

NO HEROES ARE COMING

Book One of The Far Road Campaign

CONDENSED TWO-CHAPTER PREVIEW

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Open Seat Press

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Published by Open Seat Press

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ABOUT THIS PREVIEW

This is a condensed promotional edition of the first two chapters of *No Heroes Are Coming*. Some scenes, character moments, and contextual details have been shortened or omitted for this preview. The published novel contains the complete, unabridged versions of both chapters.

Chapter 1

And That's Where We'll End Tonight

The pillar had once been white marble.

Now it stood split from base to crown, black with soot and streaked with old blood where dying hands had slipped across it. Lio Thorne hit the stone hard enough to cough the air out of his lungs. His bow clattered away across broken tile. He looked down, blinked once, then stared.

A jagged opening gaped beneath his ribs where the lieutenant's hooked spear had punched through mail and flesh and torn free. Blood ran hot over his hip and soaked into his trousers in quick, bright pulses.

For one stupid second, his first thought was irritation. That shirt had survived two winters, one marsh fire, and Brakka using it to strain stew.

"Lio," Brother Caelan snapped, grabbing the front of his torn cloak. "Stay with me."

Lio let himself be dragged the last few feet into cover. The broken pillar shielded them from the center of the ruin, though each clash of steel still rang through the stone and into his teeth. Dust fell in soft trickles from the cracked arch above them. The whole sanctuary smelled of ash, copper, and wet mortar.

Caelan shoved him down and dropped to his knees beside him. He had a healer's hands, broad and steady, though they shook now as he pulled aside blood-soaked cloth and bent mail.

"How bad?" Lio asked, mostly because silence felt worse.

Caelan gave him a look. "You know how bad."

"Right. Thought I'd check if denial was healing magic now."

Another impact shook the pillar. A spearhead burst through the marble where Lio's head had been moments earlier, showering them both with stone chips. Caelan jerked back. The blade scraped free with a hard metallic shriek.

Out in the open, Brakka roared.

The ruined sanctuary had once been a royal chapel. Its saints had lost their faces to hammers and fire long before tonight. A section of the ceiling had caved in over the dais, leaving a jagged hole to the moon. Smoke drifted through the broken hall in pale ribbons. Torn banners snapped in the wind like things trying to escape.

At the center of it stood Vargan Rhyse, the Ashen Marshal, first lieutenant to the dark lord whose shadow had fallen over half the kingdom.

He looked like a soldier someone had sharpened too far. Lean, hard, and stripped of anything soft. Burn scars licked up one side of his neck into the ruined line of his cheek. In both hands he held a spear too long and too cruel for close quarters, with hooks below the main blade for catching limbs, throats, and hope.

Brakka Skell met him head-on.

She was immense, all shoulders and scars and bright pink hair braided back from a face that grinned like violence was a private joke. Her axe came around in a flat killing arc that would have split most men in half. Vargan dipped inside the swing and slammed the iron butt of his spear into her stomach.

Brakka folded, spat blood, and drove her forehead into his face with a crack like a snapped board.

Nessa Vale dropped from the broken choir loft in a blur of black cloth and silver. One dagger flashed for the throat, the other for the gap under Vargan's arm. The first skimmed his neck. The second bit between plates.

Vargan hissed and hammered an elbow back into her jaw. Nessa reeled, then twisted away before the backswing of his spear took her head off.

“Caelan,” Lio said, because darkness had started pulsing at the edges of his vision.

“I know.”

Caelan pressed both hands over the wound. Golden light flickered weakly through his fingers, then vanished. His mouth tightened. He looked down at the blood coating his palms, then at the bronze sunburst hanging from his neck.

Lio saw the decision before he heard it.

“No.”

Caelan pulled the chain free. “Yes.”

“That one nearly killed you in Dunmere.”

Caelan planted the holy symbol on the floor between them. “Then I’ll try to die less this time.”

He set one hand over the wound and one over the sunburst and began to pray in the old tongue.

The words came out rough, thick with effort. This was no bright temple blessing. The air around them pulled taut. Smoke bent inward. The cracked marble beneath Lio’s back grew warm, then hot, then almost unbearable.

Out beyond the pillar, Brakka and Nessa fought to keep Vargan busy. Brakka’s axe carved splinters from pews and sent sparks from stone. Nessa slipped in and out of reach, trying to open him somewhere vital before the spear found one of them cleanly. They worked well together, brute force and precision, noise and silence.

Vargan still looked in control.

He caught Brakka’s axe on the shaft of his spear and turned the blow aside. Nessa went low for his knee. He kicked her off her feet. She rolled and came up crouched, blood at the corner of her mouth.

“You came far for a losing battle,” he said.

Brakka bared her teeth. “You sound nervous.”

Black flame erupted from the cracked tiles under her boots.

It hurled her backward through a splintered pew. Burning wood flew in every direction. Nessa swore and dove clear as Vargan turned toward the pillar at last.

Caelan's prayer broke into a shout.

Light burst between his fingers.

It tore through Lio like molten wire. Pain flashed white through every nerve in his body, so sharp he couldn't even cry out. The wound under his ribs drew together in a rush of heat and rawness, flesh sealing clumsily but completely enough to keep him alive. The smell of blood gave way to scorched linen and hot skin.

Then it was over.

Lio sucked in a ragged breath and shoved himself upright.

Caelan sagged against the pillar, face ashen, blood leaking from one nostril. He looked one hard shove from falling over.

"You look awful," Lio said.

Caelan let out a faint, breathless laugh. "I was going to say the same."

Lio spotted his bow a few yards away.

He lunged for it.

Vargan saw the movement and hurled the spear.

Lio twisted, but too late to clear it fully. The blade punched through his shoulder and pinned him against the broken base of a toppled saint. Agony exploded down his arm. He heard Caelan shout his name, heard Nessa curse, heard Brakka charging again.

Lio gritted his teeth, snapped the shaft against the statue, tore the ruined length free, and reached for an arrow with fingers gone slick from blood.

There. A pattern inside the chaos. Vargan favored his left side now. The arm beneath his shoulder guard was slower. Nessa's earlier strike had cost him.

"Brakka," Lio rasped.

