



'A great
storyteller.'
BEN KANE

As a nation burns, a family fights to survive . . .

GILES KRISTIAN

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING *RAVEN SAGA*

BROTHERS' FURY

ABOUT THE BOOK

Rebel

Cast out by his family, Tom Rivers returns to his regiment. His commander believes the young hothead's contempt for authority has no place in his troop. But to a spymaster like Captain Craft, Tom's dark and fearless nature is itself a weapon to be turned upon the hated Cavaliers and used to strike at their very hearts.

Renegade

Raw with grief at the death of his father, Edmund Rivers rejects the peace talks between Parliament and the King. He chooses instead to lead a band of marauders across the moors, intent on exterminating rebel forces like the vermin they believe them to be. But Prince Rupert recognizes in Mun a fellow child of war and has other, no less daring plans for him.

Huntress

Her heart broken following the deaths of her beloved Emmanuel and her father, Bess Rivers takes the hardest decision of her life: to leave her son and Sheer House and to go in search of the one person who might help her reunite her family. Risking her own life on the road, can Bess douse the flames of her brothers' fury and see them reconciled?

Brothers' Fury continues Giles Kristian's thrilling and acclaimed story of the Rivers family, whose lives are turned upside down by that most brutal and tragic of wars - the English Civil War. . .

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Map

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
A Q&A WITH GILES KRISTIAN
Also by Giles Kristian
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BROTHERS' FURY

Giles Kristian

Brothers' Fury is for Lynne and Andrew, whose support for the cause means so much.

'Thou wouldest think it strange if I should tell thee there was
a time in England when brothers killed brothers, cousins
cousins, and friends their friends. Nay, when they conceived
it was no offence to commit murder.'

A Royalist's Notebook
Sir John Oglander

England in 1643

The key engagements



KEY

-  Parts of the country under Royalist control
-  Royalist garrison towns
-  Parts of the country under the control of Parliament
-  Parliamentarian garrison towns
-  Shear House near Ormskirk, West Lancashire - home of the Rivers Family



CHAPTER ONE

14 January 1643, Lancashire

GOD ALMIGHTY, IT was cold. A little after midday, yet the pallid sun clung to the horizon, throwing the riders' shadows far ahead of them in spindly misshapen caricatures that seemed to gush across the ground like black water. The night's frost still held the land in its frigid grip, whitening tussocks and heather, sheathing leafless branches and making a hoary-haired old man of the peat moor. It was a white, silent, frozen world, and it was empty.

But for the passing of a small troop of horse.

Mun - Sir Edmund Rivers when he was not out on patrol with his men - twisted in the saddle, blinking watery eyes against the biting air. Cocooned in cloaks and hunched into themselves as though protecting some feeble flame that yet flickered within their chests, the men of the column resembled corpses swathed for burial and lashed to saddles. But for a slight sway as their mounts trudged on, they barely seemed to move, all flesh trussed up leaving only the eyes visible, and even these were slitted defensively, so that Mun could not read their thoughts.

Not that Mun needed to see their eyes to know their minds. He supposed they resented him for leading them across the empty, bitter-cold moorland when all sensible folk were inside by their hearths. Even the great armies of Parliament and King had, for the most part, settled in for the winter, Essex's force at Windsor and Charles's at Oxford, that city having become for all intents and

purposes the seat of his court and the Royalist capital. And yet not all had sheathed their blades and let their match burn out, and Lancashire remained a battleground upon which Parliament was seeming to press the advantage.

There were still powerful men waging the King's war here in the north-west, Mun knew. Men such as Richard Lord Molyneux, the wealthy Thomas Tyldesley, and the most powerful of all, James Stanley the Earl of Derby. But the earl had been deprived of his best regiments for service with the King elsewhere and had been forced to abandon his siege of Parliament-held Manchester the previous October. Now his forces had consolidated around Preston and Wigan and had made their headquarters in Warrington, just twenty miles south of Shear House.

Meanwhile the rebels were growing bold. They were recruiting.

And Mun was hunting.

'Winter either bites with its teeth or lashes with its tail, my da used to say,' O'Brien, riding beside him, muffled into the cloak covering the lower part of his face, 'but this whore-hearted bitch has had us with her claws too as she's walked across our backs.' The big Irishman pulled the cloak down and dragged a sleeve beneath his nose, breath pluming in the cutting air. 'No bugger's daft enough to be out in this.'

Mun would have wagered that every trooper in the thirty-six-strong column was thinking the same, but only O'Brien had the nerve to say it.

'*We're* out in it,' he said, watching rooks and jackdaws rise and dip across the heath, foraging amongst the frosted clumps of bilberry and heather, feeding if they could, making the most of the scant daylight hours.

