

Sample Chapters from

# Best Served Cold

A Stand-Alone Novel set in  
the World of *The First Law*  
by Joe Abercrombie

Sample Chapters from all of Joe Abercrombie's books  
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## Land of Opportunity

First thing Shivers noticed as the boat wallowed in towards the wharves, it was nothing like as warm as he'd been expecting. He'd heard the sun always shone in Styria. Like a nice bath, all year round. If Shivers had been offered a bath like this he'd have stayed dirty, and probably had a few sharp words to say besides. Talins huddled under grey skies, clouds bulging, a keen breeze off the sea, cold rain speckling his cheek from time to time and reminding him of home. And not in a good way. Still, he was set on looking at the sunny side of the case. Probably just a shitty day was all. You get 'em everywhere.

There surely was a seedy look about the place, though, as the sailors scuttled to make the boat fast to the dock. Brick buildings lined the grey sweep of the bay, narrow windowed, all squashed in together, roofs slumping, paint peeling, cracked-up render stained with salt, green with moss, black with mould. Down near the slimy cobbles the walls were plastered over with big papers, slapped up at all angles, ripped and pasted over each other, torn edges fluttering. Faces on them, and words printed. Warnings, maybe, but Shivers weren't much of a reader. Specially not in Styrian. Speaking the language was going to be enough of a challenge.

The waterfront crawled with people, and not many looked happy. Or healthy. Or rich. There was quite the smell. Or to be more precise, a proper reek. Rotten salt fish, old corpses, coal smoke and overflowing latrine pits rolled up together. If this was the home of the grand new man he was hoping to become, Shivers had to admit to being more'n a touch disappointed. For the briefest moment he thought about paying over most of what he had left for a trip straight back home to the North on the next tide. But he shook it off. He was done with war, done with leading men to death, done with killing and all that went along with it. He was set on being a better man. He was going to do the right thing, and this was where he was going to do it.

'Right, then.' He gave the nearest sailor a cheery nod. 'Off I go.' He got no more'n a grunt in return, but his brother used to tell him it was what you gave

out that made a man, not what you got back. So he grinned like he'd got a merry send-off, strode down the clattering gangplank and into his brave new life in Styria.

He'd scarcely taken a dozen paces, staring up at looming buildings on one side, swaying masts on the other, before someone barged into him and near knocked him sideways.

'My apologies,' Shivers said in Styrian, keeping things civilised. 'Didn't see you there, friend.' The man kept going, didn't even turn. That prickled some at Shivers' pride. He had plenty of it still, the one thing his father had left him. He hadn't lived through seven years of battles, skirmishes, waking with snow on his blanket, shit food and worse singing so he could come down here and get shouldered.

But being a bastard was crime and punishment both. Let go of it, his brother would've told him. Shivers was meant to be looking on the sunny side. So he took a turn away from the docks, down a wide road and into the city. Past a clutch of beggars on blankets, waving stumps and withered limbs. Through a square where a great statue stood of a frowning man, pointing off to nowhere. Shivers didn't have a clue who he was meant to be, but he looked pretty damn pleased with himself. The smell of cooking wafted up, made Shivers' guts grumble. Drew him over to some kind of stall where they had sticks of meat over a fire in a can.

'One o' them,' said Shivers, pointing. Didn't seem much else needed saying, so he kept it simple. Less chance of mistakes. When the cook told him the price he near choked on his tongue. Would've got him a whole sheep in the North, maybe even a breeding pair. The meat was half fat and the rest gristle. Didn't taste near so good as it had smelled, but by that point it weren't much surprise. It seemed most things in Styria weren't quite as advertised.

The rain had started up stronger now, flitting down into Shivers' eyes as he ate. Not much compared to storms he'd laughed through in the North, but enough to damp his mood a touch, make him wonder where the hell he'd rest his head tonight. It trickled from mossy eaves and broken gutters, turned the cobbles dark, made the people hunch and curse. He came from the close buildings and onto a wide river bank, all built up and fenced in with stone. He paused a moment, wondering which way to go.

The city went on far as he could see, bridges upstream and down, buildings on the far bank even bigger than on this side – towers, domes, roofs, going on and on, half-shrouded and turned dreamy grey by the rain. More torn papers flapping in the breeze, letters daubed over 'em too with bright coloured paint, streaks running down to the cobbled street. Letters high as a man in places. Shivers peered over at one set, trying to make some sense of it.

Another shoulder caught him, right in the ribs, made him grunt. This time he whipped round snarling, little meat stick clutched in his fist like he might've clutched a blade. Then he took a breath. Weren't all that long ago Shivers had let the Bloody-Nine go free. He remembered that morning like it was yesterday, the snow outside the windows, the knife in his hand, the rattle as he'd let it fall. He'd let the man who killed his brother live, passed up revenge, all so he could be a better man. Step away from blood. Stepping away from a loose shoulder in a crowd was nothing to sing about.

He forced half a smile back on and walked the other way, up onto the bridge. Silly thing like the knock of a shoulder could leave you cursing for days, and he didn't want to poison his new beginning 'fore it even got begun. Statues stood on either side, staring off above the water, monsters of white stone streaky with bird droppings. People flooded past, one kind of river flowing over the other. People of every type and colour. So many he felt like nothing in the midst of 'em. Bound to have a few shoulders catch you in a place like this.

Something brushed his arm. Before he knew it he'd grabbed someone round the neck, was bending him back over the parapet twenty strides above the churning water, gripping his throat like he was strangling a chicken. 'Knock me, you bastard?' he snarled in Northern. 'I'll cut your fucking eyes out!'

He was a little man, and he looked bloody scared. Might've been a head shorter'n Shivers, and not much more than half his weight. Getting over the first red flush of rage, Shivers realised this poor fool had barely even touched him. No malice in it. How come he could shrug off big wrongs then lose his temper over nothing? He'd always been his own worst enemy.

'Sorry, friend,' he said in Styrian, and meaning it too. He let the man slither down, brushed the crumpled front of his coat with a clumsy hand. 'Real sorry about that. Little . . . what do you call it . . . mistake is all. Sorry. Do you want . . .'

Shivers found he was offering the stick, one last shred of fatty meat still clinging to it. The man stared. Shivers winced. 'Course he didn't want that. Shivers hardly wanted it himself. 'Sorry . . .' The man turned and dashed off into the crowd, looking once over his shoulder, scared, like he'd just survived being attacked by a madman. Maybe he had. Shivers stood on the bridge, frowned down at that brown water churning past. Same sort of water they had in the North, it had to be said.

Seemed being a better man might be harder work than he'd thought.

# The Bone-Thief

When her eyes opened, she saw bones. Bones long and short, thick and thin, white, yellow, brown. Covering the peeling wall from floor to ceiling. Hundreds of them. Nailed up in patterns, a madman's mosaic. Her eyes rolled down, sore and sticky. A tongue of fire flickered in a sooty hearth. On the mantelpiece above, skulls grinned emptily at her, neatly stacked three high.

Human bones, then. Monza felt her skin turn icy cold.

She tried to sit up. The vague sense of numb stiffness flared into pain so suddenly she nearly puked. The darkened room lurched, blurred. She was held fast, lying on something hard. Her mind was full of mud, she couldn't remember how she'd got here.

Her head rolled sideways and she saw a table. On the table was a metal tray. On the tray was a careful arrangement of instruments. Pincers, pliers, needles and scissors. A small but very businesslike saw. A dozen knives at least, all shapes and sizes. Her widening eyes darted over their polished blades – curved, straight, jagged edges cruel and eager in the firelight. A surgeon's tools?

Or a torturer's?

'Benna?' Her voice was a ghostly squeak. Her tongue, her gums, her throat, the passages in her nose, all raw as skinned meat. She tried to move again, could scarcely lift her head. Even that much effort sent a groaning stab through her neck and into her shoulder, set off a dull pulsing up her legs, down her right arm, through her ribs. The pain brought fear with it, the fear brought pain. Her breath quickened, shuddering and wheezing through her sore nostrils.

