

# Parley

by Sash Eastough

The day was appropriately grim. The sky was overcast, and despite it being midday, the world was a grey-blue, both colour and warmth alike drained away. From his position inside the village, back leaning against the makeshift wall with his legs splayed in front of him, Rorke's breath floated out from beneath his ragged, deep-cowled travelling cloak. The militia outside was cocky, callous. They had every right to be. No militiaman expects to required much more than tying his boots on before raiding a quaint, forested village in the middle of nowhere, much less planning an attack at dusk or dawn for a tactical advantage. The task was trivial, mundane, and they expected little resistance.

So they certainly didn't expect to face a barricade, however flimsy the hastily fortified mess of carts and fence posts may have been.

Their synchronous march faltered to a standstill, confused murmurings bubbled in the sudden silence.

"It worked!" the aged village head hissed at him excitedly, "They've stopped!" As if such a trivial defence would do anything to deter so large a trained force, when all that stood between them and more pay was a few dozen poorly armed, untrained villagers behind a clumsy pile of wood and iron. Hardly a platoon behind hardly a wall. Rorke didn't say a word.

It took only a minute or two before both sides became impatient, the militia grumbling amongst themselves and checking their gear, the villagers fidgeting and throwing around furtive glances. Then the militia's herald spoke up.

Rorke had heard it all before. Not just from the farm boy who had pelted into town on a collapsing workhorse some days earlier, but from countless other villages in the past. Some lord somewhere had got enough gold and bollocks to lay claim to the land, and for some reason that meant the partial razing of most villages in the area. The eyes of what men remained in the village burn into his cloak, once more seeking leadership from this ragged, time-stained greybeard in the mail tunic who had spurred them into making weapons and defences so suddenly. Rorke felt no nervousness, nor pressure under their gaze. He just felt jaded.

Once more the tree line called to him, a sedate beckoning of a guiltless retreat. He owed these villagers nothing. None so much as knew his name. What were their names again? Hell, what was this village called? No shelter had been offered, nor a bed, nor even a meal. He had rallied them into action for no ask of coin or wares. Nothing was asked for, nothing had been given, and thus nothing was owed. He was free to leave, and though it would spell certain doom for these men, that weighed on

him little. He had taken and lost lives before. That was how the world went. Even if he fought here, the odds of any of these men surviving were slim at best. This would only delay the inevitable.

But he could not leave. Long for the tree line as he might, he could not. It was not the sake of the villagers that held him, no. It was the sake of The Lady.

He dropped his eyes from the trees and sighed heavily. His heavy, broad-edged blade served as a cane to lever himself to his feet before taking a moment to gather himself. And then, with a voice carrying the gravel, the bass, and all the weight of an avalanche, he sang.

*Through fields of bones and bodies and crows*

*The corpseman claims his dues*

*Though no man stands in No Man's Land*

*We stand, the Lady's Few*

The awaiting skirmish took a breath. Neither the villages nor the soldiers expected, on this grim and bloody day, to hear song, and the sheer bass and volume of Rorke's words were felt as much as heard. He threw the sheath from his blade, heavy as he hefted it to his shoulder, and began to climb the fortifications. Nobody moved, no-one dared to breathe, less the pressure being built from this broad bull of a man in the ruined, colourless cloak erupted.

*A band of shades, we live by the blade*

*And fight for what we call true*

*Not glory or gold, but Our Lady, behold*

*We stand, the Lady's Few*

With the final word, Rorke slammed his blade down, shattering a jutting fence post with lethal punctuation as he stood, solemn and stony. A wave rippled through the shuffling opposition, the militiamen expecting a simple village raid, not a hooded revenant with the voice of an earthquake, brandishing a beast of a blade down from a palisade. Though easily over a hundred metres away, those in the frontlines swore they could feel his dark eyes piercing through them from under that ragged cowl. Though only one man, this figure commanded something else entirely, and none amongst them, not the herald nor the captain, wished to make the first move against a phantom so bold.

None but one.

From the third rank, someone pushed their way forward. Most hardly noticed, still warily eyeing the man on the wooded wall, until the soldier replied in a softer, silvery contralto.

*Come heaven or hell, armies, dragons as well*

*Gods, and Death himself too*

*Through storm and snow, unyielding as stone*

*We stand, the Lady's Few*

The soldiers behind her gawked, jaws wide open and eyes bulging. They took stock of this soldier, this woman they had all fought beside and to whom they had never given doubt. But none could look passed her rugged, deep-cowled traveling cloak, and the heavy, broad-edged blade at her shoulder.

With little more than a moment's hesitation and a questioning glance to her captain, the newcomer strode forward towards the village. Rorke narrowed his eyes, scanning the militia. They had archers, no doubt, but they looked just as confused as the captain did. Rorke fingered the dagger hilt at his hip. There was little to no cover across the field. If the militiamen chose so, they could pick him off like a duck on the water. He wouldn't stand a chance. And yet...she not only carried the cloak and the blade, but this woman knew the song too.

