train, and if it really should be autumn yet. Somehow he doubted it.

"Will I see you—?" he asked, turning back to look at Zevanna. Where the cottage had stood was just a patch of gently swaying reeds. "Of course not."

He hefted his rifle—at least that was real enough—and took his bearing from the cold stars above. "Right. Boarsgate."

Picking his way through the forest, Holden headed west.

---

Captain Samuel Briggsway whistled and inclined his head to indicate Lieutenant Ashley Pemberton to join him at the head of the column of Steelheads. Scowling, Ash pushed her way forward.

"More reds?" Ash asked. For the past two weeks, the Khadorans had launched a series of probative attacks against Ordric defenses outside Boarsgate. Several chapters of Steelheads, including their Martenburg one, had been hired to support the Ordric Army defenders of Boarsgate and had clashed with the northerners on more than one occasion during the several weeks of their employ.

"I don't think so. It might be some of the mercs they hired out of Five Fingers, though," Briggs said. "Or maybe some of the Rhulfolk. I didn't get a good look."

He rubbed at the stubble on his jaw as he looked north to a copse of trees where he'd spotted movement. Patrolling outside the walls of Boarsgate had afforded him few opportunities for a shave, and his face was beginning to itch.

Ash said, "Better safe than sorry. I'll get the men in loose formation."

"Good call. If it's nothing," Briggs said as he pointed to the trees, "we can set camp there early and resume patrol in the morning."

Ash moved back to the men, calling for them to form staggered ranks. A handful of sergeants echoed her orders, though Master Sergeant Borok's booming voice carried above them all. In moments, the troops were arrayed for battle, with squads of riflemen at the fore backed by halberds and two blocks of cavalry stomping up at the wings. Briggs nodded in approval. He waited for Ash to rejoin him near what was now the rear of their formation before issuing his order. "Steelheads, advance!"

His men marched forward steadily, their armor clattering and their feet drumming on the soil. The heavy cavalry waited for the infantry to get a bit ahead and followed up with a crisp four-beat walk to keep pace. Briggs kept an eye on the formation as they advanced on the trees, in his mind silently pacing out a rough estimate of rifle range from the outer edge of the copse. When they were just outside it, he lifted one hand and called for his men to halt.

"Rifles ready!" Ash called. The front rank dropped into a steady crouch and braced their weapons while the second rank held their weapons at the ready position and prepared to take their place.

Briggs moved forward and cupped his gauntleted hands around his mouth. "I am Captain Samuel Briggsway of the Martenburg Steelheads, under contract to Commander Caralo Allesari of the Shield Division of the Ordic Army! Reveal yourself and state your affiliation!"

As his voice echoed away beyond the trees, Briggs privately hoped he hadn't just seen a deer preparing to bed down for the night. He suspected Ash and Borok wouldn't let him live something like that down.

After a moment, a shadow among the trees solidified into the shape of a man as it emerged. He was young and thin, his clothing washed out to a drab shade of blue-grey and caked with mud. He looked like he had been away from civilization for weeks, maybe even longer. The youth had a long hunting rifle slung over one shoulder that he hitched up as he stepped clear of the tree line.

"Halt! Friend or foe?" Briggs called. The stranger stopped and looked as if he were considering the question.

"I honestly don't know," the young man responded.

"Well, isn't that comforting," Ash muttered under her breath.

"At least he's alone," Briggs said. To the stranger he called out, "Are you alone?"

At that Ash narrowed her eyes and glared sideways at him.

"I think so," the man called back.

Briggs glanced at Ash. "See? Like I said, at least he's alone."

Ash made a frustrated noise and waved one of the sergeants forward to bring the young man to them. A small group of cavalry rode out to surround the stranger as an escort. Meanwhile, satisfied that no more men were hiding in the trees, Briggs ordered his troops to make for the shelter of the trees and set up a bivouac for the approaching night. It would be dark soon, and the dark would bring with it a deep early winter chill.

A few hours later, Briggs, Ash, and Borok sat with the stranger around a small cook fire while the gobber Tak worked her magic over a pan of frying onions and lardons of bacon. The other mercenaries spread out in the woods and tried to warm themselves by small coal fires or slumbered in scattered bedrolls and tents. Briggs himself shivered against the chill of the night air and pulled a woolen blanket tighter against his shoulders.

"You say you've been out here for two weeks?" Briggs asked the young man. He'd told them his name was Holden.

Holden nodded slightly, staring into the hot bed of coals and chewing on a heel of bread. "About."

"What would possess you to do that? We've been fighting reds here for almost that long. Plus a gang of trollkin from Gallowswood, a pack of Tharn from Morrow-knows-where, and damn-near every mercenary from here to Blackwater." Briggs studied the man's face as he spoke. Neither mention of angry trollkin nor of savage Tharn elicited any response.

