

Solomon

Details matter. Most people would say that there's never a good reason to cut a baby in half. I maintain that you should never cut a baby in half without a good reason. See the difference?

They say that the devil conceals himself in the details, and some think that's quite a trick, but in my experience the whole of hell can hide behind a single comma with room to spare.

In ancient literature heroes from Gilgamesh to Superman are halted in their tracks not by giants or dragons but by moral dilemmas. For my part, laying no claim to heroism, I've tended to overcome the moral dilemmas in my path by ignoring them, by cutting through them like the Gordian Knot or Solomon's famous baby problem, or – in most cases – simply failing to notice their existence.

Life with my road brothers tended to flatten the moral landscape into something more easily traversed and with few tripping hazards. But in my fourteenth year I'd come to the throne of a postage-stamp-sized kingdom comprising mountain peaks, deep gorges, and everything in between – which turned out to be almost entirely steep, rocky slopes.

The books I inherited in my uncle's library, a small forgotten room that came with the castle, tell me that the topography of my domain is the result of an ancient and ongoing act of violence wherein titanic fire demons, trapped deep below the ground, battle to visit us. We live such mayfly lives compared to these beasts beneath us that the chaos and upheaval they've wrought appears to us as frozen in, incomprehensible, the very definition of stability though it is all in churning motion.

Language is much the same, everchanging, bearing the scars and tombstones of the past in its flow. *Postage-stamp-sized kingdom*. I know it means small. So, a postage stamp must have been a very small thing. To know more than that I would have to spend more time at my late uncle's books. Something I would have no objection to, save that a more urgent matter came to my attention.

"They're saying it's yours and they're going to disembowel it before the gates," Lord Makin said.

I shifted on the throne. It was a pretty crappy throne, basically a bog-oak chair, highbacked and bound with bands of silver that had to be polished every day if they were to be seen. Given its cheapness, I'd have at least made it comfortable. A king might have to suffer to sit on gold and jewels but I really didn't see the need for a sore arse when sat upon so mean a seat of power.

"Disembowel, you say?"

Lord Makin frowned, aiming a puzzled look at me from beneath black brows. "You should be familiar with the concept. When we rode through Nauting—"

"But what do they think we'd do then?" I asked. "It seems a rather suicidal approach to hostage taking."

"There are a lot of them, sire." My chancellor, Coddin, approached from the shadows to the side of the throne. Castle life seemed to have aged him rapidly and he wrapped his robes about him against the autumn cold. "They know General Marten has the bulk of your forces engaged to the east. Your cousin's revolt has wounded us, and an injured kingdom is tempting prey."

I stood from the throne, stretching. It had been three years since I took the Renar Highlands for my own and still they kept trying to slip through my fingers. They say your first kingdom is the hardest, and whoever coined that phrase must have invaded the Highlands back in the long ago.

“And why do they think I care about some bastard child that’s probably not mine?”

“A weakened kingdom is strengthened by alliances and lines of succession,” Coddin supplied.

“Which has exactly what to do with whatever pink shit-machine some bunch of inbred bandits are parading outside my gates?”

“Until you marry and sire a legitimate heir this boy – were he yours – would be next in line to the throne. An alliance that might provide military support could hinge on the promise of his hand.”

I turned and stared at Coddin. “We’re marrying off babies now?”

“You should marry off the castle gargoyles if it brings you support, King Jorg.”
Coddin bowed his head. “You stand on the edge of a fall.”

I snorted and set off across the throne room’s flagstone floor. “I always do, chancellor. It’s the best place for a clear view.”

A short while later I stood on the ramparts, leaning into a blustery autumn wind over another drop. It’s always windy in the Highlands. The locals say the mountains lean into it too, and if it suddenly stopped blowing all the peaks would fall.

The bandits had indeed brought impressive numbers before the gates of the Haunt. I estimated well over a hundred. My own road brothers had never counted more than fifty, though we cut a reputation far wider than the rabble I looked down on now.

On seeing the Ancrath boar raised behind me, cracking back and forth in the aforementioned breeze, one of the bandits stepped clear of the throng. A large man in bearskins with a double-headed axe strapped over his shoulder. In both hands he lifted a pale bundle from within his furs. A baby, new-born by the looks of it, wrapped in a dirty sheet, thin black hair clinging to its over-large head. Its thin cries carried to the ramparts.

