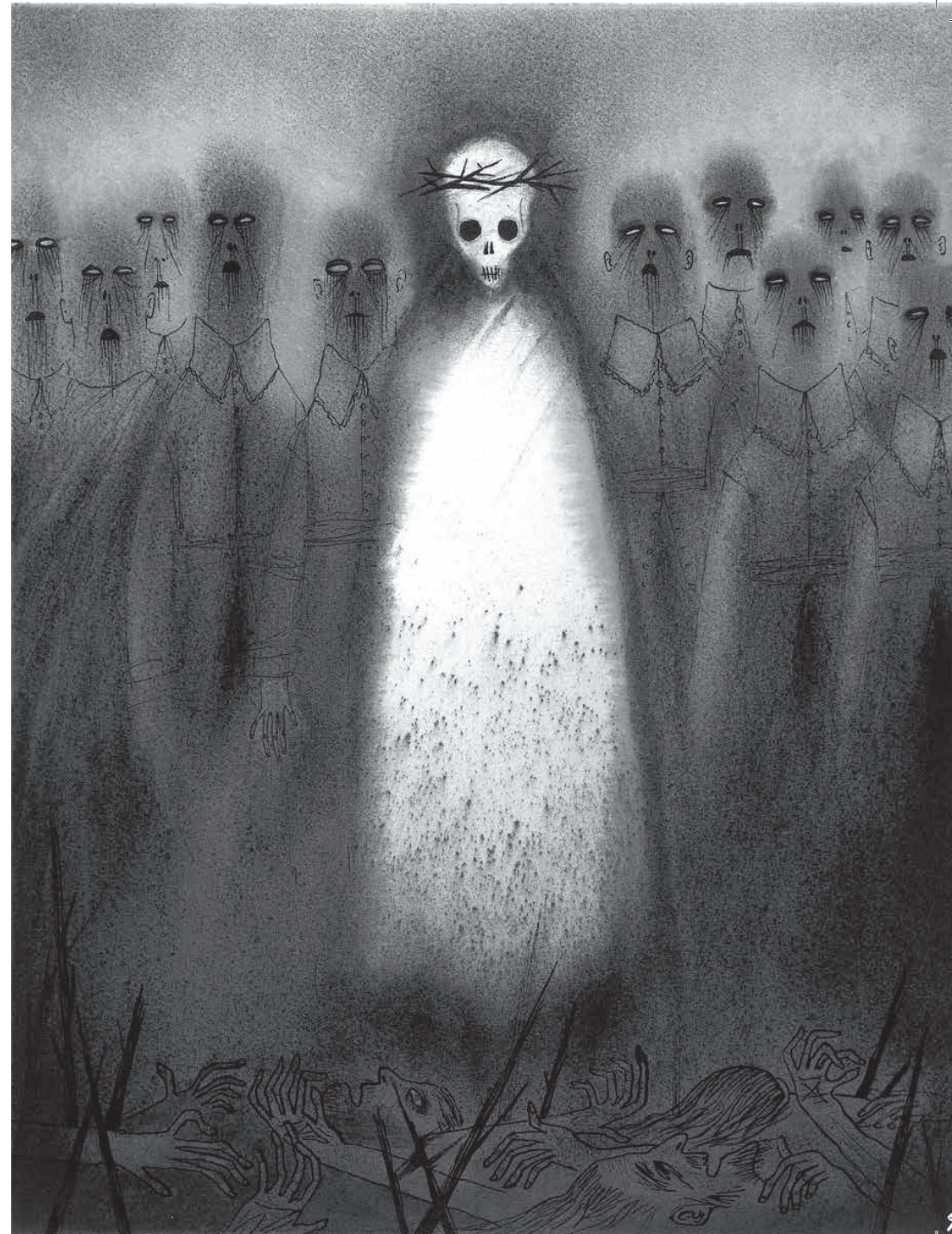


Chapter One

Once in a time of war, when I was a soldier in the Imperial Army, I saw Death walking. He wore upon his skull a withered crown of white bone twisted with green hawthorn. His skeleton was shrouded with a tattered cloak of gold and in his wake stood the ghosts of my comrades newly plucked, half-lived, from life. Many I knew by name.