She heard him anyway. She always did.

Brakka changed her footing and came in high, then higher, forcing Vargan's guard up with a brutal series of overhead chops. Nessa rolled out of the broken bench, saw the opening, and slashed low enough to keep his attention split.

Lio drew.

The string came back ugly and uneven because his shoulder was half-ruined and slick with blood. He held anyway. Moonlight spilled through the broken ceiling and silvered the line of Vargan's jaw.

Loose.

The arrow crossed the sanctuary and struck just beneath the collarbone on Vargan's injured side.

He jolted.

Brakka roared and brought the axe around from the hip with everything she had left. Vargan turned, but too slowly. The blade bit deep into his ribs and sent him stumbling sideways.

Nessa was already there. She drove both daggers into him, one after the other, then kicked him hard in the back of the knee.

Vargan dropped.

Caelan stepped out from behind the pillar, one hand braced against the stone, one hand lifted with his sunburst clenched in white fingers.

"By dawn's first fire," he said, voice raw, "be still."

The bronze symbol flared.

For the first time all night, Vargan froze.

It lasted less than a heartbeat, but that was enough.

Lio's second arrow took him through the throat.

The hall fell still.

Vargan swayed once. His eyes shifted, not to Brakka or Nessa or Caelan, but to something beyond them, somewhere in the dark near the ruined throne.

His mouth curved in a small, private smile.

Then he toppled.

For a breath none of them moved.

Brakka was first to break. She planted the head of her axe on the floor and laughed, wild and disbelieving. Nessa bent double with her hands on her knees, coughing and grinning through split lips. Caelan leaned hard against the pillar, trembling with exhaustion. Lio slid down the statue to sit on the floor before his legs could fail him outright.

“We won,” Brakka said, sounding surprised by it.

“Obviously,” Nessa said, then spat blood onto the tile. “Completely in control the whole time.”

Lio let out a hoarse laugh.

Caelan took one unsteady step toward them. “Please tell me that was the worst of it.”

Brakka opened her mouth to answer.

Vargan Rhyse’s corpse opened its eyes.

Joshua Pilbert smiled behind the screen and said, “... and that’s where we’ll end tonight’s session.”

Four voices crashed into the silence at once.

“What?”

“No way.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Josh.”

The ruined sanctuary, the blood, the smoke, the dead lieutenant with his eyes open, all of it vanished in an instant, replaced by a dining room table that had seen too many character sheets, too many takeout containers, and too many years of weekly abuse to ever be called nice again.

A cheap overhead light buzzed faintly above them. Empty soda cans crowded the far corner beside a half-folded battle map. Dice lay everywhere, glitter resin mixed with cloudy acrylic and one heavy metal d20, a twenty-sided die that had chipped the table two years ago and still got used anyway.

Joshua sat at the head of it all with one hand on the edge of the folding Game Master screen that hid his notes and the other already reaching for his drink, like he

hadn't just detonated four people emotionally for his own entertainment.

He looked exactly like the kind of man who would be very good at customer service and very hard to describe afterward.

Mid-thirties, average height, average build, average face, a little softness around the middle from too much sitting and not enough reason to care about it. His brown hair needed a trim. His glasses were plain rectangular frames that suited him well enough without making a statement. He was the sort of person whose features only got interesting after an hour in his company, once his expressions started doing the real work.

Right now those expressions were doing a lot.

He took a sip, set the glass down, and gave the table an apologetic shrug that was undercut by how pleased with himself he clearly was.

"It's midnight," he said. "You people have jobs."

"You're evil," said Mia Alvarez.

Mia, who played Lio, was small, stylish, and animated, with dark curls escaping their clip and the table's most infectious laugh.

Across from her, Daniel Park let out a long, suffering exhale and fell back in his chair like a man personally wronged by narrative structure.

"You can't stop on that," he said. "That's criminal."

Daniel played Brother Caelan with utter sincerity and had a talent for finding emotional stakes faster than anyone else, then looking personally betrayed when they hurt.

Joshua pointed at him. "See, this is exactly why I stopped there."

"That doesn't make it better."

"It makes it much better."

On Daniel's left, Tessa Morgan was already halfway standing, palms on the table, eyes bright with the specific kind of fury only a good cliffhanger can produce.

“You described his corpse opening its eyes,” she said. “You don’t get to say that and then just go home.”

Tessa taught history, loved obscure trivia like a private feud, and appropriately played Nessa, the charismatic rogue. She stood with one finger planted on the battle map as if she could pin the narrative there by force.

Then there was Eric.

Eric Bell was a clean-cut, scrawny nerd with neat hair and a notebook full of tiny handwriting, about as far from Brakka, the enormous pink-haired warrior he played, as a person could get.

Eric slowly removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Joshua,” he said, in the calm tone he only used when he was actually most irritated, “I need you to understand that if Vargan is now some kind of undead phase-two boss after we finally put him down, I’m going to take this very personally.”

Mia turned toward him at once. “We? Lio got the killing blow.”

Eric straightened a little. “After Brakka softened him up.”

“You headbutted him twice.”

“And it mattered twice.”

“It mattered structurally,” Eric said.

Joshua held up both hands. “I love all of you, but I’m still ending there.”

A chorus of complaints rose around him.

He let it wash over him with the easy tolerance of a man who had spent three years learning exactly how far to push this group before they mutinied. There was warmth in the noise. Frustration, too, real frustration, but the kind people only gave something they were fully inside.

Tuesday nights were the fixed point of Joshua’s week.

Someone was always running late. Daniel always had too many drinks in the fridge. By ten they were usually

talking over one another about a fictional problem with the intensity of an emergency meeting. The rest of the week could be emails, errands, and laundry Joshua would eventually fold. This was the part he looked forward to.

Three years in, he still liked looking around the table and realizing everyone had shown up again.

Tessa dropped back into her seat and pointed a four-sided die at him accusingly. "What was that expression Vargan made before he died?"

Joshua grinned.

"Nope."

Daniel squinted. "You had that planned, didn't you?"

"Oh, absolutely."

Mia groaned and scrubbed both hands down her face. "I hate you."

"That's fair."