“What makes them think he’s mine?” I asked.

Nearby, Red Kent, who had joined my retinue, suppressed a snort. Rike, towering beside him, didn’t bother with suppressing.

“You’ve made fucking peasant girls the new sport of kings,” Lord Makin muttered.

“I’m seventeen,” I offered by way of defence, not that I felt I needed one. “And they all seemed quite happy about it.”

Makin made no reply but his eyebrows, which had always been far too eloquent for my liking, suggested that the balance of power in transactions between a king and his subjects opened such questions to lengthy debate. I would have replied that when we were the bandits, and not the king and lord we now claimed to be, we earned our places in hell many times over with deeds that made any such debate moot. But who argues with eyebrows?

“Who is the mother?” I hollered.

“Gwenith of Scraggy Oak,” the man bellowed back. He had an impressive bellow. “You’ll pay the thousand or I’ll make him scream before he dies.”

“They want a thousand in silver,” I said, astonished. “For that runt?”

“In gold,” Coddin said.

“He’s already screaming,” I shouted back. “Babies howl like they’re on fire if the tit comes five moments too late. I’m not even convinced babies can feel pain!” I rubbed my throat. Shouting that loud made it raw.

The man in bearskins turned back towards his fellows as if seeking advice.

“Bring me a longbow,” I said.

Glances were exchanged back and forth along the wall, but Captain Keppen fetched me one quick enough. He handed the weapon to me and offered an arrow before hawking up a mess of phlegm and spitting over the wall, back into the castle. “Two-yard drift,” he muttered. He’d been gauging the wind. Old as he was, Keppen was a better shot than I was every day of the week.

“You’ve all heard of the Red Queen,” I said.

“Jorg!” Coddin and Makin objected together. “No!”

I nocked the arrow. The Red Queen, Alica Kendeth, was old now, a grandmother with a pack of young princes dancing attendance on her. But her fearsome reputation had started in her youth when the force that was besieging her castle had captured her sister and brought her before the walls. The Red Queen stuck an arrow through her sister’s heart, some said to save her from torture whilst removing the lever with which her enemies sought to dislodge her. Others said she’d done it purely to put fear into the minds of those who had come against her.

Bearskin turned back towards us, fired with fresh resolve, just about to lift the baby above his head again.

I drew and aimed. Uneasiness flickered through me – scars in my memory aligning as if to suggest there had been another baby ... some awful crime somehow misremembered or

yet to happen – I hesitated. You can shed your humanity by degrees, that’s commonly the path taken, but there are lines you can cross that strip it from you all at once and promise no return.

“You could raise the gold,” Makin said.

One more, Jorg. My father’s words rattled through my skull. He’d taught me hard lessons, had my father. Lessons I hated him for. But he wasn’t wrong. If I paid them they would ask for more. We would walk a longer path to the same place. And others would follow, scenting weakness.

I let fly.

The arrow arced, spun and twisted in the air, tempered steel hunting flesh across an acreage of windswept stone. It took the man in the mouth and punched out through the back of his skull.

“Shit. I missed.”

The bandit fell back, the baby slipping from nerveless hands and rolling down the falling slope of his legs.

“The baby!” A cry from down below where the castle staff had started to stare out through the portcullis.

“They tend to bounce, in my experience.” I handed the bow back to Keppen. Already other bandits had come forward to recover the child. It looked to be in one piece. I glanced at Makin. “What? It’s not like they’re going to kill him.”

I looked around at my captains and soldiers, then across to the keep where members of Renar’s so-called aristocracy leaned from windows, all agog at the unfolding events. I’d always been adept at reading the room. I might have chosen to ignore the warnings written

there on many occasions, but a prince's education, and indeed that of any leader, requires a level of understanding of those you seek to lead.

When my only audience had been the road brothers a certain recklessness with other people's wellbeing was expected. Now my audience was a castle and, by extension, a whole kingdom. Even as king brutality was acceptable if it got results. But babies ... they're designed to get under our barriers. Some things might just past the smell test if carried out in the heat of the moment and resulting in a clean solution. The moment to be the Red Queen had passed now. Even for King Jorg of Ancrath, taking a second shot at a baby might have been considered a step too far.