"I've been waiting for something."

"Waiting for what?" Tak's ears pricked up as she spoke. She began to scoop her cooking into mess tins and pass them around the fire. Several of the Steelheads took large bites, breathing around the hot meal to cool it off enough to eat.

"I suppose I'll know it when I see it." As before, Briggs kept his eye on Holden. As far as he could tell, the comment wasn't meant to be evasive, and Briggs could see no artifice there. The strange young man honestly didn't know.

"If you're looking for people killing one another," Briggs said, "then you've come to the right place. Pulling jobs in Ord is usually simple work—a castellan trying to put on a show of force here, smugglers employed by the Mateus looking for extra muscle there. Boarsgate is normally pretty rough—Khador likes to test their new warcasters here. But the pay is very good. Still, the past few weeks in Boarsgate have been worse than usual. We've got people from across western Immoren gathered up to take a few swings at each other. Hell, I heard someone back at the fort say they saw General Ossrum and a bunch of Cygnar's Fourth moving up from Fellig near Zerkova's Hill. No one knows why. You picked a popular place to be."

"That's probably her doing," Holden half-whispered, though he refrained from mentioning who he might be referring to. "Pulling strings to get as many people here as possible. Like setting out bait before you hunt."

Briggs raised an eyebrow at that. Across the fire, Ash gave him a look as if to suggest she thought Holden might not be all there. He made a small gesture for her to put it out of her mind.

The rest of the meal passed in relative quiet. Borok was the first to turn in, wrapping himself in layers of wool and waxed canvas to fight off the chill. Tak and Ash followed suit, and in time it seemed only Briggs, Holden, and the night sentries remained awake. Moonrise came with Calder's light breaking over the horizon and filling the fields beyond the trees with pale silver light. Laris and Artis weren't far behind. The three moons were full and shining, their light describing an almost perfect triangle in the sky.

Holden looked up, transfixed by the moons. His breath smoked as he let out a deep sigh.

"Think what you're looking for is up there?" Briggs asked as he drew his pipe from an inner pocket and began to pack the bowl.

"No. But it is my timeline."

---

Two days later, Briggs looked out toward the field of gathering armies, blowing on his hands against the biting winds this high up. He and his Steelheads stood atop the northern rampart of Boarsgate in full battle dress, ready to repel any who tried to make the top of this section of high stone wall. The pale light of early morning rose in the east, casting the muddy fields and hills north of the fort with golden hues and burning off the last of the early morning mists.

To the east and west, Ordic soldiers and other mercenaries mingled at similar positions, clustered atop towers and strung out in double-ranked lines of riflemen. The captains of cannon crews atop the wall shouted windage and distance down the line, setting the gunners to make fine adjustments with heavy hand cranks to the arrangement of large defensive batteries.

Holden had stayed with the Martenburg Steelheads. The young man seemed to have some degree of military experience and suggested he'd served with the Cygnaran Army. Sergeant Grassley, senior rifleman, had expressed surprise at Holden's marksmanship. As far as Briggs was concerned, any skilled hand with a long arm was welcome to fight by the chapter's side, strange and cryptic statements notwithstanding.

"My god, look at that thing," Ash said quietly. Near the back of the enemy lines strode a colossal painted in the colors of Khador's 3rd Border Legion, each ponderous step dimpling the muddy field. Its shadow ate up whole columns of infantry in the thin light of morning. Its great size made every movement seem slower, like a warjack moving underwater.

"Let the artillerists look at it," Borok grumbled around a reeking cigar. "Boss, cap'n of the Shield Division's First Grenadiers wants us to be ready to reinforce the east bailey by the gate. Says some of the boys from Corbhen scarpered last night."

Briggs looked to the blocky tower. It already bore scars from past engagements at the infamous "Bloodgate," and he seriously doubted the soldiers north of the wall could resist such a large, stationary target.

"All right. Let him know we're sending men. Have two squads of rifles and one of halberds reinforce the Ordric soldiers. I don't want us spread too thin."

"E suggested 'e might want more."

"Let him. And if he pushes the matter, remind him that the contract of our employment very *intentionally* gives me oversight of how I deploy my damn troops."

Master Sergeant Borok threw a quick salute and marched off bellowing orders. The day was just getting more interesting.

As if in response to Briggs' thought, a wall of white clouds appeared at the fore of the northern ranks as heavy cannons fired. A moment later, the barrage came as a distant rumble, like a far-off storm. The shots struck in the muddy and cratered field between the walls and the guns, kicking up sprays of dirt and bouncing along for another dozen yards before rolling to a stop.