Eric tipped his head toward the wall clock. "He's right about the time, though."

Everyone looked.

12:07 glowed back at them in blue light from the microwave across the kitchen.

That took some wind out of them. Real life had a nasty habit of barging in through the windows whenever the game got too good.

Mia sat back with a theatrical sigh. "Fine. Fine. Some of us have to be at work in eight hours."

"Nine," Daniel said.

"Look at Mr. Luxury over here."

Tessa was still looking at Joshua. "I'm not over this."

"You're not supposed to be."

That got another round of irritated noises. Joshua waited until it peaked, then casually added, "Oh, and you all level up."

The room exploded.

Mia slapped the table so hard one of the dice bounced. "You beautiful bastard."

Within seconds Eric was reconsidering Brakka's Strength, Daniel was asking about hit points, and Tessa was accusing Joshua of sending them home so they couldn't reverse-engineer whatever came next.

Joshua rested his chin on his fist and smiled. "That's one hundred percent because I don't want you figuring out what nonsense I'm about to throw at you."

The cliffhanger still sat sharp and unresolved between them, but the level-up had turned the sting into momentum.

Joshua leaned back in his chair and watched them all.

Mia, animated and impossible to miss. Daniel, already pretending this wasn't the highlight of his week. Tessa, arguing with herself and everyone else in equal measure. Eric, who looked like he should have been discussing laptop specs and was instead trying to optimize a giant woman with an axe.

A strange little group, held together by habit, affection, scheduling, and the weekly agreement to care very deeply about made-up people.

Joshua didn't say any of that. He just smiled, reached for another garlic knot, thought better of it, and pulled his hand back.

"All right," he said. "Get out of my house."

"It's Daniel's house," Tessa said.

Joshua looked around the room, then nodded once. "That explains why the lighting is so hostile."

They lingered anyway. Dice disappeared into bags, character sheets were tucked away, and Tessa kept trying to interrogate Joshua about Vargan while he helped Daniel gather cans and fold the battle map.

"Possession, revenant, or ritual trigger?" Tessa asked as Joshua reached for his jacket.

Joshua gave her his most innocent look. "Did you think I was going to answer questions?"

"I think you enjoy hearing me ask them."

"That too."

Mia was already predicting how he would punish them next week. Eric insisted any future challenge respect Brakka's right to solve problems by hitting them. Daniel pointed out that Eric's approach mostly respected the destruction of furniture.

They laughed. Three years of Tuesdays had given them a ridiculous amount of knowledge about one another without anyone needing to make a speech about friendship.

At the door, Mia asked, "Next week?"

"As long as Daniel still permits our presence," Joshua said.

Daniel held the door open. "I regret to inform you that I do."

Tessa threatened to stay angry all week. Eric promised that if Brakka died to some delayed consequence, he would return next Tuesday with great dignity.

Daniel clapped Joshua lightly on the shoulder on the way past. "Great session."

Joshua relaxed a little. "Thanks."

"Drive safe. You look tired."

"That's because I'm old."

"You're thirty-five."

"Exactly."

A few minutes later Joshua was alone in his car, the engine running and the bright hum of company already fading into quiet.

The session replayed itself on the drive home, until his mind circled back to the one thing he hadn't let himself sit with at the table: the critical hit he had fudged.

Vargan's spear had come up a natural twenty, the best possible roll. Played exactly as rolled, it would have killed Lio outright before Caelan could reach him. So Joshua had shaved the damage just enough to leave a sliver of hope.

The hit still mattered. It forced Caelan to burn the prayer and changed the fight. But Joshua had bent the outcome away from disaster, and he knew it.

He was still not sure whether that had been right. No one wanted Lio erased by one ugly spike of luck, but danger only mattered if the players believed Joshua might let the worst outcome stand.

Then he pictured Eric defending his structural headbutts, Tessa already building theories, Mia still updating Lio, and Daniel's quiet "Great session." They had cared. More importantly, they had left wanting next Tuesday to arrive faster.

Joshua tapped the wheel once. "Good enough."

By the next light, Vargan's resurrection was already turning over in his head. He could plan every route he wanted and the players would still surprise him. That was half the fun.

By the time Joshua reached his apartment, the post-session buzz had thinned into ordinary late-night tiredness.

The place was the steady accumulation of small postponements: shoes where they had landed, mail fanned across the counter, two mugs on the coffee table, clean laundry still living in its basket, and dishes in the sink waiting for him to run out of forks.

His laptop bag leaned beside a stack of sourcebooks bristling with sticky notes. Work waited for him in the morning too: meetings, emails, and a spreadsheet he had promised to clean up.

Joshua went through the usual motions: brushed his teeth, changed, and sat on the edge of the bed while the campaign kept rearranging itself behind his eyes.

Three years was a long time to carry a world around in his head. He could picture roads, inns, tomb doors, and conversations without opening a notebook, along with all the places his friends had changed because they refused to follow the route he expected.

He set his glasses on the nightstand and lay back. A pale stripe of streetlight crossed the room. Tomorrow he would answer ordinary questions while his mind kept

worrying at Vargan, the dark behind the throne, and whatever his players would do next.

By the time he started wondering whether Vargan would remember the fight when he woke again, the question had begun to slide into dream.

Joshua fell asleep with his friends' voices still mixed into the campaign.

Sunlight found the one break in the curtains and laid a warm white bar directly across Joshua's face.

He made a sound of immediate, heartfelt annoyance and rolled onto his side, dragging the blanket up over one shoulder. For a few sleepy seconds he considered the extremely adult option of calling in sick and pretending the world didn't exist until noon. He was tired, his dreams had been strange and crowded, and there was still a spreadsheet waiting for him that he hadn't wanted to touch yesterday and wasn't going to want to touch any more today.

Then responsibility, which he disliked on principle but obeyed with depressing regularity, started clearing its throat.

He should at least check his calendar.

Joshua cracked one eye open. The light still felt wrong somehow, too warm and direct, but his brain wasn't online enough yet to do anything with that thought. He reached a hand toward the nightstand for his phone and found only empty air.

He frowned and patted around once, then again more deliberately.

His phone wasn't on the nightstand. Without it, there was no alarm, no calendar, no group chat already filling with theories about Vargan.