Click, click.

She froze, silence prickling at her ears. Then a scraping, a key in a lock. Frantically now she squirmed, pain bursting in every joint, ripping at every muscle, blood battering behind her eyes, thick tongue wedged into her teeth to stop herself screaming. A door creaked open and banged shut. Footsteps on bare boards, hardly making a sound, but each one still a jab of fear in her throat. A

shadow reached out across the floor – a huge shape, twisted, monstrous. Her eyes strained to the corners, nothing she could do but wait for the worst.

A figure came through the doorway, walked straight past her and over to a tall cupboard. A man no more than average height, in fact, with short fair hair. The misshapen shadow was caused by a canvas sack over one shoulder. He hummed tunelessly to himself as he emptied it, placing each item carefully on its proper shelf, then turning it back and forth until it faced precisely into the room.

If he was a monster, he seemed an everyday sort of one, with an eye for the details.

He swung the doors gently shut, folded his empty bag once, twice, and slid it under the cupboard. He took off his stained coat and hung it from a hook, brushed it down with a brisk hand, turned and stopped dead. A pale, lean face. Not old, but deeply lined, with harsh cheekbones and eyes hungry bright in bruised sockets.

They stared at each other for a moment, both seeming equally shocked. Then his colourless lips twitched into a sickly smile.

‘You are awake!’

‘Who are you?’ A terrified scratch in her dried-up throat.

‘My name is not important.’ He spoke with the trace of a Union accent. ‘Suffice it to say I am a student of the physical sciences.’

‘A healer?’

‘Among other things. As you may have gathered, I am an enthusiast, chiefly, for bones. Which is why I am so glad that you . . . fell into my life.’ He grinned again, but it was like the skulls’ grins, never touching his eyes.

‘How did . . .’ She had to wrestle with the words, jaw stiff as rusted hinges. It was like trying to talk with a turd in her mouth, and hardly better tasting. ‘How did I get here?’

‘I need bodies for my work. They are sometimes to be found where I found you. But I have never before found one still alive. I would judge you to be a spectacularly lucky woman.’ He seemed to think about it for a moment. ‘It would have been luckier still if you had not fallen in the first place but . . . since you did—’

‘Where’s my brother? Where’s Benna?’

'Benna?'

Memory flooded back in a blinding instant. Blood pumping from between her brother's clutching fingers. The long blade sliding through his chest while she watched, helpless. His slack face, smeared with red.

She gave a croaking scream, bucked and twisted. Agony flashed up every limb and made her squirm the more, shudder, retch, but she was held fast. Her host watched her struggle, waxy face empty as a blank page. She sagged back, spitting and moaning as the pain grew worse and worse, gripping her like a giant vice, steadily tightened.

'Anger solves nothing.'

All she could do was growl, snatched breaths slurping through her gritted teeth.

'I imagine you are in some pain, now.' He pulled open a drawer in the cupboard and took out a long pipe, bowl stained black. 'I would try to get used to it, if you can.' He stooped and fished a hot coal from the fire with a set of tongs. 'I fear that pain will come to be your constant companion.'

The worn mouthpiece loomed at her. She'd seen husk-smokers often enough, sprawling like corpses, withered to useless husks themselves, caring for nothing but the next pipe. Husk was like mercy. A thing for the weak. For the cowardly.

He smiled his dead-man's smile again. 'This will help.'

Enough pain makes a coward of anyone.

The smoke burned at her lungs and made her sore ribs shake, each choke sending new shocks to the tips of her fingers. She groaned, face screwing up, struggling again, but more weakly, now. One more cough, and she lay limp. The edge was gone from the pain. The edge was gone from the fear and the panic. Everything slowly melted. Soft, warm, comfortable. Someone made a long, low moan. Her, maybe. She felt a tear run down the side of her face.

'More?' This time she held the smoke as it bit, blew it tickling out in a shimmering plume. Her breath came slower, and slower, the surging of blood in her head calmed to a gentle lapping.

'More?' The voice washed over her like waves on the smooth beach. The bones were blurred now, glistening in haloes of warm light. The coals in the grate were precious jewels, sparkling every colour. There was barely any pain, and what

there was didn't matter. Nothing did. Her eyes flickered pleasantly, then even more pleasantly drifted shut. Mosaic patterns danced and shifted on the insides of her eyelids. She floated on a warm sea, honey sweet . . .

'Back with us?' His face flickered into focus, hanging limp and white as a flag of surrender. 'I was worried, I confess. I never expected you to wake, but now that you have, it would be a shame if—'

'Benna?' Monza's head was still floating. She grunted, tried to work one ankle, and the grinding ache brought the truth back, crushed her face into a hopeless grimace.

'Still sore? Perhaps I have a way to lift your spirits.' He rubbed his long hands together. 'The stitches are all out, now.'

'How long did I sleep?'

'A few hours.'

'Before that?'

'Just over twelve weeks.' She stared back, numb. 'Through the autumn, and into winter, and the new year will soon come. A fine time for new beginnings. That you have woken at all is nothing short of miraculous. Your injuries were . . . well, I think you will be pleased with my work. I know I am.'

He slid a greasy cushion from under the bench and propped her head up, handling her as carelessly as a butcher handles meat, bringing her chin forwards so she could look down at herself. So there was no choice but to. Her body was a lumpy outline under a coarse grey blanket, three leather belts across chest, hips and ankles.

'The straps are for your own protection, to prevent you rolling from the bench while you slept.' He hacked out a sudden chuckle. 'We wouldn't want you breaking anything, would we? Ha . . . ha! Wouldn't want to break anything.' He unbuckled the last of the belts, took the blanket between thumb and forefinger while she stared down, desperate to know, and desperate not to know at once.

He whipped it away like a showman displaying his prize exhibit.

She hardly recognised her own body. Stark naked, gaunt and withered as a beggar's, pale skin stretched tight over ugly knobbls of bone, stained all over

with great black, brown, purple, yellow blooms of bruise. Her eyes darted over her own wasted flesh, steadily widening as she struggled to take it in. She was slit all over with red lines. Dark and angry, edged with raised pink flesh, stippled with the dots of pulled stitches. There were four, one above the other, following the curves of her hollow ribs on one side. More angled across her hips, down her legs, her right arm, her left foot.

She'd started to tremble. This butchered carcass couldn't be her body. Her breath hissed through her rattling teeth, and the blotched and shrivelled ribcage heaved in time. 'Uh . . .' she grunted. 'Uh . . .'

'I know! Impressive, eh?' He leaned forwards over her, following the ladder of red marks on her chest with sharp movements of his hand. 'The ribs here and the breastbone were quite shattered. It was necessary to make incisions to repair them, you understand, and to work on the lung. I kept the cutting to the minimum, but you can see that the damage—'

'Uh . . .'

'The left hip I am especially pleased with.' Pointing out a crimson zigzag from the corner of her hollow stomach down to the inside of her withered leg, surrounded on both sides by trails of red dots. 'The thighbone, here, unfortunately broke into itself.' He clicked his tongue and poked a finger into his clenched fist. 'Shortening the leg by a fraction, but, as luck would have it, your other shin was shattered, and I was able to remove the tiniest section of bone to make up the difference.' He frowned as he pushed her knees together, then watched them roll apart, feet flopping hopelessly outwards. 'One knee slightly higher than the other, and you won't stand quite so tall but, considering—'

'Uh . . .'

