

MARK LAWRENCE

PRINCE OF THORNS

The Thorns Taught Him
a Lesson in Blood



'Excellent –
on a par with
GEORGE R. R.
MARTIN'
Conn Iggulden

PRINCE OF THORNS

Book One of The Broken Empire

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Set in Plantin and Memento

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Ravens! Always the ravens. They settled on the gables of the church even before the injured became the dead. Even before Rike had finished taking fingers from hands, and rings from fingers. I leaned back against the gallows-post and nodded to the birds, a dozen of them in a black line, wise-eyed and watching.

The town-square ran red. Blood in the gutters, blood on the flagstones, blood in the fountain. The corpses posed as corpses do. Some comical, reaching for the sky with missing fingers, some peaceful, coiled about their wounds. Flies rose above the wounded as they struggled. This way and that, some blind, some sly, all betrayed by their buzzing entourage.

‘Water! Water!’ It’s always water with the dying. Strange, it’s killing that gives me a thirst.

And that was Mabberton. Two hundred dead farmers lying with their scythes and axes. You know, I warned them that we do this for a living. I said it to their leader, Bovid Tor. I gave them that chance, I

always do. But no. They wanted blood and slaughter. And they got it.

War, my friends, is a thing of beauty. Those as says otherwise are losing. If I'd bothered to go over to old Bovid, propped up against the fountain with his guts in his lap, he'd probably take a contrary view. But look where disagreeing got him.

'Shit-poor farm maggots.' Rike discarded a handful of fingers over Bovid's open belly. He came to me, holding out his takings, as if it was my fault. 'Look! One gold ring. One! A whole village and one fecking gold ring. I'd like to set the bastards up and knock 'em down again. Fecking bog-farmers.'

He would too: he was an evil bastard, and greedy with it. I held his eye. 'Settle down, Brother Rike. There's more than one kind of gold in Mabberton.'

I gave him my warning look. His cursing stole the magic from the scene; besides, I had to be stern with him. Rike was always on the edge after a battle, wanting more. I gave him a look that told him I had more. More than he could handle. He grumbled, stowed his bloody ring, and thrust his knife back in his belt.

Makin came up then and flung an arm about each of us, clapping gauntlet to shoulder-plate. If Makin had a skill, then smoothing things over was it.

'Brother Jorg is right, Little Rikey. There's treasure aplenty to be found.' He was wont to call Rike 'Little Rikey', on account of him being a head taller than any of

us and twice as wide. Makin always told jokes. He'd tell them to those as he killed, if they gave him time. Liked to see them go out with a smile.

'What treasure?' Rike wanted to know, still surly.

'When you get farmers, what else do you always get, Little Rikey?' Makin raised his eyebrows all suggestive.

Rike lifted his visor, treating us to his ugly face. Well brutal more than ugly. I think the scars improved him. 'Cows?'

Makin pursed his lips. I never liked his lips, too thick and fleshy, but I forgave him that, for his joking and his deathly work with that flail of his. 'Well, you can have the cows, Little Rikey. Me, I'm going to find a farmer's daughter or three, before the others use them all up.'

They went off then, Rike doing that laugh of his – '*hur, hur, hur*' – as if he was trying to cough a fishbone out.

I watched them force the door to Bovid's place opposite the church, a fine house, high roofed with wooden slates and a little flower garden in front. Bovid followed them with his eyes, but he couldn't turn his head.

I looked at the ravens, I watched Gemt and his half-wit brother, Maical, taking heads, Maical with the cart and Gemt with the axe. A thing of beauty, I tell you. At least to look at. I'll agree war smells bad. But, we'd torch the place soon enough and the stink would all turn to wood-smoke. Gold rings? I needed no more payment.

'Boy!' Bovid called out, his voice all hollow like, and weak.

I went to stand before him, leaning on my sword, tired in my arms and legs all of a sudden. ‘Best speak your piece quickly, farmer. Brother Gemt’s a-coming with his axe. Chop-chop.’

He didn’t seem too worried. It’s hard to worry a man so close to the worm-feast. Still it irked me that he held me so lightly and called me ‘boy’. ‘Do you have daughters, farmer? Hiding in the cellar maybe? Old Rike will sniff them out.’

Bovid looked up sharp at that, pained and sharp. ‘H-how old are you, boy?’

Again the ‘boy’. ‘Old enough to slit you open like a fat purse,’ I said, getting angry now. I don’t like to get angry. It makes me angry. I don’t think he caught even that. I don’t think he even knew it was me that opened him up not half an hour before.

‘Fifteen summers, no more. Couldn’t be more...’ His words came slow, from blue lips in a white face.

Out by two, I would have told him, but he’d gone past hearing. The cart creaked up behind me, and Gemt came along with his axe dripping.

‘Take his head,’ I told them. ‘Leave his fat belly for the ravens.’

Fifteen! I’d hardly be fifteen and rousting villages.
By the time fifteen came around, I’d be King!