I cast my gaze back towards the bandits, even now retreating beyond bowshot. Their temerity was starting to rankle. In fact, if I were honest, it had fucking rankled from the moment I stood from my throne. I wasn't going to take this any more than I'd take some lout crossing a tavern to confront me in the hope of strongarming some money from me. This was just a hundred and twenty heavily armed louts, and no tavern.

Besides. The baby. He could be mine. He was certainly mine in as much as he was a citizen of my kingdom. And his mother was Gwenith of Scraggy Oak. I remembered her well enough, a tall girl perhaps a year or two older than me, curling red hair, pale skin, a smile like sun on the mountain peaks. I'd liked her. Too much. She brought out a weakness in me that a king in the Broken Empire could never afford no matter how well stocked his treasury. So, I'd put her aside.

"What would they do if we just charged out with our remaining force?" I wondered aloud.

"Scatter. We'd lose three quarters of them in the valleys." Makin pursed his lips, watching the rabble's retreat.

“It’s the exchange that’s their problem,” I said.

Coddin nodded. “They’ll want the money. Time to escape. Then, just maybe, the child comes back.”

“Unacceptable.” I drew my hand down across my brow, pressing hard to squeeze out any ideas that had refused to show themselves thus far. “We need an exchange where child is swapped for gold and both parties go their way without fear. Or at least that’s what they need. They won’t agree to anything less...”

“You’re going to pay them?” Rike butted in uninvited. Generally speaking, he’d finally caught up with the whole me being the king business and him simply being big. The addition of a thousand in gold however had given him temporary amnesia. “For that little shit?”

I raised my eyes to the highest of the Haunt’s towers, drew a deep breath, and then with a sigh crossed the rampart to the low wall that prevented inadvertent tumbles from the top of the castle wall into the castle. “See that down there?” I pointed to the base of the wall without looking.

Rike joined me and leaned over. “No.”

I heaved him violently forward. For an awkward moment I thought he wouldn’t go over, and then he was gone with a wail, cut short a heartbeat later by a loud thump. A few shrieks went up from the keep windows.

Makin joined me and glanced over, wincing. “Nice aim. A foot to the left and you’d have missed the hay cart.”

“Cart?” I peered over to see Rike sprawled facedown in the ruins of a cart and scattered hay. I shook my head. “Born lucky that one.” I returned to Coddin and my captains. My moment of violence had cleared my mind and an idea had crept in.

“Send a messenger after those bastards. A thousand in gold. But it’ll be in silver marks and ornament, same value, bigger weight.”

“Much bigger,” said Makin. A faint groan rose from the base of the wall.

I carried on. “I will personally make the exchange in the Old Notch Pass. Our forces won’t go closer than Grattan Valley. That’ll give them a big enough lead to feel sure they can escape.”

“They won’t meet you there,” Keppen said. “It’s an obvious setup to anyone who knows the area.” The old captain may have learned his trade in the Forest Watch but for the past few years he’d made it his business to understand the mountains as well as the locals did. “Too easy to make a rockslide up there. Renar men been stacking the slopes for generations.”

I shrugged. “I’ll be there ahead of them. What more guarantee could they want?”

Keppen frowned. “They’ll close the pass after them. The army won’t catch them.”

Chancellor Coddin stared at the pair of us as if we’d gone mad. “You can’t go up there with your own bodyweight in silver and no guards. You’re the king, for god’s sake! They’ll take you hostage in a heartbeat!”

“Can and will.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “I am, as you say, the king – and one of the perks of that job is that I do what I want.” Another groan reached us from the last man who forgot that I sat on the throne. “Now let’s get back in the warm, and bring me that man with big arms, hairy fellow, the one who reinforced the treasury door for me. I want to ask him some questions about just how strong a strongbox really is.”

A day later I found myself driving a cart, the same cart Rike had demolished in his fall, up the narrow, winding road to Old Notch Pass. The hairy-armed carpenter, whose name I'd already forgotten again, had provided a strong box that was more than large enough to hold the worth of a thousand gold crowns in silver. Silver crowns, silver ducats, silver ingots, silver florins, silver goblets, silver platters, candlesticks, crosses and coronets. To house such wealth appropriately I'd had him add iron corner caps and additional heavy bands of iron to reinforce the container. If I could see a bit of wood still exposed I wanted to be given a good account of why it didn't need an iron plate rivetted over the top of it.