'Set, now.' He grinned as he squeezed gently at her shrivelled legs from the tops of her thighs down to her knobby ankles. She watched him touching her, like a cook kneading at a plucked chicken, and hardly felt it. 'All quite set, and the screws removed. A wonder, believe me. If the doubters at the academy could see this now they wouldn't be laughing. If my old master could see this, even he—'

'Uh . . .' She slowly raised her right hand. Or the trembling mockery of a hand that dangled from the end of her arm. The palm was bent, shrunken, a great ugly scar where Gobba's wire had cut into the side. The fingers were crooked as tree

roots, squashed together, the little one sticking out at a strange angle. Her breath hissed through gritted teeth as she tried to make a fist. The fingers scarcely moved, but the pain still shot up her arm and made bile burn the back of her throat.

‘The best I could do. Small bones, you see, badly damaged, and the tendons of the little finger were quite severed.’ Her host seemed disappointed. ‘A shock, of course. The marks will fade . . . somewhat. But really, considering the fall . . . well, here.’ The mouthpiece of the husk-pipe came towards her and she sucked on it greedily. Clung to it with her teeth as if it was her only hope. It was.

He tore a tiny piece from the corner of the loaf, the kind you might feed birds with. Monza watched him do it, mouth filling with sour spit. Hunger or sickness, there wasn’t much difference. She took it dumbly, lifted it to her lips, so weak that her left hand trembled with the effort, forced it between her teeth and down her throat.

Like swallowing broken glass.

‘Slowly,’ he murmured, ‘very slowly, you have eaten nothing but milk and sugar-water since you fell.’

The bread caught in her craw and she retched, gut clamping up tight around the knife-wound Faithful had given her.

‘Here.’ He slid his hand round her skull, gentle but firm, lifted her head and tipped a bottle of water to her lips. She swallowed, and again, then her eyes flicked towards his fingers. She could feel unfamiliar lumps there, down the side of her head. ‘I was forced to remove several pieces of your skull. I replaced them with coins.’

‘Coins?’

‘Would you rather I had left your brains exposed? Gold does not rust. Gold does not rot. An expensive treatment, of course, but if you had died, I could always have recouped my investment, and since you have not, well . . . I consider it money well spent. Your scalp will feel somewhat lumpy, but your hair will grow back. Such beautiful hair you have. Black as midnight.’

He let her head fall gently back against the bench and his hand lingered there. A soft touch. Almost a caress.

‘Normally I am a taciturn man. Too much time spent alone, perhaps.’ He flashed his corpse-smile at her. ‘But I find you . . . bring out the best in me. The mother of my children is the same. You remind me of her, in a way.’

Monza half-smiled back, but in her gut she felt a creeping of disgust. It mingled with the sickness she was feeling every so often, now. That sweating need.

She swallowed. ‘Could I—’

‘Of course.’ He was already holding the pipe out to her.

‘Close it.’

‘It won’t close!’ she hissed, three of the fingers just curling, the little one still sticking out straight, or as close to straight as it ever came. She remembered how nimble-fingered she used to be, how sure, and quick, and the frustration and the fury were sharper even than the pain. ‘They won’t close!’

‘For weeks you have been lying here. I did not mend you so you could smoke husk and do nothing. Try harder.’

‘Do you want to fucking try?’

‘Very well.’ His hand closed relentlessly around hers and forced the bent fingers into a crunching fist. Her eyes bulged from her head, breath whistling too fast for her to scream.

‘I doubt you understand how much I am helping you.’ He squeezed tighter and tighter. ‘One cannot grow without pain. One cannot improve without it. Suffering drives us to achieve great things.’ The fingers of her good hand plucked and scrabbled uselessly at his fist. ‘Love is a fine cushion to rest upon, but only hate can make you a better person. There.’ He let go of her and she sagged back, whimpering, watched her trembling fingers come gradually halfway open, scars standing out purple.

She wanted to kill him. She wanted to shriek every curse she knew. But she needed him too badly. So she held her tongue, sobbed, gasped, ground her teeth, smacked the back of her head against the bench.

'Now, close your hand.' She stared into his face, empty as a fresh-dug grave. 'Now, or I must do it for you.'

She growled with the effort, whole arm throbbing to the shoulder. Gradually, the fingers inched closed, the little one still sticking straight. 'There, you fucker!' She shook her numb, knobbly, twisted fist under his nose. 'There!'

'Was that so hard?' He held the pipe out to her and she snatched it from him. 'You need not thank me.'

'And we will see if you can take the—'

She squealed, knees buckling, would have fallen if he hadn't caught her.

'Still?' He frowned. 'You should be able to walk. The bones are knitted. Pain, of course, but . . . perhaps a fragment within one of the joints, still. Where does it hurt?'

'Everywhere!' she snarled at him.

'I trust this is not simply your stubbornness. I would hate to open the wounds in your legs again unnecessarily.' He hooked one arm under her knees and lifted her without much effort back onto the bench. 'I must go for a while.'

She clutched at him. 'You'll be back soon?'

'Very soon.'

His footsteps vanished down the corridor. She heard the front door click shut, the sound of the key scraping in the lock.

'Son of a fucking whore.' And she swung her legs down from the bench. She winced as her feet touched the floor, bared her teeth as she straightened up, growled softly as she let go of the bench and stood on her own feet.

It hurt like hell, and it felt good.

She took a long breath, gathered herself and began to waddle towards the far side of the room, pains shooting through her ankles, knees, hips, into her back, arms held out wide for balance. She made it to the cupboard and clung to its corner, slid open the drawer. The pipe lay inside, a jar of bubbly green glass beside it with some black lumps of husk in the bottom. How she wanted it. Her mouth was dry, her palms sticky with sick need. She slapped the drawer closed

and hobbled back to the bench. Everything was still pierced with cold aches, but she was getting stronger each day. Soon she'd be ready. But not yet.

Patience is the parent of success, Stolicus wrote.

Across the room, and back, growling through her clenched teeth. Across the room and back, lurching and grimacing. Across the room and back, whimpering, wobbling, spitting. She leaned against the bench, long enough to get her breath.

Across the room and back again.

The mirror had a crack across it, but she wished it had been far more broken.

Your hair is like a curtain of midnight!

Shaved off down the left side of her head, grown back to a scabby stubble. The rest hung lank, tangled and greasy as old seaweed.

Your eyes gleam like piercing sapphires, beyond price!

Yellow, bloodshot, lashes gummed to clumps, rimmed red-raw in sockets purple-black with pain.

Lips like rose petals?

Cracked, parched, peeling grey with yellow scum gathered at the corners. There were three long scabs across her sucked-in cheek, sore brown against waxy white.

You look especially beautiful this morning, Monza . . .

On each side of her neck, withered down to a bundle of pale cords, the red scars left by Gobba's wire. She looked like a woman just dead of the plague. She looked scarcely better than the skulls stacked on the mantelpiece.

Beyond the mirror, her host was smiling. 'What did I tell you? You look well.'

The very Goddess of War!

'I look a fucking carnival curiosity!' she sneered, and the ruined crone in the mirror sneered back at her.

'Better than when I found you. You should learn to look on the happy side of the case.' He tossed the mirror down, stood and pulled on his coat. 'I must leave you for the time being, but I will be back, as I always am. Continue working the hand, but keep your strength. Later I must cut into your legs and establish the cause of your difficulty in standing.'

She forced a sickly smile onto her face. 'Yes. I see.'

'Good. Soon, then.' He threw his canvas bag over his shoulder. His footsteps creaked down the corridor, the lock closed. She counted slowly to ten.

Off the bench and she snatched up a pair of needles and a knife from the tray. She limped to the cupboard, ripped open the drawer, stuffed the pipe into the pocket of the borrowed trousers hanging from her hip bones, the jar with it. She lurched down the hall, boards creaking under bare feet. Into the bedroom, grimacing as she fished the old boots from under the bed, grunting as she pulled them on.