'Aye and what does that make us?' O'Brien muttered to himself.

'Would you rather be a lapdog or a wolf?' Mun asked, the cold air hurting his teeth.

‘On a day like this I’d be a bloody cat,’ O’Brien said, ‘all curled up on some pretty wench’s lap by the fire.’

Mun smiled grimly at that image, for O’Brien was a giant of a man, red-haired, red-bearded and in battle as savage as this long winter’s claws. Twice as dangerous too. But the Irishman was right about the cold and Mun had not known a harsher winter. He recalled something his own father had once said, that in winter every mile is two, and watching the scavenging birds he decided not to range too many miles more before turning for home. Perhaps an hour had passed since they had skirted the town of Longridge above the Ribble river, eight miles north-east of Preston, and now they were at the fringes of the Forest of Bowland and the fells were no place to be after dark, especially in weather like this. Mun knew the black moor could swallow their whole column, freezing man and beast as solid as the rocky outcrops and gritstone boulders that tore through the wild heath, and no one might ever find them.

We’ll turn back at Deerleap crag, he thought, if we have caught no sight of the enemy by then. But the damned traitors were out there somewhere and he hungered to find them, would have that rather than all the warmth and comfort Shear House – his home and the Rivers family seat, Royalist bastion and now headquarters for his own operations – could offer.

‘Just a little further,’ he called over his shoulder, receiving no answer but for a loud snort from one of the horses that was eloquent testimony as to what they felt about being out on such a day.

‘As much as I enjoy giving the rebel turds a good hiding, this should be down to Derby, not us,’ O’Brien said, hawking and spitting a thick gobbet into the snow. ‘We can’t be more than nine, ten miles from Preston. It’s those buggers should be out here freezing their balls off instead of sitting around scratching their arses.’

‘True enough,’ Mun said, ‘but the earl and the other commanders are more concerned about the lightness of their purses and the gaps in their ranks than they are about waging proper war. And while they fret, the rebels recruit. They reinforce. Get stronger. Our lads were given a good kicking on Hinfield Moor, booted out of Leigh, and then earned a bloody nose for their troubles when Sir Gilbert Houghton tried to retake Blackburn.’

‘Aye, well that was a wet fart of a thing,’ O’Brien said. ‘I heard Sir Gilbert gave up the siege so that his men could eat their Christmas pies at home by their own hearths.’

Mun could not tell from his tone whether the Irishman thought that was deplorable or admirable. He suspected the latter. ‘Whatever the reason, they’re not fighting,’ he said. ‘And if they’re not fighting they’re not winning. But I promise you this, Clancy, the rebels are not safe. Not even in this Godforsaken weather. Not from us. Not from me.’ Gloved fingers instinctively caressed the curved butt of the twenty-six-inch-long firelock pistol holstered on the right of his saddle’s cantle. The weapon’s twin nestled snug in its leather sheath on the saddle’s other side against his left thigh. ‘We’re going to find them,’ Mun said, watery eyes ranging across the frosted land, ‘and we’re going to kill them.’

‘Aye, I suppose that would be agreeable. There’s nothing like a bit of a fight to stir some heat into the blood,’ O’Brien said. ‘And the boys will play the part, won’t you, lads?’ he called over his shoulder, his helmeted head wreathed in his own fogging breath. A few mumbled ayes rose from the column but most of the swaddled troopers kept their hot breath inside their chests, shoulders hunched, heads pulled in. The column comprised the best riders and most capable men from Shear House’s garrison and, though most were relatively inexperienced, they were fit, healthy and strong.

‘Men learn quickly in war, my lady,’ Major Radcliffe had assured Mun’s mother when she had voiced concern at

Mun leading them out into winter's savage maw to track and kill rebels. 'Sir Edmund is proof of that.'

'We have all been changed by this war, Major,' Lady Mary had said, and Mun had avoided her eyes then, not wanting to see the sorrow in them.

'They may be miserable as bloody Puritans in a brothel, but they'll sing loud enough when the shooting starts,' O'Brien assured Mun now, snuffling back down into his cloak.

'Like avenging angels,' Mun muttered, remembering the day he and Captain Smith - now Sir John Smith - had brazenly ridden back onto the killing field at Edgehill and wrested the King's colours from a well-armed knot of Roundhead soldiers. A Catholic and not shy to admit it, Smith had announced to a group of dragoons that he and Mun were two of St Michael the Archangel's soldiers come with swords of fire to smite God's enemies.