"Come on," he muttered into the pillow.

It had probably slipped off in the night. That happened often enough. He pushed himself up on one elbow, still more asleep than awake, and reached farther. His

fingertips brushed wood, then fabric, then the familiar hard shape of his glasses.

Those, at least, were where they should be.

Joshua sat up slowly and rubbed one hand over his face. His mouth tasted stale. His neck felt stiff. There was a faint ache behind his eyes, the harmless sort that came from too little sleep and too much screen time. He could still feel the shape of the campaign drifting through the back of his mind, loose pieces from half-formed dreams. Vargan's corpse opening its eyes. Tessa demanding answers. Eric insisting the headbutts mattered.

He hooked his glasses by one temple, held them in front of him while his vision swam uselessly over soft blurs and pale morning light, then slid them on.

The world snapped into focus.

Joshua froze.

This wasn't his bedroom.

The thought hit first as refusal, blunt and immediate. The narrow bed beneath him was wrong. The blanket was wrong, rougher and heavier than the one he owned. The light was pouring through wooden shutters, not cheap curtains. The wall across from him was plaster over timber, cracked in one corner and washed gold by morning sun. A small washstand stood near the window where his bookshelf should have been. Beside the bed sat a plain wooden chair with a folded shirt draped over the back, a shirt of coarse undyed cloth that was very much not his.

He didn't move.

His whole body seemed to forget how to move.

Then every thought in his head tried to happen at once.

He looked down at the mattress, at his hands, at the unfamiliar room around him, and felt the last scraps of sleep vanish so completely it was like being dropped through ice.

Joshua stared at the shutters, the washstand, the rough timber frame of the door.

He wasn't in his apartment.

Chapter 2

No Heroes Are Coming

He stayed perfectly still.

Sleep was gone now. So was the soft, harmless confusion that usually followed waking up in a bad mood and a familiar room. What sat in its place felt sharper, colder, like his brain had run face first into a locked door and was still trying to decide whether to be alarmed or embarrassed.

This wasn't his apartment.

That much had already landed. The room was wrong. The bed was wrong. The walls were wrong. Even the light felt wrong, richer somehow, warmer and cleaner than the thin stripe that usually leaked through the gap in his curtains every morning.

Joshua looked around again, slower this time, as if patience might make the place resolve into something ordinary.

It didn't.

The bedframe was carved wood, plain but hand-shaped. A clay pitcher sat in a basin on a washstand by the wall. The floorboards were wide and uneven. Sunlight came through wooden shutters, not glass. The shirt folded over the chair back looked like something a peasant extra in a fantasy show would wear if the costume department had been trying unusually hard.

He stared at it for another second.

Then his thoughts started arriving faster than he could sort them.

He remembered driving home. Brushing his teeth. Getting into his own bed. Nothing between those moments and this room made sense.

He shut his eyes and pressed the heels of his hands against them.

“Okay,” he muttered. “Okay, stop.”

His own voice sounded too loud in the room.

Joshua took a breath, then another, and tried to force his thoughts into something resembling order. He had spent his whole life overthinking simple situations until they became impossible knots. There was no reason to start with the most insane explanation when simpler ones were available.

Occam’s razor.

Occam’s razor usually kept him from sprinting after the wrong answer.

He opened his eyes again.

Most likely explanation: I’m still asleep. Second most likely, somebody did something very weird to me. Third most likely, I have finally had the kind of nervous breakdown that gets described as “quiet” in a family group chat.

That was better. Sort of.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood carefully, half expecting the room to lurch or peel away the second his feet hit the floor. It didn’t. The boards were cool underfoot. The ache in his neck from sleeping wrong was real. The faint dryness in his mouth was real. None of it had the slippery quality dreams usually had once he started looking too closely.

Joshua turned in a slow circle.

The room was small, maybe a guest chamber above a tavern or inn if fantasy logic applied, with a narrow bed, a washstand, a chair, and a squat little hearth built into one wall. The room had no television, no phone charger, and no air vent humming in the background. Somewhere below him he could hear voices, muffled by floorboards, and the dull thud of something heavy being set down.

He frowned.

That sound, more than anything else, made the whole thing tilt from abstract weirdness into logistical concern.

If this was a prank, it was elaborate enough that several people had committed felony-level enthusiasm to the bit.

His eyes caught on something by the hearth.

A small carved fox sat tucked into the corner of the mantel, no bigger than his thumb, its tail curled neatly around its feet. The carving was simple and a little rough, but the pose was unmistakable. Joshua stepped closer and stared at it.

He knew that fox.

Or rather, he knew the habit that had put it there.

Years ago, in his first homebrew campaign, he had improvised an innkeeper who kept a little fox carving by the fire for luck. One of his players had loved the detail so much that Joshua started reusing it, then turned it into a quiet signature. Ever since, almost every tavern or inn he described had one somewhere, a tiny fox on a shelf, carved into a beam, painted on a sign, hidden in plain sight like an inside joke he was mostly making for himself.

Nobody else should have known that.

His pulse kicked, then hope rushed in behind it. Maybe this was a prank. An absurdly elaborate, friendship-ending prank, but still a prank.

“Okay,” he called. “Very funny. Seriously, I’m impressed. You got every detail right.”

No one answered. No laughter came from behind the door, no Mia or Tessa ruined the reveal, and no Daniel or Eric appeared with a camera and an apology.

Joshua crossed to the door. The iron latch was warm from the sun and rough beneath his fingers. Weight, texture, temperature: tiny details his dreams usually got lazy about.

He opened it onto a timber-framed hall and a narrow stair. From below came voices, cutlery, boots on wood,

and the smell of bread, smoke, spilled ale, and something cooking in fat.

If his friends had somehow rented a medieval inn and filled it with extras, Daniel would insist on production value. Tessa would call the actors background characters until someone got offended. Eric would have a spreadsheet. Mia would demand a reveal dramatic enough to justify the effort.

It was still easier to believe than waking up inside his own campaign.

Joshua drew himself up and started downstairs. “Play along. Act impressed. Then ask pointed questions about how they transported a whole human being without permanent spinal damage.”