Out into the corridor again, her breath hissing with effort, and pain, and fear. She knelt down by the front door, or at least lowered herself by creaking degrees until her burning knees were on the boards. It was a long time since she'd worked a lock. She fished and stabbed with the needles, twisted hand fumbling.

'Turn, you bastard. Turn.'

Luckily the lock wasn't good. The tumblers caught, turned with a satisfying clatter. She grabbed the knob and hauled the door open.

Night, and a hard one. Cold rain lashed an overgrown yard, rank weeds edged with the slightest glimmer of moonlight, crumbling walls slick with wet. Beyond a leaning fence bare trees rose up, darkness gathered under their branches. A rough night for an invalid to be out of doors. But the chill wind whipping at her face, the clean air in her mouth, felt almost like being alive again. Better to freeze free than spend another moment with the bones. She ducked out into the rain, hobbled across the garden, nettles snatching at her. Into the trees, between their glistening trunks, and she struck away from the track and didn't look back.

Up a long slope, bent double, good hand dragging at the muddy ground, pulling her on. She grunted at each slipping footfall, every muscle screeching at her. Black rain dripped from black branches, pattered on fallen leaves, crept through her hair and plastered it across her face, crept through her stolen clothes and stuck them to her sore skin.

'One more step.'

She had to make some distance from the bench, and the knives, and that slack, white, empty face. That face, and the one in the mirror.

'One more step . . . one more step . . . one more step.'

The black ground lurched past, her hand trailing against the wet mud, the tree roots. She followed her father as he pushed the plough, long ago, hand trailing through the turned earth for stones.

What would I do without you?

She knelt in the cold woods beside Cosca, waiting for the ambush, her nose full of that damp, crisp smell of trees, her heart bursting with fear and excitement.

You have a devil in you.

She thought of whatever she needed to so she could keep going, memories rushing on ahead of her clumsy boots.

Off the terrace and let us be done.

She stopped, stood bent over, shuddering smoky breaths into the wet night. No idea how far she'd come, where she'd started, where she was going. For now, it hardly mattered.

She wedged her back against a slimy tree-trunk, prised at her belt buckle with her good hand, shoved at it with the side of the other one. It took her a teeth-gritted age to finally get the damn thing open. At least she didn't have to pull her trousers down. They sagged off her bony arse and down her scarred legs under their own weight. She paused a moment, wondering how she'd get them back up.

One battle at a time, Stolicus wrote.

She grabbed a low branch, slick with rain, lowered herself under it, right hand cradled against her wet shirt, bare knees trembling.

'Come on,' she hissed, trying to make her knotted bladder unclench. 'If you need to go, just go. Just go. Just—'

She grunted with relief, piss spattering into the mud along with the rain, trickling down the hillside. Her right leg was burning worse than ever, wasted muscles quivering. She winced as she tried to move her hand down the branch, shift her weight to her other leg. In a sick instant one foot flew out from under her and she went over backwards, breath whooping in, reason all blotted out by the dizzy memory of falling. She bit her tongue as her head cracked down in the mud, slid a stride or two, flailed to a stop in a wet hollow full of rotting leaves. She lay in the tapping rain, trousers tangled round her ankles, and wept.

It was a low moment, no doubt of that.

She bawled like a baby. Helpless, heedless, desperate. Her sobs racked her, choked her, made her mangled body shake. She didn't know the last time she'd cried. Never, maybe. Benna had done the weeping for both of them. Now all the pain and fear of a dozen black years and more came leaking out of her screwed-up face. She lay in the mud, and tortured herself with everything she'd lost.

Benna was dead, and everything good in her was dead with him. The way they made each other laugh. That understanding that comes from a life together, gone. He'd been home, family, friend and more, all killed at once. All snuffed out carelessly as a cheap candle. Her hand was ruined. She held the aching, mocking remnant of it to her chest. The way she used to draw a sword, use a pen, firmly shake a hand, all crushed under Gobba's boot. The way she used to walk, run, ride, all scattered broken down the mountainside under Orso's balcony. Her place in the world, ten years' work, built with her own sweat and blood, struggled for, sweated for, vanished like smoke. All she'd worked for, hoped for, dreamed of.

Dead.

She worked her belt back up, dead leaves dragged up with it, and fumbled it shut. A few last sobs, then she snorted snot down, wiped the rest from under her nose on her cold hand. The life she'd had was gone. The woman she'd been was gone. What they'd broken could never be mended.

But there was no point weeping about it now.

She knelt in the mud, shivering in the darkness, silent. These things weren't just gone, they'd been stolen from her. Her brother wasn't just dead, he'd been murdered. Slaughtered like an animal. She forced her twisted fingers closed until they made a trembling fist.

'I'll kill them.'

She made herself see their faces, one by one. Gobba, the fat hog, lounging in the shadows. A waste of decent flesh. Her face twitched as she saw his boot stomp down across her hand, felt the bones splinter. Mauthis, the banker, his cold eyes staring down at her brother's corpse. Inconvenienced. Faithful Carpi. A man who'd walked beside her, eaten beside her, fought beside her, year upon year. I really am sorry. She saw his arm go back, ready to stab her through, felt the

wound niggling at her side, pressed at it through her wet shirt, dug her fingers into it back and front until it burned like fury.

'I'll kill them.'

Ganmark. She saw his soft, tired face. Flinched as his sword punched through Benna's body. That's that. Prince Ario, lounging in his chair, wine glass dangling. His knife cut Benna's neck open, blood bubbling between his fingers. She made herself see each detail, remember each word said. Foscar, too. I'll have no part of this. But that changed nothing.

'I'll kill them all.'

And Orso, last. Orso, who she'd fought for, struggled for, killed for. Grand Duke Orso, Lord of Talins, who'd turned on them over a rumour. Murdered her brother, left her broken for nothing. For a fear they'd steal his place. Her jaw ached, her teeth were clenched so hard. She felt his fatherly hand on her shoulder and her shivering flesh crawled. She saw his smile, heard his voice echoing in her pounding skull.

What would I do without you?

Seven men.

She dragged herself up, chewing at her sore lip, and lurched off through the dark trees, water trickling from her sodden hair and down her face. The pain gnawed through her legs, her sides, her hand, her skull, but she bit down hard and forced herself on.

'I'll kill them . . . I'll kill them . . . I'll kill them . . .'

It hardly needed to be said. She was done with crying.

The old track was grown over, almost past recognition. Branches thrashed at Monza's aching body. Brambles snatched at her burning legs. She crept through a gap in the overgrown hedgerow and frowned down at the place where she'd been born. She wished she'd been able to make the stubborn soil bear a crop as well as it bloomed thorn and nettle now. The upper field was a patch of dead scrub. The lower was a mass of briar. The remains of the mean farmhouse peered sadly over from the edge of the woods, and she peered sadly back.

It seemed that time had given both of them a kicking.

She squatted, gritting her teeth as her withered muscles stretched around her crooked bones, listening to a few birds cawing at the sinking sun, watching the wind twitch the wild grass and snatch at the nettles. Until she was sure the place was every bit as abandoned as it looked. Then she gently worked the life back into her battered legs and limped for the buildings. The house where her father died was a tumbled-down shell and a rotted beam or two, its outline so small it was hard to believe she could ever have lived there. She, and her father, and Benna too. She turned her head and spat into the dry dirt. She hadn't come here for bitter-sweet remembrances.

She'd come for revenge.

The shovel was where she'd left it two winters ago, blade still bright under some rubbish in the corner of the roofless barn. Thirty strides into the trees. Hard to imagine how easily she'd taken those long, smooth, laughing steps as she waddled through the weeds, spade dragging behind her. Into the quiet woods, wincing at every footfall, broken patterns of sunlight dancing across the fallen leaves as the evening wore down.