*Some people are born to rub you the wrong way. Brother
Gent was born to rub the world the wrong way.*

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Mabberton burned well. All the villages burned well that summer. Makin called it a hot bastard of a summer, too mean to give out rain, and he wasn't wrong. Dust rose behind us when we rode in; smoke when we rode out.

'Who'd be a farmer?' Makin liked to ask questions.

'Who'd be a farmer's daughter?' I nodded toward Rike, rolling in his saddle, almost tired enough to fall out, wearing a stupid grin and a bolt of samite cloth over his half-plate. Where he found samite in Mabberton I never did get to know.

'Brother Rike does enjoy his simple pleasures,' Makin said.

He did. Rike had a hunger for it. Hungry like the fire.

The flames fair ate up Mabberton. I put the torch to the thatched inn, and the fire chased us out. Just one more bloody day in the years' long death throes of our broken empire.

Makin wiped at his sweat, smearing himself all over with soot-stripes. He had a talent for getting dirty, did

Makin. ‘You weren’t above those simple pleasures yourself, Brother Jorg.’

I couldn’t argue there. ‘How old are you?’ that fat farmer had wanted to know. Old enough to pay a call on his daughters. The fat girl had a lot to say, just like her father. Screeched like a barn owl: hurt my ears with it. I liked the older one better. She was quiet enough. So quiet you’d give a twist here or there just to check she hadn’t died of fright. Though I don’t suppose either of them was quiet when the fire reached them...

Gemt rode up and spoiled my imaginings.

‘The Baron’s men will see that smoke from ten miles. You shouldn’ta burned it.’ He shook his head, his stupid mane of ginger hair bobbing this way and that.

‘Shouldn’ta,’ his idiot brother joined in, calling from the old grey. We let him ride the old grey with the cart hitched up. The grey wouldn’t leave the road. That horse was cleverer than Maical.

Gemt always wanted to point stuff out. ‘You shouldn’ta put them bodies down the well, we’ll go thirsty now.’ ‘You shouldn’ta killed that priest, we’ll have bad luck now.’ ‘If we’d gone easy on her we’d have a ransom from Baron Kennick.’ I just ached to put my knife through his throat. Right then. Just to lean out and plant it in his neck. ‘What’s that? What say you, Brother Gemt? Bubble, bubble? Shouldn’ta stabbed your bulgy old Adam’s apple?’

‘Oh no!’ I cried, all shocked like. ‘Quick, Little Rikey, go piss on Mabberton. Got to put that fire out.’

‘Baron’s men will see it,’ said Gemt, stubborn and red-faced. He went red as a beet if you crossed him. That red face just made me want to kill him even more. I didn’t, though. You got responsibilities when you’re a leader. You got a responsibility not to kill too many of your men. Or who’re you going to lead?

The column bunched up around us, the way it always did when something was up. I pulled on Gerrod’s reins and he stopped with a snicker and a stamp. I watched Gemt and waited. Waited until all thirty-eight of my brothers gathered around, and Gemt got so red you’d think his ears would bleed.

‘Where we all going, my brothers?’ I asked, and I stood in my stirrups so I could look out over their ugly faces. I asked it in my quiet voice and they all hushed to hear.

‘Where?’ I asked again. ‘Surely it isn’t just me that knows? Do I keep secrets from you, my brothers?’

Rike looked a bit confused at this, furrowing his brow. Fat Burlow came up on my right, on my left the Nuban with his teeth so white in that soot-black face. Silence.

‘Brother Gemt can tell us. He knows what should be and what is.’ I smiled, though my hand still ached with wanting my dagger in his neck. ‘Where we going, Brother Gemt?’

‘Wennith, on the Horse Coast,’ he said, all reluctant, not wanting to agree to anything.

‘Well and good. How we going to get there? Near forty of us on our fine oh-so-stolen horses?’

Gemt set his jaw. He could see where I was going.

‘How we going to get there, if we want us a slice of the pie while it’s still nice and hot?’ I asked.

‘Lich Road!’ Rike called out, all pleased that he knew the answer.

‘Lich Road,’ I repeated, still quiet and smiling. ‘What other way could we go?’ I looked at the Nuban, holding his dark eyes. I couldn’t read him, but I let him read me.

‘Ain’t no other way.’

Rike’s on a roll, I thought, he don’t know what game’s being played, but he likes his part.

‘Do the Baron’s men know where we’re going?’ I asked Fat BurLOW.

‘War dogs follow the front,’ he said. Fat BurLOW ain’t stupid. His jowls quiver when he speaks, but he ain’t stupid.

‘So...’ I looked around them, real slow-like. ‘So, the Baron knows where bandits such as ourselves will be going, and he knows the way we’ve got to go.’ I let that sink in. ‘And I just lit a bloody big fire that tells him and his what a bad idea it’d be to follow.’

I stuck Gemt with my knife then. I didn’t need to, but I wanted it. He danced pretty enough too, bubble bubble on his blood, and fell off his horse. His red face went pale quick enough.

‘Maical,’ I said. ‘Take his head.’

And he did.

Gemt just chose a bad moment.

Keep reading Prince of Thorns