Lord Makin and Chancellor Coddin waited back at the end of Gattan Valley with thirty mounted soldiers, ten good archers, and two dozen men at arms bearing spears. They were a mile at least behind me now, and several hundred yards below. Getting further off with each rotation of the wheels.

Makin had told me I was an idiot. Coddin had opted for 'fool'.

"And what would my people think of me if I let bandits murder my own child?" I'd asked them. "They'll hardly want to pay my taxes or fight for me if I don't pay for my by-blows or fight for my own blood, now will they?"

Now, bumping along the narrow trail to the pass with the enormous treasure box lashed to the bed of the repaired cart, I had time to reflect on my own actions. Time to consider your choices can be both a blessing and a curse when it comes to navigating a successful path through life. Time cools a hot head, but similarly it's the thief of courage. Time offers perspective, reveals alternatives, shines a light on oversights, but the other side of that coin is doubt, compromise, loss of clarity.

I often thought that perhaps the single skill that had seen me flourish where others might fall by the wayside was my ability to cling on to the purity of the instant even when hours or days inserted themselves between the incitement to action and the taking of that action.

Had I inherited that from my father? Perhaps. Some of it. My father had taught me many useful things but had left me with the conviction that, even if they had saved my life, I would better have lived a shorter life without those lessons. Was this squalling pink creature my son? Was he even Gwenith's child? The opportunity for lies and falsehood abounded. If our rutting in the hayloft hadn't sown any royal seed then surely the girl would have been encouraged to quickly find more partners. Any claim to a royal bastard would raise the stock of Scraggy Oak, and although the sea could not be spotted even from the highest of Renar's peaks, the mountain folk still understood that a rising tide lifts all boats.

Whatever the truth or falsehood of the claims, I feared that I was more angry at the bandits for thinking they might steal from me than I was concerned for the child's fate. I had vowed to never be the father my own sire was, but God truly unbalanced the scales in the matter of procreation. The ease with which new life could be made weighed as a feather against the effort and time required to deal with the result. Perhaps slicing a blade across your own throat could make more of an impact on your future for less effort, but few other activities would.

I reached the crest of the pass and slowed the mule to a stop. It stood with its head down, coughing, an old beast with lungworm. If the bandits wanted to get the cart out of the mountains they'd have to bring their own draft horse, this one wasn't more than ten miles from its last rest.

I sat, huddled in my cloak against the wind that knifed through the pass. The slopes veering up to either side of me were too steep for anyone but a determined climber to scramble up, thick with loose rock and boulders that looked to be little more than a gust away from joining me in the pass. Most of it was scree though, that mass of frost-shattered rock which will give even a goat pause for thought: pieces from the size of your thumbnail to the size of your fist, all of it ready to slide away beneath your feet.

There was cover on the slopes, especially high up by the ridges, but not for more than a dozen men at most, nothing like the numbers needed to worry six score bandits.

I saw them coming a mile off, rounding a shoulder of the mountain. It looked as if they were all here. I guess that they knew my reputation and would want a dozen good warriors at least. Add to that the worry that I might have brought a few of my best men and have them hiding close at hand, and they might feel they needed forty of their number to keep the upper hand. But all of them? I watched the long column of them snake along the trail. All of them – that spoke of distrust among the ranks. They wanted to see the payment, see it divided among their number, giving no opportunity for their leaders to betray them.

I sat waiting, boots on the footboard, hands under my armpits, watching. The anger I needed still burned. Even so, I should have brought a thicker cloak.

Eventually the first of them clattered up on their ponies, small beasts fitted to the terrain. Despite their suitability, I always felt a man looked stupid riding a pony, especially a big man, his legs stuck out, heels barely a foot from the ground.

The first rider was a big man. He looked stupid. He was an ugly ogre of a man, taller than me, and I'm tall, and twice as wide. He swung off his pony and the beast snuffled its relief. Others began arriving, dismounting, scanning the slopes for signs of ambush. The big

man advanced on me with a disbelieving grin beginning to spread across his face, revealing as many missing teeth as those still present.