At the bottom, the common room opened around him: smoke-dark beams, long tables, morning light, travelers eating breakfast, a serving girl carrying mugs, and a broad man behind the bar polishing a cup.

Nobody yelled surprise. Nobody laughed. The room kept moving without him.

Joshua forced a smile. “All right. Very funny. Seriously, though, where are you hiding?”

The barman raised his eyebrows. “Hiding, sir?”

“My friends. The ones who brought me here.”

The man folded a towel over one shoulder. “You arrived alone last night. Near enough collapsed. Paid for a room, ate half a bowl of stew, and fell asleep at the table. Never saw a group with you.”

Joshua stared at him. The man wasn’t performing. He looked like a tired innkeeper deciding whether a guest was hungover, concussed, or both.

“And your tiny fox?” Joshua asked.

“My what?”

Joshua pointed upstairs. “On the mantel. The carving.”

The barman frowned, then shrugged. “Been there longer than I’ve had the place. Lucky little thing, they say.”

A chill crawled over Joshua’s neck.

If this was a set, it had to continue past the front door. If he stepped outside and found a parking lot, Daniel trying to look innocent, Tessa vibrating with triumph, Eric documenting everything, and Mia laughing hard enough to need a wall, wonderful. Humiliating, but wonderful.

He crossed the room, opened the door, and stepped outside.

Cool morning air touched his face, carrying woodsmoke, damp earth, and bread from somewhere nearby.

The street sloped gently away from the inn in a broad run of packed dirt and pale gravel, still damp in the low spots from night mist. Timber-framed houses stood on either side with plaster walls washed cream and ocher under the morning sun. A blacksmith's chimney sent up a ribbon of smoke near the square. Laundry stirred on a line behind a cooper's shop. Beyond the last row of buildings, green hills rolled outward under a wide blue sky that looked too clean to belong to him.

He stopped just past the threshold.

The town square sat a little downhill from the inn, exactly where it should have been. The stone well at its center was ringed by a low wall polished smooth by use. The shrine beside it had the same slanted cedar roof he had once described offhand because Daniel had asked what kind of wood the village favored. The smithy crouched on the eastern side of the square, heavier and darker than the surrounding buildings, its yard cluttered with scrap, tools, and half-finished work. The old road curved north around the mill, just as he remembered. Even the line of poplars beyond the last cottage stood where he had placed them to make the village feel a little too pretty for what was about to happen there.

His jaw loosened.

It was all here.

The place in front of him wasn't merely close to what he remembered, inspired by his campaign, or an

impressive approximation assembled by a group of criminally dedicated friends. It was the town itself, down to the choices he had made on lunch breaks and in notebook margins and in those last few minutes before a session when a player asked one more question than he had planned for.

He took two slow steps into the road and turned in a half circle, drinking it in with the stunned greed of someone watching a private sketchbook unfold into architecture.

There was the red-tiled bakehouse with the chipped blue shutters he had added because a starting town needed one feature people could picture instantly. There was the hitching post outside the cooper's, worn smooth where he had imagined reins being looped a thousand times. There was the squat watch post near the south path, a little too sturdy for a town this size because he had wanted the guard captain to seem more capable than the place could really afford. Every tiny decision he had made to convince his players this village existed had been translated into wood, stone, smoke, and motion.

He could hear it too. A dog barked somewhere behind the mill. Hammering rang from the smithy. Cart wheels rattled over the road. A woman laughed from an upper window. The breeze moved through the leaves above the well with a dry, whispering sound. The whole town carried on with the careless certainty of a place that had been here long before he opened his eyes and would still be here if he shut them again.

Joshua felt suddenly, violently underdressed for the size of what he was seeing.

"Well, Toto," he said softly, because apparently his brain had chosen movie quotes over screaming, "I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

Nobody answered. The line fell into the bright air and vanished.

Joshua laughed once under his breath because crying over a village felt too large and too ridiculous to do standing in the road.

Then movement at the far edge of the square caught his eye.

A man in work clothes came hurrying between two buildings with an armload of split kindling. Two children darted around the well chasing each other in crooked circles. A woman in an apron leaned out of the bakehouse door to shake flour from a cloth. Ordinary life, small and constant and so completely at ease with itself that Joshua drew one short breath for an entirely different reason.

He knew these people.

He knew them less by face than by function, texture, and the handful of names he had scattered through town. The baker with the strong opinions. The cooper's son who always wanted adventure. The widow who kept geese and scared off drunks with a broom. He had made them as background, half a line here, a joke there, enough to give the players something to bounce off before the real story arrived.

They were all moving through the morning as if they had always been alive.

Joshua took another step forward, almost reverent now, and the inn door eased shut behind him with a soft wooden thump.

He barely heard it.

The scream came from somewhere downhill.

It cut through the square sharp enough to break whatever spell had settled over him. Joshua turned at once. A woman near the well had dropped her bucket. It hit the stone rim, tipped, and went over with a hollow splash. Farther up the road, someone shouted again, louder this time.

"Wolves! Wolves are attacking the town! Everybody run!"

Joshua jolted hard enough to feel it in his ribs.

He knew this.

For one suspended second, everything around him seemed to click into place. The square, the villagers, the road leading north past the poplars, the timing of it, morning instead of night because his players had insisted on sleeping before investigating the mayor's vague warnings, all of it. This was the opening encounter. The first real hook of the campaign. The moment that had brought the whole party together three years ago.

A man stumbled into the square from the north lane with blood on one sleeve and terror written plainly across his face. Behind him came two more villagers and a barking tangle of panic. Someone grabbed a child by the wrist and hauled him bodily toward the nearest doorway. A dog shot under a cart with its tail tucked tight.

Joshua stood in the middle of the road with wonder still fading out of him and excitement rushing in to take its place.

Of course this was what happened next.

He had built this sequence carefully, or at least carefully by the standards of a man making encounter notes on a weeknight after work and trying to predict what four other adults would find dramatic. Wolves hit the town from the north side because that put the danger close enough to feel immediate without making escape impossible. The first howl from the tree line. The shout. The rush of villagers. A few quick beats of confusion. Then the heroes stepped in, not as strangers arriving from nowhere, but as people already in the right place at the right time.