And smite Mun would, for the rebels had destroyed his family. His father was dead, slain at Edgehill, as was Mun's good friend, his sister Bess's betrothed Emmanuel. Then the traitors had besieged Shear House and killed many of its defenders before Mun could break the siege, the scars carved into the house by their demi-cannon serving as a constant reminder of that desperate episode. Added to all this the feckless enemy had recruited his brother Tom, meaning that Tom and he were now foes, and this had ripped the heart out of their once proud family. It was a wound that would not, could not heal. And for all this the rebels would pay in blood. Which was why Mun had not returned to his regiment despite having given his word to Prince Rupert that he would join him as soon as he and the mercenary Osmyn Hooker had raised the siege of Shear House.

Be sure to return to us with news of the rebels' movements in the north-west. Had those not been the Prince's words? So rather than sit idle in Oxford with the

King's army, watching the enemy grow stronger and letting the edge of his sword dull, Mun would hunt. He would kill. Surely a child of war like the Prince would understand his reasons for remaining in Lancashire, would rather Mun remained a thorn in his enemy's side than became a swaggering wineskin like most of the gentlemen Cavaliers in Oxford.

'You don't have much faith in the peace negotiations I take it,' O'Brien said, one bushy red eyebrow hoisted. Tack and armour jangled and clinked and horses snorted; those sounds and the occasional raucous *koww* of a crow the only interruptions to the silence of the frozen fells.

'There's more chance of you taking holy orders and ending up the Bishop of bloody Bath than there is of His Majesty going along with Parliament's demands,' Mun replied.

O'Brien cocked his head thoughtfully, as though the scenario Mun had suggested was not entirely inconceivable. 'The concessions they demand of him are unrealistic,' Mun went on. 'Just think it through.' He doubted the Irishman would. 'The King will not relinquish his sovereign control of the militia. Honour prevents him handing over those whom Parliament would scourge. His religion will not let him put an end to bishops, and only a fool would disband a growing army that shows signs of being useful.'

Mun clapped his hands together and pumped his fists, trying to get some warmth into them. 'No, the negotiations will come to nothing, mark my words, and if I know the Prince he'll be stalking around Oxford like a caged animal.'

Mun thought about the Prince and his seemingly boundless energy for war. 'Actually, I'd wager he is ignoring the sham of peace entirely. He'll be up to the same as us,' he said, patting the pistol's butt, 'trying to further our political advantages by means of steel and shot, for he

knows better than anyone that our failure to take London has cost us dear.'

O'Brien sniffed loudly. 'Well let's hope the royal fellow doesn't decide to use his steel and shot on us for not rejoining the regiment.'

'You're free to leave. Bugger off back to Ireland if you want. I won't make you stay,' Mun said, looking straight ahead, feeling a stab of irritation. Or rather disappointment to think the Irishman might want to leave. Yet he knew it was unfair to expect O'Brien to risk punishment for Mun's own dereliction.

'I'll freeze my arse off a while longer if it's all the same to you.' O'Brien looked off across the frost-hardened heath. 'You need me to look after you. Besides, little Francis would miss me something terrible if I buggered off now.'

Mun felt the cold air bite into the cracks in his lips as he smiled, for who would believe that, aside from their friendship, a baby was truthfully the main reason why O'Brien had not turned his mare south and ridden to Oxford. Mun knew the big man had grown fond of little Francis, Bess and Emmanuel's baby who had been born to the demi-cannon's roar during the siege of Shear House. The dear fatherless boy's first taste of life had been bitter with the acrid smoke of muskets, his little ears full of the screams of the stricken and dying, but he had brought a tenderness out of O'Brien that Mun guessed few had ever witnessed. Though how an infant did not wail with terror at the sight of the red-haired giant was a constant surprise to Mun.

'It's all the same to me but Prudence will be happy to hear of it,' Mun said, watching from the corner of his eye for O'Brien's reaction. Which was a great shiver and beard-splitting grimace. The cook did not boast looks that Anthony van Dyck would have got his brushes wet for, but she clearly thought the Irishman did and her ears and cheeks would flush red whenever she saw him.

‘The way she leers at me ...’ O’Brien growled, ‘as though she’d put me in one of her pies and wolf me down with a wash of ale.’

Mun laughed, his breath blending with Hector’s, fogging around his face. Then the stallion neighed, the bit in his mouth jangling against his teeth, and Mun knew Hector well enough to follow the beast’s gaze into what little breeze prevailed against them from the east.

And that was when he saw it. A faint stain on a ridge of ground thirty paces off his right shoulder, where the frost had been knocked off the heather.

‘Come on, boy,’ he said, clicking his tongue and pressing his right knee against Hector’s warm flank, ‘let’s take a look, shall we?’