“It can’t really be you?” He glanced back at the bandits, perhaps twenty already crowding behind him. “I don’t believe this! We’ve got ourselves a king, boys!”

The man had an axe slung across his back, and looked very familiar in his bearskins, the stink of which reached me well before he did, despite the wind.

“Didn’t I kill you already?” I asked.

The man’s good humour vanished in a moment, thunder gathering on his brow.

“Ah. Your brother perhaps?” I stood and leaned against the strongbox behind me. “Where’s this baby then? I think it might be the most expensive thing I’ve ever purchased, so it had better be in good condition.”

The man stood straight and drew a deep breath. “My name is Bortus Leencing and it’s the name you’ll be screaming when you beg for mercy. When I get you back to—”

“You’re boring me, Bortus. Bring the child then take your silver, or we can all die here.” I shrugged off my cloak and drew my sword. The sword was worth more than the ransom he’d asked for: a razored yard of builder steel along which hints of fire seemed to flicker.

Bortus took a step back despite himself. “Heard you’re pretty good with that.” There were fifty bandits dismounted behind him now, ten abreast, crammed into the pass.

“How are you with arrows?” A handful of archers squeezed from the ranks.

“Ask your brother,” I said and smiled since it was a pretty good reply.

“Put one in his leg,” Bortus told the bandit beside him, who if she was a woman – as I thought on balance she was – was the biggest woman I’d ever seen and old enough to be his mother.

“Are you his mother?” I asked, stepping neatly behind the strongbox to remove anything but my head and shoulders from her aim.

The woman’s expression hardened but she made no reply other than drawing back her arrow.

“You came to my house. *My house*. And tried to take from me.” I let the anger I’d been holding colour my voice. “And don’t think this makes any difference.” I waved at the mountains. “This is my kingdom. This right here is still my house.” I waved my sword at the heights. “Lay a hand on me and we’ll all die here together. I’ve got enough men up there to start a slide that will bury everyone.” I could see nearly a hundred of my enemy filling the pass now. “Bring me my son and you can take your silver.”

However badly Bortus and his mother might have wanted to make me suffer for the brother and son I’d taken from them, they were leaders and found themselves, as I did, wrapped with responsibilities, expectations, and even demands. The bandits behind them probably didn’t give two shits about the lost brother. They wanted to get paid. In fact, if Bortus and his mother were more like Rike than they were like me then getting paid was probably top of their list too, brother and-or son be damned.

“Let me see the silver,” Bortus shouted.

“Let me see the bastard,” I called back.

Bortus beckoned to the crowd behind him and after some shuffling, another enormous beetle-browed woman emerged carrying the soiled bundle I'd seen the day before. The woman – perhaps another of Bortus's relatives – came to stand beside him.

“Well, bring him then!” I cupped my fingers.

Mother, brother, and sister came forward with a score of others advancing slowly in their wake, drawn by the lure of silver but not sure if they were invited. The mother slung her bow. I kept my sword out.

They reached the cart, all three of them individually capable of barrelling me over, all of them reeking, angry, suspicious, and greedy.

“Put him down there.” I pointed to the cart bed with my sword.

“Let's see the silver,” the mother growled.

I slammed the hilt of my blade against the side of the strong box. It opened like a door, hinges towards the bandits. I reached in and brought out a gleaming plate from my own dinner service, the edges a frothy confection of overworked ornamentation, a silversmith's wet dream. I spun it out towards them and Bortus barely caught it in time to prevent it removing his remaining teeth.

“Baby,” I demanded.

The sister eyed my half-dead mule suspiciously, assessing the likelihood of my making a quick getaway. It coughed on cue, a wet and ragged cough that should have made her glad she'd not ridden up and exposed her own steed to possible infection. She leaned into the cart and set down the shit-stained bundle which gave a whimper. Despite the infant's incontinence it was the sister that smelled worst.

I lifted the covers with the tip of my sword. Blue eyes stared wonderingly up at the sky, failing to focus on me. The child was tiny, the fringe of black hair barely enough to cover its skull. It looked like an old man more than a new one. And yet... And yet. And yet we are built to love them.

“I’ll give you three hundred,” I said. “No way he’s worth a thousand.”

The sister glared up at me, eyes hard in a raw-boned face. “You’re not the only one who’s ready to die here if they don’t get what they want, boy-king.”