Joshua could have laughed from pure relief.

The world was impossible, yes. Absurd. Terrifying in several larger ways he hadn't even begun to catalog. But if it was his world, if it was following the bones of the campaign, then he had an advantage so enormous it barely felt fair. He didn't just know the town. He knew what came next.

“Okay,” he said under his breath, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth before he even noticed it. “Okay, yes. I know this one.”

A howl rolled down from beyond the north cottages, long and ragged and close enough to strip the last of the morning calm off the square.

People scattered.

A woman from the bakehouse snatched the nearest child and shoved him inside with enough force to send flour flying from her apron. The man with the kindling dropped half of it in the road and ran back the way he had come. Someone in the watch post shouted for the north barrier. That sounded grander than it was: a timber gate across the road, a shallow ditch, and a low palisade protecting only part of the village. Cedarwell’s real defense had apparently always been the hopeful idea that anything serious would overlook it.

Joshua didn’t panic.

He felt the opposite of panic, in fact. His shoulders loosened. His eyes moved from roofline to alley mouth to north road, already choosing the places where everyone should enter. Every anxious question that had been crashing into one another since he woke up got shoved to the edges by a much simpler thought.

The players are about to show up.

He turned toward the north road and started mentally setting the scene the way he always had behind the screen.

The first wolves would break from between the cooper’s shed and the empty goat pen. One would veer left and snap at the baker’s husband because the party had to see the threat land on ordinary people before they committed. Another would circle toward the well to split attention. The alpha wouldn’t come in immediately. The alpha never came in immediately. You held the bigger threat back just long enough to make the first wave look manageable.

Joshua's eyes swept the square, no longer seeing only the town. He was seeing entrances.

Lio should take the roofline on the right, the one above the cooper's where he would have a clean sightline to the northern lane. Brakka would come from the stable yard because that had given Eric the longest possible charge line and, more importantly, a reason to shout something stupid before hitting an enemy with an axe. Nessa had entered from behind the old shrine, all speed and bad intentions, after trying to rob the town's donation box on the way to breakfast. Caelan, still fastening part of his armor, had arrived last from the inn with his holy symbol in one hand and the expression Daniel always got when the world was being unreasonable in his vicinity.

Joshua grinned outright now.

He could still remember the first time he ran it. Mia had asked if she could already be awake and checking rooftops because Lio "slept lightly in new places." Tessa, who never missed a chance to make character choices inconvenient on purpose, had decided Nessa was absolutely casing the square before dawn in case there was anything worth stealing. Eric had somehow turned Brakka buying breakfast into a full social scene with three named villagers and an argument over sausage. Daniel, because he was Daniel, had spent ten real minutes trying to decide whether Caelan would finish his morning prayer before investigating the noise.

They had felt so alive from the beginning, those four.

Joshua stepped farther into the square with his hands half lifted, unconsciously taking the posture of a man about to point out where everyone should stand.

A gray shape flashed between the buildings at the north edge of town.

There, he thought.

The wolf cleared the gap in a blur of muscle and dirty fur, hit the road, and skidded slightly on the damp ground before recovering. It looked bigger in motion than it ever

had in his imagination, shoulders rolling under its coat, jaws already open. A second shape burst after it, then a third, one darker than the others and lean enough that the ribs showed under its hide.

Someone screamed again. The sound echoed off the buildings and snapped around the square like a whip.

Joshua's pulse climbed with it, but the fear still couldn't quite get in. Everything he was seeing only confirmed what he already knew. This was the quest trigger. This was the setup. This was the moment before the heroes made themselves known.

He even knew the beats.

The first wolf lunges at a villager near the well. Lio's arrow takes it through the neck before it lands. Brakka intercepts the second one near the smithy. Nessa appears on the third from nowhere at all. Caelan starts moving civilians to safety and shouts something deeply cleric-shaped in the process. Then the guard captain arrives a little too late to be useful and just in time to hand out the next quest.

It was all so familiar that Joshua almost expected dice to start rolling somewhere above the sky.

He took another step forward and laughed softly, disbelieving and delighted at the same time.

This was insane. Completely insane. His breathing steadied anyway.

He was still standing in a town that shouldn't exist, wearing a shirt that wasn't his, with his real life somewhere behind him. In this moment, though, the logic made sense. The sequence made sense. For the first time since he woke up, he wasn't lost.

He knew the scene better than anyone in it.

A woman grabbed his arm on her way past and nearly dragged him with her. "What are you doing? Run!"

Joshua blinked at her, then almost smiled.

“I’m fine,” he said automatically, because that was what he always said when someone else was frightened and he needed them to settle down a notch.

The answer sounded more confident than he felt, which was saying something because his confidence was climbing fast enough to be almost embarrassing.

The woman didn’t wait to argue. She let go and hurried on toward the inn, skirts gathered in both fists. Two men were trying to wrestle a handcart across the road as a makeshift barrier, which Joshua recognized immediately as the kind of useless civilian instinct he had included for texture. It would slow exactly one wolf for maybe half a second. Nice visual, though.

Another howl rose up, closer now, followed by a burst of barking from somewhere behind the smithy. The wolves were spreading exactly as designed, probing the square, looking for the easiest point of panic.

Joshua turned slowly, scanning the rooftops and alleys with anticipation so clean it almost felt childish.

Any second now.

Lio on the roof.

Brakka from the stable yard.

Nessa from the shrine.

Caelan from the inn.

He could see them in his head so clearly that for one absurd moment it felt as though the world might conjure them simply because he was expecting them hard enough.

A wolf lunged at the edge of the square.

Joshua didn’t flinch.

He was too busy looking for the heroes.

The pattern was doing exactly what he had built it to do: split attention, punish an open flank, force the party to cover one another. Without a party, every opening belonged to a villager instead.

The first villager died before the thought finished.

A man near the well turned too slowly with a bucket still in his hands. The wolf hit him high in the chest, drove

him backward into the stone rim, and tore at his throat in one savage shake. The bucket rang against the well and rolled away in a bright wobbling circle.

Joshua stopped breathing.

That was wrong.