"Ash, they're starting to dial us in. I want you to put our heavy horse by the sally ports near the east bailey. Make sure they have men to lock up behind and let them back in as needed. Get one of those battle chaplains, too, while you're at it," Briggs said. He turned to look at Holden. Unlike several of the other Steelheads around his age, the young man hadn't flinched at the sound of the big guns. "Holden, you sure you want to stay up here? Nobody would blame you for ducking back and waiting this out. No reason for you to be up here with us."

The young man didn't respond. Instead, he checked the breech of his rifle, checked the sights, and touched the cartridges in loops on his belt as if to count them.

Briggs shrugged at him and watched the infantry blanketing the hills as they approached.

---

Warjacks impacted with the crunch of metal in the rolling hills beyond Boarsgate while cannonballs thudded into the stones. Blocks of infantry on the field traded volleys of rifle fire or impacted with the rattle of armor and the ring of halberd and sword. Either wedges of charging cavalry or trampling warjacks smashed through the men, leaving channels of broken bodies behind them as they gouged deep into the swarms of fighters. Hundreds of war cries filled the air with a dull, unintelligible roar.

The Khadorans may have initially planned for this to be a small skirmish against Boarsgate, but events had escalated the numbers on either side. Several large armies had mustered on the battlefield just beyond the Ordric fort, while its defenders had rallied what military and mercenary support they could, transforming some poor warcaster's training mission into an all-out assault. Boarsgate had

seen worse in its day, but it was likely the largest clash here in several decades at least.

Briggs' horse galloped through the chaos of pitched battle as he led a squadron of heavy cavalry toward his goal. He'd rather have stayed on the wall with the other Steelheads, but too many of Boarsgate's own cavalry lay dead on the field, and there was no one else for this particular job. Most of the other swift riders were trying to break stalemates of melee behind him or had been blown off the field of battle by heavy guns.

One such shell erupted to his left. The blast wave punched deep in his guts as a shower of dirt fell on him. Briggs yanked the reins a moment before the next shell landed. Most of his men followed behind with a thunder of hooves, but a few were too slow to turn and rode straight into the explosion.

His new route took him near a small melee between ogrun and spear-wielding infantry. A hulking ogrun mercenary with a battle cannon under his arm saw them approaching. Rather than let the merc fire a shot into his cavalry as they passed, Briggs veered closer. He swung his axe low and into the center of the ogrun's skull in passing. The impact sent a jolt up his arm that numbed his fingers and pitched the ogrun back off his feet.

Rather than check to see if he'd killed his target, Briggs spurred his horse forward through a loose group of skirmishers with bows and rifles. The men and women dived out of his path or had their bones snapped by impact with his horse or crushed under its hooves. Beyond them, his goal—a battery of Khadoran mortars—waited on the ridge of a muddy hill. The artillery crews saw them approach and began falling back from their guns. Still, he rode them down.

When the last artillerist was dead, Briggs wheeled his horse around to look back at Boarsgate. He'd ridden an irregular path through the entire battlefield to the high hills on the north and had a perfect viewpoint of the fighting below. The defenders were spread across the wall and in blocked infantry in front of it. Shots from field guns and bombards impacted high on the walls, showering the men below with stones and mortar.

"Back," Briggs shouted, pointing his gory axe to where his Steelhead halberdiers battled with a group of trollkin bearing axes and shields. The battle had turned into a disorganized mess of men fighting, and he wanted to be back at the walls before the enemy army could reorganize enough to cut off that line of retreat.

At a gallop, Briggs led a weaving route through scattered mobs of men killing one another, giving any warjacks a wide berth.

---

Ash screamed for another volley. Her riflemen leaned over the parapet and shot down into the back ranks of pike-wielding Iron Fangs locked in combat with their fellow Steelheads at the base of the wall. From this angle, the Khadorans' shields afforded them little protection from the rain of bullets, and a dozen men in red armor fell. Another squad was locked in fighting with a cluster of trollkin and she called for rifles to support them as well.

The man called Holden was with Ash's troops. He had proven to be a skilled sniper and picked his targets well, shooting down a lieutenant and a standard bearer one after the other. Each time he fired, the rifle made a strange, almost musical, noise.

"You're not bad," Ash shouted between volleys.

"I used to be a trencher." He sounded almost wistful.

Borok roared and hurled a keg of black blasting powder off the wall. It impacted below among dozens of armored men, bursting and throwing the fine powder within up in a cloud. As it dispersed in the air, he grabbed a red powder keg and hurled it into the cloud. When it impacted, the resulting blast caused a brilliant flash. The explosion threw men away from the detonation and left a deep crater where the center of their formation had been.

"Another!" Borok shouted.

---

Briggs' horse thudded into the rear of the trollkin mercenaries, crushing the back lines into their comrades and forcing some onto the waiting spikes of Steelhead halberds. He fired a blunderbuss down into the skull of another before the large trollkin could attack him with its war hammer.