Thirty strides. She hacked the brambles away with the edge of the shovel, finally managed to drag the rotten tree-trunk to one side and began to dig. It would've been some task with both her hands and both her legs. As she was now, it was a groaning, sweating, teeth-grinding ordeal. But Monza had never been one to give up halfway, whatever the costs. You have a devil in you, Cosca used to tell her, and he'd been right. He'd learned it the hard way.

Night was coming on when she heard the hollow clomp of metal against wood. She scraped the last soil away, prised the iron ring from the dirt with broken fingernails. She strained, growled, stolen clothes stuck cold to her scarred skin. The trapdoor came open with a squealing of metal and a black hole beckoned, a ladder half-seen in the darkness.

She worked her way down, painstakingly slow since she'd no interest in breaking any more bones. She fumbled in the black until she found the shelf, wrestled with the flint in her bad joke of a hand and finally got the lamp lit. Light flared out weakly around the vaulted cellar, glittering along the metal edges of Benna's precautions, sitting safe, just as they'd left them.

He always had liked to plan ahead.

Keys hung from a row of rusted hooks. Keys to empty buildings, scattered across Styria. Places to hide. A rack along the left-hand wall bristled with blades, long and short. She opened a chest beside it. Clothes, carefully folded, never worn. She doubted they'd even fit her wasted body now. She reached out to touch one of Benna's shirts, remembering him picking out the silk for it, caught sight of her own right hand in the lamplight. She snatched up a pair of gloves, threw one away and shoved the maimed thing into the other, wincing as she worked the fingers, the little one still sticking out stubbornly straight.

Wooden boxes were stacked at the back of the cellar, twenty of them all told. She hobbled to the nearest one and pushed back the lid. Hermon's gold glittered at her. Heaps of coins. A small fortune in that box alone. She touched her fingertips gingerly to the side of her skull, felt the ridges under her skin. Gold. There's so much more you can do with it than just hold your head together.

She dug her hand in and let coins trickle between her fingers. The way you somehow have to if you find yourself alone with a box of money. These would be her weapons. These, and . . .

She let her gloved hand trail across the blades on the rack, stopped and went back one. A long sword of workmanlike grey steel. It didn't have much in the way of ornamental flourishes, but there was a fearsome beauty about it still, to her eye. The beauty of a thing fitted perfectly to its purpose. It was a Calvez, forged by the best swordsmith in Styria. A gift from her to Benna, not that he'd have known the difference between a good blade and a carrot. He'd worn it for a week then swapped it for an overpriced length of scrap metal with stupid gilt basketwork.

The one he'd been trying to draw when they killed him.

She curled her fingers round the cold grip, strange in her left hand, and slid a few inches of steel from the sheath. It shone bright and eager in the lamplight. Good steel bends, but never breaks. Good steel stays always sharp and ready. Good steel feels no pain, no pity and, above all, no remorse.

She felt herself smile. The first time in months. The first time since Gobba's wire hissed tight around her neck.

Vengeance, then.

## Fish out of Water

The cold wind swept in from the sea and gave the docks of Talins a damn good blasting. Or a damn bad one, depending how well dressed you were. Shivers weren't that well dressed at all. He pulled his thin coat tight round his shoulders, though he might as well not have bothered, for all the good it did him. He narrowed his eyes and squinted miserably into the latest gust. He was earning his name today, alright. He had been for weeks.

He remembered sitting warm by the fire, up in the North in a good house in Uffrith, with a belly full of meat and a head full of dreams, talking to Vossula about the wondrous city of Talins. He remembered it with some bitterness, because it was that bloody merchant, with his dewy eyes and his honey tales of home, who'd talked him into this nightmare jaunt to Styria.

Vossula had told him that the sun always shone in Talins. That was why Shivers had sold his good coat before he set off. Didn't want to end up sweating, did he? Seemed now, as he shivered like a curled-up autumn leaf only just still clinging to its branch, that Vossula had been doing some injury to the truth.

Shivers watched the restless waves chew at the quay, throwing icy spray over the few rotting skiffs stirring at their rotting wharves. He listened to the hawsers creaking, to the ill seabirds croaking, to the wind making a loose shutter rattle, to the grunts and grumbles of the men around him. All of 'em huddled on the docks for the sniff of a chance at work, and there'd never been in one place such a crowd of sad stories. Grubby and gaunt, ragged clothes and pinched-in faces. Desperate men. Men just like Shivers, in other words. Except they'd been born here. He'd been stupid enough to choose this.

He slid the last hard heel of bread from his inside pocket as carefully as a miser breaking out his hoard, took a nibble from the end, making sure to taste every crumb of it. Then he caught the man nearest to him staring, licking his pale lips. Shivers felt his shoulders slump, broke some off and handed it over.

'Thanks, friend,' as he wolfed it down.

'No bother,' said Shivers, though he'd spent hours chopping logs for it. Quite a lot of painful bother, in fact. The rest of 'em were all looking now, big sad eyes like pups needed feeding. He threw up his hands. 'If I had bread for everyone, why the fuck would I be stood here?'

They turned away grumbling. He snorted cold snot up and spat it out. Aside from some stale bread it was the only thing to have passed his lips that morning, and going in the wrong direction. He'd come with a pocketful of silver, and a faceful of smiles, and a swelling chestful of happy hope. Ten weeks in Styria, and all three of those were emptied to the bitter dregs.

Vossula had told him the people of Talins were friendly as lambs, welcomed foreigners like guests. He'd found nothing but scorn, and a lot of folk keen to use any rotten trick to relieve him of his dwindling money. They weren't just handing out second chances on the street corners here. No more'n they had been in the North.

A boat had come in now, was tying off at the quay, fishers scurrying over and around it, hauling at ropes and cursing at sailcloth. Shivers felt the rest of the desperate perking up, wondering if there might be a shift of work for one of 'em. He felt a dismal little flair of hope in his own chest, however hard he tried to keep it down, and stood up keen on tiptoes to watch.

Fish slid from the nets onto the dockside, squirming silver in the watery sun. It was a good, honest trade, fishing. A life on the salty brine where no sharp words are spoken, all men set together against the wind, plucking the shining bounty from the sea, and all that. A noble trade, or so Shivers tried to tell himself, in spite of the stink. Any trade that'd have him seemed pretty noble about then.

A man weathered as an old gatepost hopped down from the boat and strutted over, all self-importance, and the beggars jostled each other to catch his eye. The captain, Shivers guessed.

'Need two hands,' he said, pushing his battered cap back and looking those hopeful, hopeless faces over. 'You, and you.'

Hardly needed saying Shivers weren't one of 'em. His head sagged along with the rest as he watched the lucky pair hurrying back to the boat after its captain. One was the bastard he gave his bread to, didn't so much as look round, let alone put in a word for him. Maybe it was what you gave out that made a man, not

what you got back, like Shivers' brother used to say, but getting back's a mighty good thing to stop you starving.

'Shit on this.' And he started after them, picking his way between the fishers sorting their flapping catch into buckets and barrows. Wearing the friendliest grin he could muster, he walked up to where the captain was busying himself on the deck. 'Nice boat you got here,' he tried, though it was a slimy tub of shit far as he could see.

'And?'

'Would you think of taking me on?'

'You? What d'you know about fish?'

Shivers was a proven hand with axe, blade, spear and shield. A Named Man who'd led charges and held lines across the North and back. Who'd taken a few bad wounds and given out a lot of worse. But he was set on doing better'n that, and he was clinging to the notion tight as a drowning man to driftwood.

'I used to fish a lot, when I was a boy. Down by the lake, with my father.' His bare feet crunching in the shingle. The light glistening on the water. His father's smile, and his brother's.

But the captain didn't come over nostalgic. 'Lake? Sea-fishing's what we do, boy.'

'Sea-fishing, I've got to say, I've had no practice at.'

'Then why you wasting my bloody time? I can get plenty of Styrian fishers for my measure, the best hands, all with a dozen years at sea.' He waved at the idle men lining the dock, looked more like they'd spent a dozen years in an ale-cup. 'Why should I give work to some Northern beggar?'