O’Brien flicked his reins and made to follow. ‘Good idea. It won’t be so damned cold if we get off the high ground,’ he called, thinking that Mun would lead them over the swell and down into one of the many deep river valleys that cut through the moorland. But Mun did not answer, because he did not know yet what he was looking at.

‘Could be deer,’ O’Brien said, drawing alongside, looking down at the disturbed clump of heather. ‘Or a sheep that has wandered off.’ Behind them the rest of the column had halted in a cloud of their own fog, some of the men slapping their upper arms for warmth, others sitting their mounts as though they had already frozen to death. ‘Mary mother of God!’ he said then, seeing what held Mun’s eye: a column of infantry down in the valley, trudging towards a copse of skeletal oak, ash and alder. There were several horsemen too, one of whom had evidently scouted up the valley’s steep side and left his tracks in the frost: tracks which now led all the way back to the column. ‘Do you think he saw us?’

‘I’d wager a half crown on it,’ Mun said, twisting and gesturing for his troopers to join them. ‘That’s why they’re heading for the trees.’

‘So we know the buggers aren’t ours then,’ O’Brien said, ‘else they wouldn’t be scarpering like mice back to their little hole.’

‘You’re assuming that scout knew who *we* were,’ Mun said, sweeping out an arm towards the men and horses that were bunching around them. ‘We’re not the Prince’s Horse now.’

O’Brien frowned, casting an eye over the Shear House men who had become Sir Edmund Rivers’s cavalry troop. ‘Aye, you’d think us a horde of starving cut-throats,’ he said. None of the men disagreed, their liquid eyes fixed on the column of foot below.

‘Not cut-throats. Not with these horses,’ Mun said, ‘yet the sight of us was enough to curdle that scout’s blood and put his whole company to flight. All, what, forty of them?’

O’Brien grinned wickedly. ‘Horses put the fear of God into infantry.’

‘That’s part of it,’ Mun said, ‘but there’s another reason they’re wetting their breeches.’

The Irishman’s gloved fingers raked the thick red bristles on his cheek until the answer struck him. ‘They’re bloody recruits!’ he said. ‘Not even proper soldiers, but for those officers sitting nice warm beasts, boots out of the frost.’

Mun nodded. ‘Those officers have come north. From Blackburn.’ He gestured at the handful of riders who were corralling those on foot towards the trees, which were still four or five hundred yards away by Mun’s reckoning. ‘They’ve come looking for wool traders and farm boys to turn into soldiers, those who were not in the villages when the sergeants came banging the drum.’

‘To give the traitorous fellows their due it looks as if they’ve found some,’ O’Brien admitted.

That was true enough, Mun thought. The rebels knew Derby was holed up forty miles south in Warrington and they’d guessed correctly that the Preston garrison would be keeping their bones warm. So here they were, out in the

freezing cold. Recruiting. Mun felt the blood begin to tremble in his limbs. It was the battle thrill coming on him.

'The brazen bastards,' Trooper Harley said, winding his wheellock. Many of the others were doing likewise, slipping spanners over the square section of their weapons' wheel shafts and filling the still morning with a salvo of clicks before priming the pans with powder and pulling the pan covers shut.

'We're going to tear them to shreds,' Mun said, checking that his own weapons - the two firelocks and his carbine - were secure. His heavy sword was snug in its scabbard on his saddle behind his left hip. He still wore the old back-and-breast he had bought from a trooper in Nehemiah Boone's company whose place he had taken after breaking the man's leg, but beneath it he now wore a fine buff-coat stripped from the dead captain who had led the assault on Shear House. Downing had been the man's name and his leather coat - so fine that it could not have cost the captain less than eleven pounds - fitted Mun perfectly, providing not only protection but much-needed warmth. As for Nehemiah Boone, just the thought of him was enough to sour Mun's belly. They might both fight for the King but there was as much bad blood between Mun and the captain - the first of it spilled by Boone himself the day they had met - as there would soon be amongst the frosted tussocks in the valley below.

'If we let those men live they and others like them will be at the gates of Shear House before spring,' he announced to the troop, taking off his gloves. 'They will threaten our families. They will try to kill us.'

'Whoresons can try,' a hard-looking man with a weathered face said. His name was John Cole and from what Major Radcliffe had told Mun and from what Mun had since seen for himself, Cole was a useful man to have with you in a fight.

‘They will spread their sedition and we shall never be rid of this war,’ Mun went on, tying his helmet’s leather thong beneath his chin then shoving cold hands back into the gloves. ‘So we kill them before they get to those trees.’

‘Do we offer quarter?’ a wide-eyed lad named Godfrey asked, pushing his wheellock back into its saddle holster with a trembling hand.