"To hell with it." Rorke muttered, and before the village head could ask what he was doing, the ragged man vaulted down the palisade, blade once more at his shoulder, and moved to meet her.

Despite the tension radiating from each army, the pair stopped only an arms-length away, and once Rorke noted the quillon dagger at the younger woman's hip, as beautifully maintained as its twin on his own waist, he sheathed his sword. The woman's eyes were wide, and hesitantly she made to bow.

Rorke cut her off, sharp, but not unkind. "None of that. There lies no rank here."

The woman closed her mouth, straightened up, and nodded dutifully.

"The Lady sees you."

Rorke winced at the greeting. It had been some time.

"The Lady sees you," he responded.

There was a moment of silence, heavy and sad, before the younger soldier shook her head.

"Rorke the Ragged. As I live and breathe. We had all thought that—"

"I did not."

The curt response caught the soldier unaware.

"...Well. No," she faltered, "clearly."

"And what of you?" Rorke continued. "You stand, what, under thirty? The Last Hand."

"Yes," she nodded, "I was among the last. Viceroy is what they called me."

"Mm. You sound it."

Viceroy laughed. A sweet, full voice.

"You are as dry as they say."

Rorke had no reply; he had never bothered about what *'they say'*. A silence grew between them, fragile and timid. Viceroy's voice was thick when she broke it.

"Why do you stand here, Rorke? You know that there is no hope."

"Would you have me abandon them?"

"I would have you save yourself."

"From what?" There was an edge to Rorke's stony voice. Viceroy flinched.

"You know what, Rorke. What we're here to do. It is duty."

"Raiding villages."

"That's not..." She looked back to the men behind her, knowing that there was no lie in Rorke's words. "...what was I to do, Ragged? The Few were gone. As far as we knew, no-one made it out of Burnham Heath. We are mercenaries, dammit. A soldier needs an army. Would you have me toiling in fields?" There was conviction in her eyes as they returned to Rorke's. "We are warriors, Ragged. She would never have us lay down our blades to pick up a scythe. I kept on fighting, in Her name."

"Yet you'd ask me to lay down mine?"

"That's not—"

"We're warriors. You're right." Rorke narrowed his eyes, growing cold. "Not bandits or thugs, raiding hapless villagers. You'd have me retreat? Abandon them? What would She say to that?"

"And look where that has you now!" Viceroy snapped. "Defending thankless villagers from impossible odds. What warrior would fight for a cause so hopeless, what would She say to that?"

"I know what She would say." Rorke's voice remained low and steady despite Viceroy's heat.

“I am fighting for a cause, for a lord, for my brethren, what do you fight for? Charity? This is inevitable, Rorke, if not this lord than the next. We take no pleasure in this, but we must work to survive, the villagers will be fine if they just—”

“ ‘We do not yield.’ ”

“AND LOOK WHERE THAT GOT HER!”

Viceroy’s voice echoed over the clearing. Both sides of the awaiting skirmish flinched from its impact, but Rorke did not; his face had disappeared into the shadows of his deep cowl, and he shifted from jade to cold stone. Viceroy did not shrink, but bowed her head too. Her dirty face was streaked when it rose.

“She’s gone, Rorke. The Lady’s Few have no Lady.”

When the statue of a man finally replied, it was as though another were behind it, smaller, and wounded.

“I know, Viceroy. I was there.” His shoulders heaved, and his head dipped further.

“For days at Burnham Heath I stood by her side. I was her watchman when she slept, I was her right hand when she fought. She was our commander, Viceroy, and our heart. So believe me when I say that I know she is gone. I believe I know that more than anyone.” Viceroy could hear the bones in Rorke’s massive fists creak under pressure. “I watched her fall with my own eyes, and were my skull any thinner, the mace that cleaned me up would have cracked me open too. I’d have died right beside her, rather than wake up to a dead land and her body lost later. In some ways I wish I had. I’ve seen bodies before, Viceroy, we all have. But waking up as one of them in a field left for none but the corpse is not something a living man should ever have to experience.

“I have no love for these people. As you say, they care not for me. Their fate will come, from one lord or the next. Always does. I’d rather have never set foot in this town.”

His head swung up, just enough for his dark, deep-set eyes to glint out under his ragged cowl and matted hair.

“But She would stand here, for them. As she did then, for us. I must honour that.”

Viceroy turned away, failing to find a hole to punch through Rorke’s words. The old man’s eyes softened as he reached a hand onto her slumping shoulders. “Stand with me Viceroy. As our captain would. Our Lady.”

When Viceroy looked up, her smile was full of sorrow.

“How can you ask that of me, Rorke?”