'I'll work hard. Had some bad luck is all. I'm just asking for a chance.'

'So are we all, but I'm not hearing why I should be the one to give it you.'

'Just a chance is—'

'Away from my boat, you big pale bastard!' The captain snatched up a length of rough wood from the deck and had himself a step forwards, as if he was set to beat a dog. 'Get off, and take your bad luck with you!'

'I may be no kind of fisher, but I've always had a talent for making men bleed. Best put that stick down before I make you fucking eat it.' Shivers gave a look to go with the warning. A killing look, straight out of the North. The captain faltered,

stopped, stood there grumbling. Then he tossed his stick away and started shouting at one of his own people.

Shivers hunched his shoulders and didn't look back. He trudged to the mouth of an alley, past the torn bills pasted on the walls, the words daubed over 'em. Into the shadows between the crowded buildings, and the sounds of the docks went muffled at his back. It had been the same story with the smiths, and with the bakers, and with every damn trade in this damn city. There'd even been a cobbler who'd looked like a good enough sort until he told Shivers to fuck himself.

Vossula had said there was work everywhere in Styria, all you had to do was ask. It seemed, for reasons he couldn't fathom, that Vossula had been lying out of his arse the whole way. Shivers had asked him all kinds of questions. But it occurred to him now, as he sank down on a slimy doorstep with his worn-out boots in the gutter and some fish-heads for company, he hadn't asked the one question he should've. The one question staring him in the face ever since he got here.

Tell me, Vossula – if Styria's such a slice of wonder, why the hell are you up here in the North?

'Fucking Styria,' he hissed in Northern. He had that pain behind his nose meant he was close to weeping, and he was that far gone he was scarcely even shamed. Caul Shivers. Rattleneck's son. A Named Man who'd faced death in all weathers. Who'd fought beside the biggest names in the North – Rudd Threetrees, Black Dow, the Dogman, Harding Grim. Who'd led the charge against the Union near the Cumnur. Who'd held the line against a thousand Shanka at Dunbrec. Who'd fought seven days of murder up in the High Places. He almost felt a smile tugging at his mouth to think of the wild, brave times he'd come out alive from. He knew he'd been shitting himself the whole way, but what happy days those seemed now. Least he hadn't been alone.

He looked up at the sound of footsteps. Four men were ambling into the alley from the docks, the way he'd come. They had that sorry look men can get when they've got mischief in mind. Shivers hunched into his doorway, hoping whatever mischief they were planning didn't include him.

His heart took a downward turn as they gathered in a half-circle, standing over him. One had a bloated-up red nose, the kind you get from too much drinking. Another was bald as a boot-toe, had a length of wood held by his leg. A third had a scraggy beard and a mouthful of brown teeth. Not a pretty set of men, and Shivers didn't reckon they had anything pretty in mind.

The one at the front grinned down, a nasty-looking bastard with a pointed rat-face. 'What you got for us?'

'I wish I'd something worth the taking. But I've not. You might as well just go your way.'

Rat Face frowned at his bald mate, annoyed they might get nothing. 'Your boots, then.'

'In this weather? I'll freeze.'

'Freeze. See if I care a shit. Boots, now, before we give you a kicking for the sport of it.'

'Fucking Talins,' mouthed Shivers under his breath, the ashes of self-pity in his throat suddenly flaring up hot and bloody. It gnawed at him to come this low. Bastards had no use for his boots, just wanted to make themselves feel big. But it'd be a fool's fight four against one, and with no weapon handy. A fool's choice to get killed for some old leather, however cold it was.

He crouched down, muttering as he started to pull his boots off. Then his knee caught Red Nose right in his fruits and doubled him over with a breathy sigh. Surprised himself as much as he did them. Maybe going bare-foot was more'n his pride would stretch to. He smashed Rat Face on the chin, grabbed him by the front of his coat and rammed him back into one of his mates, sent them sprawling over together, yelping like cats in a rainstorm.

Shivers dodged the bald bastard's stick as it came down and shrugged it off his shoulder. The man came stumbling past, off balance, mouth wide open. Shivers planted a punch right on the point of his hanging chin and snapped his head up, then hooked his legs away with one boot, sent him squawking onto his back and followed him down. Shivers' fist crunched into his face – two, three, four times, and made a right mess of it, spattering blood up the arm of Shivers' dirty coat.

He scrambled away, leaving Baldy spitting teeth into the gutter. Red Nose was still curled up wailing with his hands between his legs. But the other two had

knives out now, sharp metal glinting. Shivers crouched, fists clenched, breathing hard, eyes flicking from one of 'em to the other and his anger wilting fast. Should've just given his boots over. Probably they'd be prising them off his cold, dead feet in a short and painful while. Bloody pride, that rubbish only did a man harm.

Rat Face wiped blood from under his nose. 'Oh, you're a dead man now, you Northern fuck! You're good as a—' His leg suddenly went from underneath him and he fell, shrieking, knife bouncing from his hand.

Someone slid out of the shadows behind him. Tall and hooded, sword held loose in a pale left fist, long, thin blade catching such light as there was in the alley and glinting murder. The last of the boot-thieves still standing, the one with the shitty teeth, stared at that length of steel with eyes big as a cow's, his knife looking a piss-poor tool all of a sudden.

'You might want to run for it.' Shivers frowned, caught off guard. A woman's voice. Brown Teeth didn't need telling twice. He turned and sprinted off down the alley.

'My leg!' Rat Face was yelling, clutching at the back of his knee with one bloody hand. 'My fucking leg!'

'Stop whining or I'll slit the other one.'

Baldy was lying there, saying nothing. Red Nose had finally fought his way moaning to his knees.

'Want my boots, do you?' Shivers took a step and kicked him in the fruits again, lifted him up and put him back down mewling on his face. 'There's one of 'em, bastard!' He watched the newcomer, blood swooshswooshing behind his eyes, not sure how he came through that without getting some steel in his guts. Not sure if he might not still. This woman didn't have the look of good news. 'What d'you want?' he growled at her.

'Nothing you'll have trouble with.' He could see the corner of a smile inside her hood. 'I might have some work for you.'

A big plate of meat and vegetables in some kind of gravy, slabs of doughy bread beside. Might've been good, might not have been, Shivers was too busy ramming

it into his face to tell. Most likely he looked a right animal, two weeks unshaved, pinched and greasy from dossing in doorways, and not even good ones. But he was far past caring how he looked, even with a woman watching.

She still had her hood up, though they were out of the weather now. She stayed back against the wall, where it was dark. She tipped her head forwards when folk came close, tar-black hair hanging across one cheek. He'd worked out a notion of her face anyway, in the moments when he could drag his eyes away from his food, and he reckoned it was a good one.

Strong, with hard bones in it, a fierce line of jaw and a lean neck, a blue vein showing up the side. Dangerous, he reckoned, though that wasn't such a clever guess since he'd seen her slit the back of a man's knee with small regret. Still, there was something in the way her narrow eyes held him that made him nervous. Calm and cold, as if she'd already got his full measure, and knew just what he'd do next. Knew better'n he did. She had three long marks down one cheek, old cuts still healing. She had a glove on her right hand, and scarcely used it. A limp too he'd noticed on the way here. Caught up in some dark business, maybe, but Shivers didn't have so many friends he could afford to be picky. Right then, anyone who fed him had the full stretch of his loyalty.

She watched him eat. 'Hungry?'

'Somewhat.'

'Long way from home?'

'Somewhat.'

'Had some bad luck?'

'More'n my share. But I made some bad choices, too.'

'The two go together.'

'That is a fact.' He tossed knife and spoon clattering down onto the empty plate. 'I should've thought it through.' He wiped up the gravy with the last slice of bread. 'But I've always been my own worst enemy.' They sat facing each other in silence as he chewed it. 'You've not told me your name.'