‘You can offer by all means, lad, but kill them first,’ O’Brien said, pushing his own helmet down snug over his thick red tresses.

‘Kill them,’ Mun said, holding Godfrey’s eye with enough steel in the gaze to make the young trooper more afraid of him than of the enemy below. And with that he gave Hector a touch of heel and urged him over the frost-stiffened tussocks of the ridge, his eyes riveted on the men below, whose formation had disintegrated now in their panic to get to cover.

Mun knew it was unwise to ride at any sort of speed down such a slope, but he also knew that if they descended at a walk the rebels would gain the trees and he would lose the advantage. So they went at the trot, hooves thudding against the iron-hard ground, armour and tack clinking and jangling. Mun felt the icy wind bite into his face, blurring his vision and dragging tears from the corners of his eyes. The bitterly cold air scorched his throat and lungs but he relished it, his whole body thrumming now with the excitement that always flooded his veins before mortal danger. And now he could hear the men in the gully below shouting, could discern fragments of commands mostly lost amongst the wind gushing past his face and eking into the gaps between helmet-steel and ears.

‘For England and King Charles!’ he roared, and that’s when the first muskets cracked in the valley, etching a grimace between Mun’s lips, for this all but confirmed that the troops below were Parliament men and in truth Mun had not been utterly certain before. ‘England and King

Charles!' he yelled again, and this time several others repeated the war-cry as they followed Mun's lead and gave the spur, breaking into a gallop, a fear of flying lead hunching shoulders and pulling in heads. O'Brien, no great admirer of the King but a sworn devotee of killing men who pointed muskets at him, gave his own cry of 'Ireland', as a stuttering volley of musketry shredded the crisp afternoon. Mun felt a ball whir past his left cheek, and the frantic rhythm his troopers' horses beat against the ground.

They galloped down onto the valley floor, men folding forward and grunting with the impact of coming onto flatter ground, and now Mun could make out the faces of his enemies one hundred feet away, their eyes wide with terror as their freezing hands fumbled at powder flasks, scouring sticks and glowing match-cords. He saw one man drop his musket and another turn and run, but Mun's prey was a buff-coated officer sitting a chestnut mare, who was screaming at his recruits to form a line and for the love of God load and give fire.

Forty feet away.

Taking the reins in his left hand Mun reached behind him with his right and hauled his carbine round on its belt, though he did not fire because the weapon was jolting wildly.

Twenty feet.

The rebel officer must have fired his pistol already for now he drew his sword, but Mun gripped with his knees and brought his left hand up to steady the carbine's barrel and the rebel threw his other arm across his face in vain as Mun squeezed the trigger. The carbine roared and its ball punched a hole through buff leather, skin and breastbone, and through the rebel's heart, spraying gore-flecked bone and slivers of glistening meat out of the ruin of his back, and then Mun was flown past him.

A callow-faced young rebel raised his matchlock and Mun cursed, thinking himself a dead man. But in his fear or

inexperience the musketeer had misjudged the length of match clamped in the serpent's jaws and the tip of the burning match missed the priming-pan, or else he had forgotten to open the pan, and Mun spurred Hector forward so that the stallion's chest slammed into the man, catapulting him backwards with the sound of bones snapping. 'King Charles!' Mun clamoured, drawing a pistol and shooting a rebel between the eyes, who collapsed, a dark stain blooming on the crotch of his breeches, his brains spread across the frosted tussocks like spilled porridge.

Mun twisted and saw O'Brien bury his poll-axe in another mounted officer's shoulder, heard the rebel scream like a vixen before the Irishman leant across and shoved his pistol into the man's belly and gave fire, gobbets of flesh and spine erupting from a void in the officer's back.

Some rebels were still running for the trees and so Mun hauled on the reins and kicked back with the spurs that had once been fastened to the boots of the King of England himself, urging the stallion on, breaking away from the chaos to cut down the fugitives.

'Wait for me, you greedy bastard! Sir!' O'Brien yelled and pulled his own mount round to gallop after Mun. Who was already pulling his heavy sword out of its scabbard and into the raw, death-filled day.

CHAPTER TWO

MUN HAD CUT down two more rebels as they fled for the trees, his heavy sword hacking into the first man's shoulder, all but severing the arm, then lopping off a goodly chunk of the second rebel's skull as Hector bore him past at the gallop. Surprisingly it was the first rebel who had died first, almost instantly, bleeding in rhythmic goutts that melted the frost. The second man, with half his skull gone to expose the glistening brains, had lived long enough to mumble that he had wanted no part in the argument between King and Parliament and wished even then, his brains leaking, to be left alone that he might go home to his ill mother.