Bloody, sudden, and impossible in the one way that mattered: that wasn't how this scene went.

In the campaign, the first wolf never landed.

Lio's arrow took it through the neck before it reached the well. Joshua remembered describing the impact in detail because Mia had rolled well and smiled like she already knew it. The villager had lived long enough to thank the party afterward. Joshua had even given him a name halfway through the encounter because Eric had asked whether he still had both hands after Brakka shoved him out of the way.

But the man at the well had both hands now, and neither of them were helping him.

The wolf tore free and wheeled toward the next nearest movement, jaws red.

Joshua took one step backward.

Somewhere to his left a woman screamed for her husband. On the right side of the square, another wolf launched itself at a pair of men still trying to push the handcart into place. One got clear. The other went down beneath the wolf with a cry that cut off so fast Joshua's brain refused to finish imagining the rest.

A moment ago it had felt staged, all dramatic movement and recognizable beats. Now it was only panic. People weren't running in clever directions that left room for heroes to enter. They were running like frightened townsfolk, colliding with one another, dropping things, wasting seconds, making every bad choice ordinary people made when their day ripped open in the middle.

Joshua turned toward the roofline again.

The cooper's roof was empty; no movement, no arrow, no Lio. The square had wolves, villagers, and panic, but

none of the people he was waiting for: no Brakka, no Nessa, no Caelan.

The excitement went out of him.

Another wolf burst from the lane and hit a fleeing goat broadside. The animal shrieked. A child cried somewhere nearby. Joshua's eyes kept moving, still trying to force the scene back onto its rails just by recognizing all the places where people should have been.

They weren't here.

His mouth went dry.

His players didn't exist here.

Or if they existed, they weren't coming.

His pulse beat hard in his throat. The town was here. The wolves were here. The quest hook he had written three years ago was here, along with mud, blood, and people screaming names he had probably improvised once and forgotten. The four heroes his friends had made at the table were not.

The world had kept everything he built for them.

It hadn't kept them.

His fingers had gone cold despite the morning sun.

Then something else rose up behind it.

Maybe it's me.

Joshua stared at the north lane as another wolf came pelting through the gap between two cottages.

The thought should have been ridiculous. It should have collapsed under its own ego immediately. Instead it fit the moment so perfectly that it lit him up from the inside.

Of course.

If the world existed and the heroes didn't, somebody still had to step into the space they had left. Somebody had to answer the call and get the story moving.

He was here.

He knew the world better than anyone in it.

A shocked laugh escaped him before he could stop it.

Fear still prickled along his arms, but excitement crowded it out. Years spent memorizing maps, encounter notes, and character sheets suddenly felt less like overthinking and more like an unfair advantage.

This was his town. His scene. His encounter. He knew the wolves, the alpha's entrance, the captain who came afterward, and the quest that followed.

Joshua turned on his heel and ran for the inn.

He almost slipped on the threshold in his hurry, caught himself on the doorframe, and shouldered through into the common room hard enough to make the nearest table jolt. Several heads snapped toward him. The barman behind the counter started to say something, but Joshua was already moving.

Above the hearth hung the decorative sword and shield he had placed there years ago for flavor: a faded round shield and an old iron arming sword that had belonged to the town's founder in local legend.

The barman had rounded the end of the counter. "What in God's name are you doing?"

Joshua grabbed the shield first. It came down crooked and nearly pulled him off balance. He caught the sword an instant later, fumbled it, recovered, and then looked at the barman with a certainty so wild it almost made him smile.

"Saving your town," he said.

The words sounded incredible out loud. Corny, theatrical, completely unearned, and in the moment he loved them.

The barman stared at him. "Those are decorations."

"Yes," Joshua said, adjusting his grip. "For now."

A crash outside made people jump. Joshua tightened his grip on the sword as his confidence returned, larger and much less reasonable.

He had woken in a fantasy world and stepped into his own starting town. Compared to that, grabbing a tavern

sword and becoming the hero of the opening scene felt weirdly natural.

He gave the sword an experimental swing. It felt awful: too heavy at the tip, dead in the wrist, nothing like a prop.

That should have sobered him. Instead he laughed once, breathless. “Okay. Sure. We’re doing this.”

He pushed back toward the door.

The barman caught his sleeve for half a second. “You’ll get killed.”

Joshua looked back at him.

Outside, another scream cut through the morning. The sound went through him like a hook. Whatever else this world was, whatever rules it obeyed, the people in it were screaming like it mattered. The dead at the well had mattered. The men at the cart had mattered. The town had gone on being real while he stood there expecting somebody else to save it for him.

He pulled his sleeve free.

“Then I’ll wake up,” he said, because saying it made the whole thing easier.

He didn’t wait to see whether the barman believed him.

Joshua shoved through the door and ran back into the square with a sword in one hand, a shield on the other arm, and a grin that belonged to a man who had finally found the one role he had always assumed was for somebody else.

Joshua didn’t think.

He yelled, raised the sword with both hands, and brought it down in a clumsy overhead chop that landed mostly because the wolf had turned from an older man near the tavern at the noise instead of finishing its charge.

Steel sank into the animal’s neck at an ugly angle.

The impact jolted all the way up his arms. Hot blood sprayed across his sleeve. The wolf convulsed once, then crumpled with a wet choking sound and stopped moving.

Joshua froze over it.

Blood darkened the dirt beneath the wolf. Joshua stared at the blade buried in its neck and, for a second, heard nothing but his own breathing.

He had done that.

He hadn't imagined it across a table while other people rolled dice. He had stepped in, swung the sword, and changed the scene.

A laugh burst out of him before he could help it, half shock and half triumph.

"Okay," he said, breathless. "Okay, yes. There we go."

A woman yanked the old man upright and dragged him toward the tavern. Someone shouted thanks to Joshua as they passed. The words hit him like kindling.

His pulse surged. The fear that had been clawing at him a minute ago suddenly felt small, manageable, almost embarrassing. Of course the first swing had felt awkward. Of course the sword had felt strange. None of that mattered. He knew the encounter. He knew the timing. He knew how wolves like these pressed a crowd, split targets, tested weak flanks, and ceded ground the moment coordinated resistance stiffened.