'No.'

'Like that, is it?'

'I'm paying, aren't I? It's whatever way I say it is.'

'Why are you paying? A friend of mine . . .' He cleared his throat, starting to doubt whether Vossula had been any kind of friend. 'A man I know told me to expect nothing for free in Styria.'

'Good advice. I need something from you.'

Shivers licked at the inside of his mouth and it tasted sour. He had a debt to this woman, now, and he wasn't sure what he'd have to pay. By the look of her, he reckoned it might cost him dear. 'What do you need?'

'First of all, have a bath. No one's going to deal with you in that state.'

Now the hunger and the cold were gone, they'd left a bit of room for shame. 'I'm happier not stinking, believe it or not. I got some fucking pride left.'

'Good for you. Bet you can't wait to get fucking clean, then.'

He worked his shoulders around, uncomfortable. He had this feeling like he was stepping into a pool with no idea how deep it might be. 'Then what?'

'Not much. You go into a smoke-house and ask for a man called Sajaam. You say Nicomo demands his presence at the usual place. You bring him to me.'

'Why not do that yourself?'

'Because I'm paying you to do it, fool.' She held up a coin in her gloved fist. Silver glinted in the firelight, design of weighing scales stamped into the bright metal. 'You bring Sajaam to me, you get a scale. You decide you still want fish, you can buy yourself a barrelful.'

Shivers frowned. For some fine-looking woman to come out of nowhere, more'n likely save his life, then make him a golden offer? His luck had never been anywhere near that good. But eating had only reminded him how much he used to enjoy doing it. 'I can do that.'

'Good. Or you can do something else, and get fifty.'

'Fifty?' Shivers' voice was an eager croak. 'This a joke?'

'You see me laughing? Fifty, I said, and if you still want fish you can buy your own boat and have change for some decent tailoring, how's that?'

Shivers tugged somewhat shamefacedly at the frayed edge of his coat. With that much he could hop the next boat back to Uffrith and kick Vossula's skinny arse from one end of the town to the other. A dream that had been his one source of pleasure for some time. 'What do you want for fifty?'

'Not much. You go into a smoke-house and ask for a man called Sajaam. You say Nicomo demands his presence at the usual place. You bring him to me.' She paused for a moment. 'Then you help me kill a man.'

It was no surprise, if he was honest with himself for once. There was only one kind of work that he was really good at. Certainly only one kind that anyone would pay him fifty scales for. He'd come here to be a better man. But it was just like the Dogman had told him. Once your hands are bloody, it ain't so easy to get 'em clean.

Something poked his thigh under the table and he near jumped out of his chair. The pommel of a long knife lay between his legs. A fighting knife, steel crosspiece gleaming orange, its sheathed blade in the woman's gloved hand.

'Best take it.'

'I didn't say I'd kill anyone.'

'I know what you said. The blade's just to show Sajaam you mean business.'

He had to admit he didn't much care for a woman surprising him with a knife between his thighs. 'I didn't say I'd kill anyone.'

'I didn't say you did.'

'Right then. Just as long as you know.' He snatched the blade from her and slid it down inside his coat.

The knife pressed against his chest as he walked up, nuzzling at him like an old lover back for more. Shivers knew it was nothing to be proud of. Any fool can carry a knife. But even so, he wasn't sure he didn't like the weight of it against his ribs. Felt like being someone again.

He'd come to Styria looking for honest work. But when the purse runs empty, dishonest work has to do. Shivers couldn't say he'd ever seen a place with a less honest look about it than this one. A heavy door in a dirty, bare, windowless wall, with a big man standing guard on each side. Shivers could tell it in the way they stood – they had weapons, and were right on the edge of putting 'em to use. One was a dark-skinned Southerner, black hair hanging around his face.

'Need something?' he asked, while the other gave Shivers the eyeball.

'Here to see Sajaam.'

'You armed?' Shivers slid out the knife, held it up hilt first, and the man took it off him. 'With me, then.' The hinges creaked as the door swung open.

The air was thick on the other side, hazy with sweet smoke. It scratched at Shivers' throat and made him want to cough, prickled at his eyes and made them water. It was dim and quiet, too sticky warm for comfort after the nip outside. Lamps of coloured glass threw patterns across the stained walls – green, and red, and yellow flares in the murk. The place was like a bad dream.

Curtains hung about, dirty silk rustling in the gloom. Folk sprawled on cushions, half-dressed and half-asleep. A man lay on his back, mouth wide open, pipe dangling from his hand, trace of smoke still curling from the bowl. A woman was pressed against him, on her side. Both their faces were beaded with sweat, slack as corpses. Looked like an uneasy cross between delight and despair, but tending towards the latter.

'This way.' Shivers followed his guide through the haze and down a shadowy corridor. A woman leaning in a doorway watched him pass with dead eyes, saying nothing. Someone was grunting somewhere, 'Oh, oh, oh,' almost bored.

Through a curtain of clicking beads and into another big room, less smoky but more worrying. Men were scattered about it, an odd mix of types and colours. Judging by their looks, all used to violence. Eight were sitting at a table strewn with glasses, bottles and small money, playing cards. More lounged about in the shadows. Shivers' eye fell right away on a nasty-looking hatchet in easy reach of one, and he didn't reckon it was the only weapon about. A clock was nailed up on the wall, innards dangling, swinging back and forth, tick, tock, tick, loud enough to set his nerves jangling even worse.

A big man sat at the head of the table, the chief's place if this had been the North. An old man, face creased like leather past its best. His skin was oily dark, short hair and beard dusted with iron grey. He had a gold coin he was fiddling with, flipping it across his knuckles from one side of his hand back to the other. The guide leaned down to whisper in his ear, then handed across the knife. His eyes and the eyes of the others were on Shivers, now. A scale was starting to seem a small reward for the task, all of a sudden.

'You Sajaam?' Louder than Shivers had in mind, voice squeaky from the smoke.

The old man's smile was a yellow curve in his dark face. 'Sajaam is my name, as all my sweet friends will confirm. You know, you can tell an awful lot about a man from the style of weapon he carries.'

'That so?'

Sajaam slid the knife from its sheath and held it up, candlelight glinting on steel. 'Not a cheap blade, but not expensive either. Fit for the job, and no frills at the edges. Sharp, and hard, and meaning business. Am I close to the mark?'

'Somewhere round it.' It was plain he was one of those who loved to prattle on, so Shivers didn't bother to mention that it weren't even his knife. Less said, sooner he could be on his way.

'What might your name be, friend?' Though the friend bit didn't much convince.

'Caul Shivers.'

'Brrrr.' Sajaam shook his big shoulders around like he was cold, too much chuckling from his men. Easily tickled, by the look of things. 'You are a long, long way from home, my man.'

'Don't I fucking know it. I've a message for you. Nicomo demands your presence.'

The good humour drained from the room quick as blood from a slit throat. 'Where?'

'The usual place.'

'Demands, does he?' A couple of Sajaam's people were moving away from the walls, hands creeping in the shadows. 'Awfully bold of him. And why would my old friend Nicomo send a big white Northman with a blade to talk to me?' It came to Shivers about then that, for reasons unknown, the woman might've landed him right in the shit. Clearly she weren't this Nicomo character. But he'd swallowed his fill of scorn these last few weeks, and the dead could have him before he tongued up any more.

'Ask him yourself. I didn't come here to swap questions, old man. Nicomo demands your presence in the usual place, and that's all. Now get off your fat black arse before I lose my temper.'

There was a long and ugly pause, while everyone had a think about that. 'I like it,' grunted Sajaam. 'You like that?' he asked one of his thugs.

'It's alright, I guess, if that style o' thing appeals.'