'We've all got a part in this but you should have joined the right bloody side, lad,' O'Brien had said not unkindly, though he was cleaning his poll-axe on the dying man's tunic at the time. The young rebel had seemed about to answer this when he was gripped by a sudden convulsing and frothing about the mouth, soon after which he died with eyes full of tears.

'He lasted longer than I would have wagered, what with his skull opened up like a boiled egg,' O'Brien had said, but Mun had not replied because despite his previous order to his men to give no quarter, he was now trying to rein them in and stop the killing.

'Hold, Shear House men!' he yelled at twelve of his mounted men who were corralling nine stunned and bloodied survivors together like a noose around a neck. 'Spare them if they have yielded.'

But his men, who were thirty paces off, were blood-drunk and wanted more.

'You heard Sir Edmund!' a man named Goffe bellowed, urging his mount in amongst the press of mostly younger men. 'Pull that trigger, Bull, I'll knock yer bloody ears off and you'll be picking the frost out of 'em.'

Bull was glaring at a rebel who was on his knees, his peaked montero-cap gripped before his terrified face, but Goffe's threat pierced Bull's rage and, cursing, he lowered his wheellock, keeping his finger on the trigger. Mun walked Hector over to them, grateful to have Goffe with him. A tenant farmer, Goffe had proved a solid soldier, the kind of man who would be made a corporal in the King's real army. The other men respected him as one of their own and listened to him, which was just as well for the surviving rebels. At least for now.

'Take anything worth having,' Mun said, dismounting and leading Hector by his bridle, 'and share out the powder and shot. Lash the muskets together in fours and let the lighter men tie them across their saddles.'

They knew well enough what to do, had done it before, and dismounted to set about their task. Other Shear House men were spread across the site of the carnage, looting the dead, cold hands fumbling at the boxes on slain rebels' bandoliers, emptying the precious black powder into their own flasks. Two of the younger troopers were doubled over and puking, the vomit pattering onto the frosty grass and steaming, and Mun knew it was the shock of seeing men butchered. He felt the thrum in his own limbs intensify now that the fight was over: his body's way of confirming that it still lived, that the heart still thumped in his breast whilst other men's hearts had beaten their last and were growing cold.

It had been a wild but utter victory. They had swept down into the valley in a wave of death and if they had been wolves and the rebels sheep the result would not have been

any different, for they had killed thirty and lost not one. Mun dared to wonder if this proved that God was on his side; on the King's side too, yet he pushed such thoughts back into the dark corners of his mind. Because God was merciful and would wish Mun to be merciful now.

But Mun had not stopped the killing out of mercy.

'You command here?' a rebel barked, eyeballing Mun even as John Cole snatched his knapsack off him and began to rifle through the contents.

'I do,' Mun replied, walking over, letting go of Hector's bridle so that he could slide his sword through a scrap of cloth torn from a rebel's shirt.

'You devil! You gave us no opportunity to surrender,' the man protested as Mun tossed the bloody rag aside. He was in his thirties, clean-shaven, clear-eyed and with a strong jaw that Mun guessed had been honed to sharp edges by the yelling of commands. He did not seem afraid, which might have been surprising given that his newly raised troop lay butchered before it had ever served Parliament's cause. Yet good commanders knew that fear spread like fire. Good officers learned to smother it, whether in the presence of their own men or the enemy.

'Would you have allowed us to surrender?' Mun asked, holding the man's eye, and to the rebel's credit he held his tongue rather than lie. 'No you would not,' Mun confirmed, 'and if we had given you warning and thus chance to properly defend yourselves, your men would still be dead now' - he pointed his sword at a rebel whose lifeless face was a blood-sheeted grimace - 'but many of mine would be corpses too.' Mun shrugged, pushing his blade back into its scabbard. 'This is your reward for treason,' he said. 'Death is your payment for taking up arms against your king.'

'You mean to murder us in cold blood?' The man was wide-eyed, the bridle slipping off his fear at last.

Mun shook his head. 'Not me,' he said, glancing up at the wan sky, his breath rising in a cloud. He turned to the rest

of his troop who were still plundering the dead. 'Shear House men, mount up! We have done our work here.'

'You're going to leave us out here like this?' the rebel leader asked, ignoring Cole's growled threat to take off his buff-coat or else die with it on. Goffe, Harley and even young Godfrey were working fast, relieving the stunned rebels of food, spare clothing, tinder boxes, flints and steel, bottles, blankets and money; stripping them as thoroughly as a dog paring flesh from a bone. 'We'll freeze to death,' the man declared as his men looked to each other fearfully. 'The nearest village is ten miles east. If we don't find it before dark we'll die.'