Because he had written them to do exactly that.

Another wolf darted in from the left lane. Joshua turned toward it with much more confidence than he had any right to possess. It circled wide instead of rushing him head-on, shoulders low, yellow eyes fixed on the shield.

Right, he thought. Feint wide, pull attention, open the center.

He grinned despite himself.

"I know what you're doing."

He advanced when he should have waited.

The wolf lunged low, just like he remembered, and Joshua got the shield down in time. Teeth clacked against wood. The impact was much worse than he expected, but his sword was already coming down in a panicked, graceless slash. The blade clipped the wolf across the snout. It yelped and sprang back.

Joshua took a step after it, encouraged.

Then another wolf hit him from the right.

It came as a gray blur and a weight with claws. Teeth closed around the back of his calf through his borrowed trousers, and pain shot up his leg so fast it erased every coherent thought.

Joshua screamed. The wolf tore loose. He spun, slashed wildly, missed, and nearly lost the sword.

While he had been dealing with one animal, the square had filled with them. Wolves darted between carts and legs in packs of two or three. A body lay motionless in the road.

The wolves didn't care about his choreography.

A third rushed him. He caught it on the shield and stabbed down, scraping ribs before it twisted away. Something raked across his upper thigh.

Claws.

Red spread fast over his trousers. His breath went ragged. The sword already felt twice as heavy.

He had built this encounter for heroes.

For four characters with training, weapons, stamina, and abilities. For Lio on the rooftops, Nessa in the alleys, Brakka holding the line, and Caelan covering mistakes before they became funerals.

Joshua was one out-of-shape man with a decorative sword and a shield he barely knew how to carry.

Another wolf came in. He slashed too early, and the blade pulled him off balance. The animal hit the shield hard enough to numb his shoulder.

Panic hit full and cold.

This wasn't a dream. Dreams didn't linger on the aching pull in his calf, the raw burn in his thigh, the smell of wet fur and blood.

One wolf paced in and out of range while another drifted toward his flank. Joshua recognized the tactic. A trained fighter would lock one down while the rest of the party punished the other.

He had no party.

His heel struck the wolf from his first kill. He nearly fell, hacked wildly, and by some miracle felt the edge bite. A wolf yelped and collapsed.

Two down. It should have felt good. Instead it only made the emptiness around him louder.

Somewhere a man shouted for the guard.

Cecil, Joshua thought. The guard captain comes after the fight. He sees the heroes with the dead alpha and offers the next quest.

That meant the alpha had to be close.

As if summoned by the thought, the wolves around him shifted.

The wolves widened their circle. Their ears tilted toward the north lane. Joshua knew that movement. Something larger was coming.

Then the alpha came.

It burst into the square between two cottages in a spray of dirt and splintered fence wood, bigger than the others by half again, all rangy muscle and scarred gray hide. One ear was torn. Its chest was broad. Its eyes were pale and steady in a way animal eyes shouldn't have been.

Joshua had described it once as looking like famine with teeth.

At the time he had been very pleased with himself.

Now he wished he had gone with something less accurate.

The alpha didn't rush blindly. It slowed as it entered the square and took him in with a flat, assessing stare.

Joshua swallowed.

"Right," he whispered.

In the campaign, Brakka had planted herself between the alpha and the fleeing townsfolk while Lio, Nessa, and Caelan worked around her.

Joshua's body waited for those things to happen.

Nothing happened.

The alpha moved.

Joshua lifted the shield.

The beast lunged left, then cut right so fast his brain barely tracked the feint. He turned too slowly. Its weight slammed into him like a thrown log. He got the shield mostly up, enough to keep its jaws off his throat, but the impact drove him straight to the ground.

The sword flew from his hand.

It landed somewhere out of reach with a dull metallic clatter.

Joshua hit the dirt flat on his back. The shield crashed down over his chest a split second before the alpha's full weight came after him. Teeth snapped shut on the rim inches from his face. A rank wave of heat and saliva washed over him.

He screamed again, this time from sheer terror.

The wolf's paws dug into him as it tried to force the shield aside. Joshua locked both hands on the grip and pushed with everything he had left.

Drool splashed warm across his cheek. His arms trembled. Teeth scraped against the shield's rim.

He couldn't do this.

He wasn't strong enough. His arms were already giving way.

Boots pounded nearby. A voice shouted. Joshua didn't dare turn his head.

The alpha gathered itself for another shove.

Then it jerked.

A spearhead burst through its ribs in a wet spray of red.

The weight on the shield collapsed sideways.

Joshua sucked in air so hard it hurt.

Above him stood a broad, sun-browed man in a dark surcoat with a spear braced in both hands.

Cecil.

For one strange second Joshua felt absurd relief at recognizing him, as though one familiar piece had snapped the world back into place.

Cecil was speaking, but only fragments reached him. “Gods above... still with me? ...move, can you move?”

Joshua tried to answer. What came out was something between a cough and a laugh.

Cecil shifted him, and pain dragged Joshua’s attention back to his leg. His calf throbbed. His thigh felt wet and slippery. The edges of the square had gone soft.

The captain hauled him partly upright. “You stupid bastard,” he said, with admiration or disbelief or both.

Joshua wanted to explain that this had gone differently at the table. He wanted to say the heroes were supposed to be here.

Instead he looked past Cecil to the dead wolves, the blood on the road, and the villager still unmoving by the well.

No one else was coming to carry the scene.

Mostly, Joshua just felt tired.

Cecil shouted for a healer.

That seemed encouraging.

Then the world tilted sideways. Morning light flashed white above the rooftops as Cecil tightened his grip to keep Joshua from slipping.

Joshua tried to hold onto the hand under his arm, the sky, and the ridiculous fact that the quest-giver from his campaign was real enough to smell like sweat, leather, and iron.

It wasn’t enough.

The square drifted out from under him.

Darkness came up fast, and Joshua fell into it.

CONTINUE THE FULL STORY

You've reached the end of this condensed preview.

The complete edition of *No Heroes Are Coming* includes the full, unabridged versions of Chapters 1 and 2, with additional character moments, context, and details omitted here. If you continue with the novel, I recommend starting again from Chapter 1.

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