It was on the second day of November 1642, in the midst of the battle of Breitenfeld, when our regiment had been trapped in the great forest, caught between the criss-cross of trees and the oncoming guns of the enemy. Cannon blast sent fire into the woods and in the smoke I couldn't tell which way the fight ran. In the distance, the sound of horses, bridles and harnesses. I'd been in battle since dawn. Like my comrades, I'd fought for all I was worth, though I knew ours was a hopeless cause. About me lay the dead and the dying, their blood – our



blood – made the carpet of leaves more crimson than autumn had intended.

That was when I saw Death.

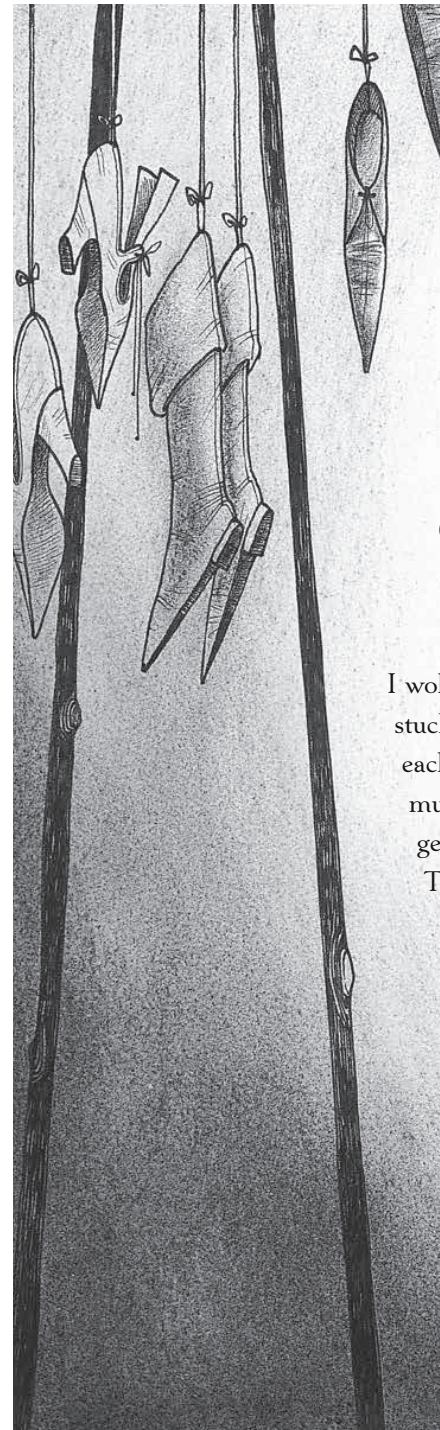
He seemed neither surprised nor impressed by the number of souls he had gathered that day. He simply asked me if I was with him.

I looked upon the ghostly army and wondered if it wouldn't be best to follow for, in truth, I'd had enough of war, had seen too much of man's inhumane heart.

'I wait for no one,' said Death.

'You've feasted well today,' I said. 'What difference would my soul make?'

It was then that Death and his ghostly army vanished. In their place a thick mist rose and through the mist a horseman came charging, sword in hand. Without another thought, I turned and ran. I ran until every muscle, every sinew strained to the edge of breaking. I ran until I had no breath left, my boots giving out before my legs fell away beneath me. I ran until the ground and I became one. I lay unable to move, only stare at the canopy of leaves all golden, all falling in spirals of colour. I listened for the sound of hooves, for the howl of a wolf, for the growl of a bear. I knew well that if the battle did not kill me then the forest would, for the smell of blood brings beasts out to feed. I lay injured, a bullet in my side, a sword wound in my shoulder, watching night creep through the trees. Maybe I should have gone with Death when he offered me his bony finger.



Chapter Two

I woke to find a fire burning and around me, stuck into the moist earth, were poles. On each hung an array of boots and shoes that must have once belonged to fine ladies, gentlemen, peasants and soldiers alike. They danced without their owners in the flicker of the flames. Perhaps this was a dream, for by the fire knelt a beast.

He had the furry snout of a great hog, the floppish ears of a hare and a single horn like that of an oxen. He was dressed in a mish-mash of doublets over which he wore a breastplate.