'There's a village called Longridge five miles back that way,' Mun said, thumbing south, seeing hope spark in the rebel's eyes. 'But if I see you there I will kill you. Your only hope lies east. Whalley village.'

'Who are you, you devil?' the rebel officer asked as he was shoved this way and that by Cole who was pulling his plain buff-coat off him, leaving him clothed merely in shirt and doublet so that much of his white skin was now at the mercy of the biting cold.

'He's the man that gave you a good hiding,' O'Brien said at Mun's shoulder, pouring powder down the muzzle of his wheellock. Some of the rebels grimaced, disgusted though perhaps not surprised to discover that an Irishman had played some part in their destruction.

'My name is Sir Edmund Rivers,' Mun said, taking hold of his saddle's cantle and hauling himself up onto Hector's back. 'If you do not freeze to death out here you would do well to remember me.'

'Then I shall pray to the Lord, Sir Edmund, that He sees fit to preserve me that I might meet you again and avenge these men whom you have barbarously slaughtered.' His eight companions lacked their leader's boldness and either gawked pathetically at their enemies or looked at their shoes.

Mun regarded the man for a moment, saw that he was beginning to shiver, the raw air sinking teeth into his bones. Part of him was tempted to give the order to kill the prisoners where they stood and be done with the thing. Then his mind dragged up an image of his father lying plundered and stripped in the bloody mire of Edgehill. It was not a memory, for he had never found Sir Francis or Emmanuel after the battle, yet he knew the image to be true all the same.

Let them freeze, he thought, and with a click of his tongue he turned Hector around and walked him south away from the Forest of Bowland, looking up at the pale, grey-hazed sun and looking forward to getting himself in front of a roaring fire in Longridge village.

Tom Rivers had found more comfort than he would have dared hope for in *The Leaping Lord*. He had been back in Southwark some seven weeks now, drawn south to London because he knew not where else to go and wanted to be at the least far away from Shear House and the ruins of his former life. London was buzzing, her people still jubilant after their victory at Turnham Green where twenty-four thousand soldiers and townsfolk - men and women - had stood side by side to defend the road into London. Together this huge if unusual army had mustered on Chelsea Fields and marched westwards to deny their king entry to the city.

'What a sight it was. A vision I shall never forget,' Ruth Gell had told Tom the night he had come to the Lord. At first she had not recognized him - later she admitted to assuming him to be a beggar - but then she had looked properly into his eyes and she had gasped in shock, seeing through the unkempt hair and beard - and the scars - to the young man she had known before the war. There had been no available rooms and Tom had shared Ruth's bed as in old times.

Her eyes had shone as she recounted the tale. 'All the proud ensigns of the Trained Bands danced in the wind and we stood there shoulder to shoulder with fighting men,' she had told him, 'men who had stood against the King at Kineton Fight. And hundreds more were scattered amongst the gardens and orchards and waiting in narrow lanes beside the Thames. And we were prepared to fight, too!' she had announced, as though daring him to dispute it.

He had not disputed it. 'We knew that devil Prince Rupert and his cavalry couldn't hurt us in the streets,' she had said, 'and you know what His Majesty's men did? They watched us. They watched us eat and they watched us pray and damn their eyes but they did not know what to do.' The ghost of a smile had lit her eyes. 'It wouldn't look good, would it, the King sending his soldiers against so many ordinary folk? And we knew it. You should have seen it, Tom. It was like a miracle.'

Ruth had shrugged, accepting that he would never know how it had felt to be among them on that glorious day. 'By evening it was all over. His Majesty and all his haughty lot buggered off.' Her plump lips had curled then, like a cat settling into its basket. 'We danced and sang and drank until we fell over. Oh but you should have been there, my handsome man. You should have seen us.'

Tom had listened, barely saying a word, barely even stirring other than an occasional nod to usher her on with the story, and Ruth had obliged, washing the dirt of the road from his skin and tracing callused fingers over scars and the puckered flesh of wounds that had not been there when she had last known his body by candlelight. Only in the early hours of the morning, when Tom had been vaguely aware of his limbs slackening, his body surrendering at last against Ruth and her lumpy bed, had she murmured that she had thought he was dead.

'Some of your friends were here,' she said, her voice barely above a whisper, as though she was compelled to tell

him but hoped he would not hear. She pushed his long hair behind his right ear, fingertips brushing his cheekbones and the taut ridge of his brows. 'Matthew Penn and Will Trencher. They've been in a few times. They said you were killed at Kineton Fight.' Tom felt some small lifting of his soul's burden at the mention of his friends. 'They miss you, Tom. Never said as much of course, but I could see it in their faces. You men can't hide things like that. Matthew said you fought like a demon. That you weren't afraid of anything.'