He winced at the tremor in her silver voice. “These people,” she continued, “they saved me. The Few were lost, my family disbanded. These soldiers gave me a home again, a purpose. They may not be any saints, but come now, neither were the Few.

They have fought beside me, some have died saving me, and I have killed saving them. We are brothers now. You would ask me to turn my back on them?"

Rorke took his hand back with a bitter grimace to the dirt.

"...You're right. I should not have asked. And yet..."

Viceroy smiled sympathetically. "And yet, you must. As I have. I know, Ragged. I feel it too." With a small chuckle, she took a lilt to her voice. "I should've known better anyways, huh? Than to try and talk down the Wraith of Jaybury Bridge. How many did you stand alone before then, eh? Today must seem—"

"Stop." Rorke did not cut Viceroy off so much as muffle her, his voice quiet and pleading, not sharp and loud. He cast his eyes over the battlefield. The militia stood solid and grim, a force of war. But the gloom in their eyes was familiar. They looked forward to this task as little as the villagers behind him did, hollowed looks gazing down from the palisade to their awaiting execution. "...There is nothing to be found here today, Viceroy. Jaybury, I fought for the Few. We needed time, and I could give it, but here. Here there is nothing. No gold, no glory, no honour. I won't be saving these men, nor their village. I fight today because I could not face myself if I do not."

Gingerly, he drew back his ragged hood, failing to remember the last time he'd done so, and he turned back to look Viceroy in the eye. She had heard many tales of this seemingly unkillable warrior of stone. So, when she saw just how haggard the old man of myth was, how fragile his voice wavered, she herself almost choked.

"Viceroy. Know that I mean nothing more honestly today than when I say, I have no wish to fight you."

Viceroy struggled to hold those tormented eyes. "Nor I, you."

Slowly, Rorke released her eyes and cast his gaze far afield.

"May we not meet again." As he made to turn away, he heard a rasp of steel and sheath sound so familiar to him that he almost didn't realise the danger it proposed.

"To hell with that." He heard Viceroy call, and in an instant of clarity, he whirled around, grabbed the younger soldier's wrist by her hip, flicked his own quillon dagger into his hand and poised the immaculate blade under her throat. His face was stone, but his eyes were clouded and pained. It wasn't until he checked Viceroy's hand that he knew his misjudgement: she was holding her own dagger by the blade, not to kill.

Tenderly, she grasped his blade, and the worn leather of her daggers hilt pushed gently into Rorke's palm. The older soldier was dubious, reluctant to loosen his grip, until she smiled and closed his fingers around her cherished weapon.

"Take it, Rorke. A blade from brethren." The bigger man frowned, but let her take his weapon, not sheathing Viceroy's at his hip until she had done the same. "When this is all over, come find me, we can trade them back. I'll buy you a drink to hear of Jaybury, and another for Burnham if you care for it. The last of the Lady's Few, a drink in her name. What say you, Ragged?"

And to that, Rorke smiled.

Wordlessly, he drew up his hood and made for the village, Viceroy calling once more with her lilt. "Easy on the left mid, Rorke. Its where we blood the new ones. They get a little flustered, might not notice a shadow slipping by 'em, eh?"

The bigger man paused a moment, considering. Had he turned around, he may have noticed how his words buckled the young soldier's legs.

"You know, Viceroy. You remind me of Her."

He nodded slowly, finding more truth in his words than he first realised. "...Dark ale. Don't like mead, it's too sweet. I'll tell you of Jaybury." He raised a hand over his shoulder as he strode back to his hopeless defenders. "May She watch you."

It took a moment for Viceroy to recover. She stared after the retreating figure, open mouthed, before finally smiling. "May She watch you." Sheathing Rorke's dagger, she spun on her heel and returned to her new militia, feeling lighter than when she left it. Today would be grim, inglorious work, and there would be no pleasure in it. She would fight for her brethren and to earn her keep, nothing more. She would keep her brothers and sisters alive, and that is all she would do. But now, at least there was something more to gain on this day. Rorke the Ragged, the Wraith of Jaybury Bridge. A living legend. And a brother of the Lady's Few. She did not look forward to this day. But at least she could look forward to a drink with an old, as-yet unacquainted friend.

She looked up from her musings as she approached the army and found her captain waiting a few paces closer than the rest. Viceroy met his gaze and shook her head sadly. He swore bitterly, already grieving for the men he will inevitably lose this day, when he had hoped for a mere show of arms without much bloodshed. He closed his eyes with a heavy sigh, swore again, then gazed towards the village.

"And who was he?" The captain asked of Viceroy. She followed his eyes to the homemade fortifications as Rorke heaved himself up, the old village head asking the same question of the old veteran about the woman he had parleyed with.

Across the battlefield, Rorke and Viceroy met eyes alive one last time, and the pair answered their questions as one.

"Just a soldier."