I shrugged. “Let me check he’s got all his bits. You lot have the look of baby-eaters to me.”

I moved around, not relinquishing my blade, ready to bend and pick the infant up in one hand. Instead, I kicked him. Not a hard kick of the sort that might launch a new-born across a courtyard. Never let it be said that Jorg Ancrath goes all out when kicking babies. It was more of nudge than a punt. A solid nudge. Hard enough to set the tightly bundled baby rolling a short distance across the cart and into the strongbox.

“Thanks.” I twisted, ducked, and stepped back smartly into the strongbox after him, drawing the door closed behind me. A series of reassuring clicks followed. I reached down, awkward in the confined space, and eased the howling baby up into my arms. I was glad I tossed the plate out. The box, now containing nothing but me and the baby, was pretty cramped.

“Sorry about the kick.” I inserted the words into a pause as the child drew breath for another rage-filled scream. “Yell away. It’s going to get a lot louder.”

I could already hear the shouts, quite clear even within the box’s heavily padded interior. Most of them were angry shouts. That would change.

The box rocked as Bortus or his sister clambered onto the cart. A blow struck the side.

“Is he mad?” It sounded like Bortus.

“It’s not opening in a hurry...” The sister.

“We’ll take him as he is. Burn him out back at camp.” The delightful mother.

I heard the screams before the thunder. Then the thunder came and drowned them out. A deep grinding rumble. The box fell on its side as the cart lurched. It hurt. The baby screamed even louder but I took the brunt and he sounded cross more than scared.

“Fuck—”

A sharp blow silenced both of us. Like a rock striking an iron plate. Then another. Then a dozen. Then a quickly muffled rain of them.

Coddin said it took them a day to dig us out, even with fifty men on the job and knowing exactly where we were. If it had been mud or sand burying us we would have suffocated before they reached us. But rocks falls are fairly porous and we never felt short of breath.

The bandits were mostly ground to a fine paste but I was pleased to hear that some of them escaped to spread the tale. If none of them had won free then I’d have had to pay men to pretend to have been there and tell the story. I didn’t want to spend my time chasing after the well-being of however many bastards I’d sown the valleys with. No, people had to know what would come to them if they tried that path.

I have to say that a day in a dark box with an angry, stinking baby feels like a week. Even so, when he (or she, as she turned out to be) was quiet and there was nothing to do but

hold her and share whatever thoughts happened to be passing through my mind, time passed more swiftly and I didn't even wholly object to spending it with her.

I never did get my silver plate back. Not that I ever liked it.

A week later I rode to the edge of my kingdom and brought my horse to a halt at the unmarked border. Gwenith drew up beside me, and Red Kent beside her. Both had their burdens, hers was young Rowen who she'd named for my mother. His was enough of the silver that I never carried to Old Notch Pass to ensure that neither of them would ever want for anything without – hopefully – being so much as to bring trouble to their door. Not that trouble needs an invitation.

Red Kent was not only the single most deadly man sworn to me but also the only one save Makin, Marten, or Coddin who I knew with complete faith would never even consider riding off with that silver for themselves. Kent's concerns were not with money. He was a simple man and yet one whose main concern was reconciling himself with his own nature, and doing so before the eyes of God. So, maybe not that simple after all.

Gwenith was a mistake, a moment of weakness. Several moments. Many nights in fact. I'd taken off my clothes for plenty of women as Lord Makin had so eloquently noted, but with Gwenith I'd taken off some of my armour too – and that was the mistake.

She eyed me resentfully from her horse. Exchanging her home and family for the safety of distance and wealth was not, apparently, a trade she would have chosen. I couldn't explain myself to her. I'd have to explain myself to me first, and that task had thus far defeated me.

I nudged my steed closer and reached over for the baby. Rowen met my eyes on this occasion, seeing me for perhaps the first time and probably the last. I held her to my face, remembering the comfort in our cuddles within the box, and the dangers, not all of them physical. She smelled a lot better this time.

I held her for a while. It didn't seem long, but it was long enough for her to fall asleep and wake again. Long enough for the sun to move and the shadows to swing. Before I handed her back to her mother and sent them on their way with Kent to guide and guard them to their destination, I had three words, just for my child and for her alone. I bent close to whisper them.

“I never miss.”