'I was afraid,' Tom heard himself mumble.

'One of the others saw you ride into the King's men, saw you shot from your horse.' There was a short heavy silence. 'I'm sorry if Achilles is gone,' she said, 'you loved that horse better than you love most people.' *Better than you love me*, her eyes said. Tom said nothing and Ruth nestled a kiss amongst his hair and pressed her cheek against his head. 'No one has heard from you since.'

A short while later he heard Ruth say: 'Well you're safe now.'

And then he had slept.

Now it was mid March and freezing still, and Tom had resumed his old duties at the Lord, clearing tables, hefting barrels and doing whatever else Abiezer Grey, in grudging tone, asked him to do. Grey had not been cheered to see Tom again, had visibly chafed when Tom had said that he would work for food and fodder for his mare but not for a room, being as he would share Ruth's bed. But it was more than distaste at the thought of Tom lying with Ruth, more than simple jealousy that Tom had seen in the innkeeper's eyes. If it was not quite fear it was fear's cousin, and it was a look he was coming to recognize in patrons of the Lord and in whores and tradesmen, even in the jakes farmers and rag-and-bone men he dealt with.

For Tom was a killer. People saw it in him and it disquieted them so that if they could they avoided him. If

they could not do that, they would equip themselves with dourness, incline towards few words and eye him askance. And for his part Tom did little to assuage their unease, saw no point in trying to be anything other than what he was: a man who had butchered others in the red-hot madness of battle. A man who had lain with the dead, been pecked at by the carrion feeders, and yet had been turned away from Hell itself and brought back to life.

The freezing night he had spent on the plain below Edgehill was a haunting from which he could not unshackle himself. In the daytime, when he was busy earning his food and beer, the memory of that great battle was a thin gossamer web clinging to his soul. But at night, after they had enjoyed each other and Ruth was sleeping soundly beside him, its horror spread like a dark heavy stain that threatened to spill into his mouth and drown him. Somehow the smell of death, of open bowels and the copper stink of blood, would seep from his memory back into his nose. Pain would bloom in the wound in his shoulder - all healed now - where scalding hot lead had ripped through his flesh. He would clench his right hand, the savage stub of the third finger throbbing, reminding him of the indignity of being mutilated by thieves who had flocked to loot the dead.

And he would hear again brave Achilles's scream of pain as the musket ball punched into his noble chest.

And yet he kept it all, its foulness and its shame, its savagery and its ... thrill to himself. He knew Ruth would gladly hear the whole if he would tell it. She would listen sympathetically and then she would minister to him in her fashion, show him kindness the way a young girl will tend to a lame dog or a bird with a broken wing. No, that was unfair. There would be more to it than that, more than some ingenuous need to mend him. Truth be told he knew the girl was more in love with him than he was with her. Her eyes had betrayed as much when they had coupled the night after his return and Ruth's soul had, for one fleeting

moment, lain as bare as her body. Yes Ruth would care for him, and even given the affections of such as her, a serving girl who is every man's friend, it would perhaps prove balm to his soul.

But he said nothing, instead feeling the rank memory of that late October night suppurate and fester like a wound that is bandaged tight and given no air.

Now, The Leaping Lord on Long Southwark, which Abiezer Grey leased off Mark Sayer for an annual rent of fifty pounds and a sugar loaf, was the nearest thing Tom had to a home, and each day he found himself doing the kinds of jobs that once, in a distant life, would be done by servants without him barely so much as noticing.

'Looks like rain,' Ruth said now, looking up to the slate grey sky as she handed two pails of kitchen slops to a small grubby boy named Snout on account of his snub nose.

'I'll not complain if it dampens down some of this damn smoke,' Tom replied, putting a beer barrel down onto the cobbles and straightening to drag an arm across his forehead. The breeze was coming from the west, bringing with it palls of acrid coal smoke from the glassblowers, soapmakers and cloth-makers clustered cheek by jowl along St Saviour's, so that even Tom's sweat was grimy with soot.

'When it comes, Snout, you stand out in it for a while, do you hear?' Ruth said to the boy who nodded contritely. 'Let God's rain wash some of that filth off. I've known rakers that'd look like gentlemen of the King's Chamber if they stood beside you. And tell old Jacob I'll be expecting some bacon from him before long.' The boy shuffled off with the heavy pails and Tom smiled to himself because he suspected it would be some time yet before Ruth saw any bacon in return for the Lord's kitchen slops. He knew that old Jacob Payne kept his pigs up past St Margaret's Hill and Blackman Street in St George's Fields. Yet several times Tom had seen Snout turn right down Long Southwark