The sound of battle pounded in his ears as the rest of the Steelhead cavalry impacted. There were angry whinnies and the cries of injured trollkin followed by the deep bark of more firearms. Briggs swung his axe down and clove into the shoulder of another target, cutting through the links of the trollkin's heavy chainmail. Another charged into Briggs' horse with its shoulder, breaking the beast's ribs on impact and sending him down to the mud.

Briggs rolled away before his mount could pin him and came up to face the roaring trollkin. It whipped a large axe at his head that he intercepted with the barrel of his blunderbuss. The impact nearly threw him off his feet and sent his firearm flying. He regained his footing and chopped into the side of the trollkin's right knee with his own axe, causing it to stumble.

---

An explosion blew one of the tower's corners to dust. Choking on the powdered stone, Borok looked out of the rent in the tower and down at a Khadoran warjack, blasting smoke still billowing around it. He couldn't hear the sound of a fresh shell dropping into its heavy bombard, but he watched it aiming the weapon up.

Before it could fire, Borok grabbed the nearest weapon at hand, a twelve-pound cannon that had been blown off its carriage. With a roar of effort, the ogrun picked up the heavy gun. It was over a thousand pounds of cast iron that made his tendons creak and his muscles scream. With every ounce of ogrun strength in him, the master sergeant pitched the cannon through the hole in the tower. It sailed down and impacted on the warjack's hull with a loud noise, driving the red machine down into the mud. A moment later, the warjack's bombard triggered into the earth, and the explosion tore through its hull.

---

When the skirmish ended, Briggs wiped spattered blood from his face and assessed the battlefield. The fighting had reached the walls of Boarsgate northwest of his position.

He prepared to order a retreat of the forces beyond the battlements, to pull back and prepare to defend the fort itself, when the sky began to darken. From a point over the heart of the battle, a swirling cloud of darkness began to spread.

On reflex, he looked to see what warcaster or sorcerer was behind this clearly supernatural manifestation. Though he saw flashing runes on both sides of the conflict, none of them seemed to be producing the strange darkness and the rapidly changing weather.

An unnatural dark fell like a curtain, enveloping the battlefield. At the center where it had started, the hills heaved upward. Shadowy pits opened and began to seep a black fluid, like fast-flowing coal tar, that bubbled and spread to fill in nearby craters. It moved in a pattern like the roots of a great, malignant tree, flowing around fighting men and warjacks.

"In the name of Morrow, what is that?" cried one of the horsemen. Briggs watched in horror as figures began to emerge from those pits and bubbling pools. Strange, almost-human shapes appeared, as well as some that made little sense to his eyes.

---

"Are those pigs?" someone atop the wall said, his voice cracking. A cackling mob of things spilled up from dozens of stains on the world. Ash didn't know how to answer.

For a moment, the fighting paused. Other than the screeching laughter of these newcomers, there was a great calm born from confusion.

To her right, Holden lowered his rifle. He stared at the growing throng of—*things* was the only word she could think of—as they spread out into a large crowd. Massive figures towered among them, and sleek black hounds with lashing tongues began to pad forward, shoulders hunched like a cat on the prowl.

---

Holden's breath stopped, but his heart hammered. Hundreds of the things in all shapes and sizes stood on the battlefield. But the way the other soldiers acted, he knew they saw them, too. At least this time they were real, not just visions that plagued him. He saw the pigs riding their wretched mounts, eyeless hollowmen in irregular formations, and a dozen other things besides.

The creatures parted to allow one of them to pass. It was a towering man in baroque gold-and-white armor that glowed with some inner glamour. Holden watched with growing dread as the massive man grasped his perfect face with one hand and peeled it away, like a nobleman at a masquerade revealing his identity to his paramour. Beneath was a grim face like a mask of stone with eyes and mouth that bled eerie purple light.

The figure held his disembodied face aloft and turned slowly in place so all could see. Then the face in his hand began to laugh. It was the laughter of a mad king that peeled across the hushed battlefield and caused those nearby to clap their hands over their ears.

Holden watched as the motley horde of creatures dashed toward the closest warriors, gleeful as they slashed and pounced upon the stunned men.

On the parapet beside him, a crow landed. It had come from nowhere. But it looked up at him with one expectant eye.

His courage was not certain. This was the end of his path, the moment that everything had built to for months. More? A man with a rifle, staring down at the face of a god.

With one hand, Holden gripped his rifle. The other reached into a pocket and curled around the comforting weight of an old, gold coin. He took it out to look upon it.

He could hear the voice of Rogers whispering behind him. *If you don't know what to do, if you're at a crossroad and don't know which way to go...*

Holden flipped the coin.