'On occasion. Large words and bluster and hairy-chested manliness. Too much gets boring with great speed, but a little can sometimes make me smile. So Nicomo demands my presence, does he?'

'He does,' said Shivers, no choice but to let the current drag him where it pleased, and hope to wash up whole.

'Well, then.' The old man tossed his cards down on the table and slowly stood. 'Let it never be said old Sajaam reneged on a debt. If Nicomo is calling . . . the usual place it is.' He pushed the knife Shivers had brought through his belt. 'I'll keep hold of this though, hmmm? Just for the moment.'

It was late when they got to the place the woman had showed him and the rotten garden was dark as a cellar. Far as Shivers could tell it was empty as one too. Just torn papers twitching on the night air, old news hanging from the slimy bricks.

'Well?' snapped Sajaam. 'Where's Cosca?'

'Said she'd be here,' Shivers muttered, half to himself.

'She?' His hand was on the hilt of the knife. 'What the hell are you—'

'Over here, you old prick.' She slid out from behind a tree-trunk and into a scrap of light, hood back. Now Shivers saw her clearly, she was even finer-looking than he'd thought, and harder-looking too. Very fine, and very hard, with a sharp red line down the side of her neck, like the scars you see on hanged men. She had this frown – brows drawn in hard, lips pressed tight, eyes narrowed and fixed in front. Like she'd decided to break a door down with her head, and didn't care a shit for the results.

Sajaam's face had gone slack as a soaked shirt. 'You're alive.'

'Still sharp as ever, eh?'

'But I heard—'

'No.'

Didn't take long for the old man to scrape himself together. 'You shouldn't be in Talins, Murcatto. You shouldn't be within a hundred miles of Talins. Most of all, you shouldn't be within a hundred miles of me.' He cursed in some language

Shivers didn't know, then tipped his face back towards the dark sky. 'God, God, why could you not have sent me an honest life to lead?'

The woman snorted. 'Because you haven't the guts for it. That and you like money too much.'

'All true, regrettably.' They might've talked like old friends, but Sajaam's hand hadn't left the knife. 'What do you want?'

'Your help killing some men.'

'The Butcher of Caprile needs my help killing, eh? As long as none of them are too close to Duke Orso—'

'He'll be the last.'

'Oh, you mad bitch.' Sajaam slowly shook his head. 'How you love to test me, Monzcarro. How you always loved to test us all. You'll never do it. Never, not if you wait until the sun burns out.'

'What if I could, though? Don't tell me it hasn't been your fondest wish all these years.'

'All these years when you were spreading fire and murder across Styria in his name? Happy to take his orders and his coin, lick his arse like a puppy dog with a new bone? Is it those years you mean? I don't recall you offering your shoulder for me to weep upon.'

'He killed Benna.'

'Is that so? The bills said Duke Rogont's agents got you both.' Sajaam was pointing out some old papers stirring on the wall behind her shoulder. A woman's face on 'em, and a man's. Shivers realised, and with a sharp sinking in his gut, the woman's face was hers. 'Killed by the League of Eight. Everyone was so very upset.'

'I'm in no mood for jokes, Sajaam.'

'When were you ever? But it's no joke. You were a hero round these parts. That's what they call you when you kill so many people the word murderer falls short. Orso gave the big speech, said we all had to fight harder than ever to avenge you, and everyone wept. I am sorry about Benna. I always liked the boy. But I made peace with my devils. You should do the same.'

'The dead can forgive. The dead can be forgiven. The rest of us have better things to do. I want your help, and I'm owed. Pay up, bastard.'

They frowned at each other for a long moment. Then the old man heaved up a long sigh. 'I always said you'd be the death of me. What's your price?'

'A point in the right direction. An introduction here or there. That's what you do, now, isn't it?'

'I know some people.'

'Then I need to borrow a man with a cold head and a good arm. A man who won't get flustered at blood spilled.'

Sajaam seemed to think about that. Then he turned his head and called over his shoulder. 'You know a man like that, Friendly?'

Footsteps scraped out of the darkness from the way Shivers had come. Seemed there'd been someone following them, and doing it well. The woman slid into a fighting crouch, eyes narrowed, left hand on her sword hilt. Shivers would've reached for a weapon too, if he'd had one, but he'd sold all his own in Uffrith and given the knife over to Sajaam. So he settled for a nervous twitching of his fingers, which wasn't a scrap of use to anyone.

The new arrival trudged up, stooped over, eyes down. He was a half-head or more shorter than Shivers but had a fearsome solid look to him, thick neck wider than his skull, heavy hands dangling from the sleeves of a heavy coat.

'Friendly,' Sajaam was all smiles at the surprise he'd pulled, 'this is an old friend of mine, name of Murcatto. You're going to work for her a while, if you have no objection.' The man shrugged his weighty shoulders. 'What did you say your name was, again?'

'Shivers.'

Friendly's eyes flickered up, then back to the floor, and stayed there. Sad eyes and strange. Silence for a moment.

'Is he a good man?' asked Murcatto.

'This is the best man I know of. Or the worst, if you stand on his wrong side. I met him in Safety.'

'What had he done to be locked in there with the likes of you?'

'Everything and more.'

More silence. 'For a man called Friendly, he's not got much to say.'

'My very thoughts when I first met him,' said Sajaam. 'I suspect the name was meant with some irony.'

'Irony? In a prison?'

'All kinds of people end up in prison. Some of us even have a sense of humour.'

'If you say so. I'll take some husk as well.'

'You? More your brother's style, no? What do you want husk for?'

'When did you start asking your customers why they want your goods, old man?'

'Fair point.' He pulled something from his pocket, tossed it to her and she snatched it out of the air.

'I'll let you know when I need something else.'

'I shall tick off the hours! I always swore you'd be the death of me, Monzcarro.' Sajaam turned away. 'The death of me.'

Shivers stepped in front of him. 'My knife.' He didn't understand the fine points of what he'd heard, but he could tell when he was caught up in something dark and bloody. Something where he was likely to need a good blade.

'My pleasure.' Sajaam slapped it back into Shivers' palm, and it weighed heavy there. 'Though I advise you to find a larger blade if you plan on sticking with her.' He glanced round at them, slowly shaking his head. 'You three heroes, going to put an end to Duke Orso? When they kill you, do me a favour? Die quickly and keep my name out of it.' And with that cheery thought he ambled off into the night.

When Shivers turned back, the woman called Murcatto was looking him right in the eye. 'What about you? Fishing's a bastard of a living. Almost as hard as farming, and even worse-smelling.' She held out her gloved hand and silver glinted in the palm. 'I can still use another man. You want to take your scale? Or you want fifty more?'

Shivers frowned down at that shining metal. He'd killed men for a lot less, when he thought about it. Battles, feuds, fights, in all settings and all weathers. But he'd had reasons, then. Not good ones, always, but something to make it some kind of right. Never just murder, blood bought and paid for.

'This man we're going to kill . . . what did he do?'

'He got me to pay fifty scales for his corpse. Isn't that enough?'

'Not for me.'

She frowned at him for a long moment. That straight-ahead look that was already giving him the worries, somehow. 'So you're one of them, eh?'

'One o' what?'

'One of those men that like reasons. That need excuses. You're a dangerous crowd, you lot. Hard to predict.' She shrugged. 'But if it helps. He killed my brother.'

Shivers blinked. Hearing those words, from her mouth, brought that day right back somehow, sharper than he'd remembered it for years. Seeing his father's grey face, and knowing. Hearing his brother was killed, when he'd been promised mercy. Swearing vengeance over the ashes in the long hall, tears in his eyes. An oath he'd chosen to break, so he could walk away from blood and be a better man.

And here she was, out of nowhere, offering him another chance at vengeance. He killed my brother. Felt as if he would've said no to anything else. But maybe he just needed the money.

'Shit on it, then,' he said. 'Give me the fifty.'