

SAMPLE CHAPTERS FROM

HALF THE WORLD

By Joe Abercrombie

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THE WORTHY

He hesitated just an instant, but long enough for Thorn to club him in the balls with the rim of her shield.

Even over the racket of the other lads all baying for her to lose, she heard Brand groan.

Thorn's father always said *the moment you pause will be the moment you die*, and she'd lived her life, for better and mostly worse, by that advice. So she bared her teeth in a fighting snarl – her favourite expression, after all – pushed up from her knees and went at Brand harder than ever.

She barged him with her shoulder, their shields clashing and grating, sand scattering from his heels as he staggered back down the beach, face still twisted with pain. He chopped at her but she ducked his wooden sword, swept hers low and caught him full in the calf, just below his mailshirt's flapping hem.

To give Brand his due he didn't go down, didn't even cry out, just hopped back, grimacing. Thorn shook her shoulders out, waiting to see if Master Hunnan would call that a win, but he stood silent as the statues in the Godshall.

Some masters-at-arms acted as if the practice swords were real, called a halt at what would have been a finishing blow from a steel blade. But Hunnan liked to see his students put down, and hurt, and taught a hard lesson. The gods knew, Thorn had learned hard lessons enough in Hunnan's square. She was happy to teach a few.

So she gave Brand a mocking smile – her second favourite expression, after all – and screamed, 'Come on, you coward!'

Brand was strong as a bull, and had plenty of fight in him, but he was limping, and tired, and Thorn had made sure the slope of the beach was on her side. She kept her eyes fixed on him, dodged one blow, and another, then slipped around a clumsy overhead to leave his side open. *The best place to sheathe a blade is in your enemy's back*, her father always said, but the side was almost as good. Her wooden sword thudded into Brand's ribs with a thwack like a log splitting, left him tottering helpless and Thorn grinning wider than ever. There's no feeling in the world so sweet as hitting someone just right.

She planted the sole of her boot on his arse, shoved him splashing down on his hands and knees in the latest wave, and on its hissing way out it caught his sword and washed it down the beach, left it mired among the weed.

She stepped close and Brand winced up at her, wet hair plastered to one side of his face and his teeth bloodied from the butt she gave him before. Maybe she should've felt sorry for him. But it had been a long time since Thorn could afford to feel sorry.

Instead she pressed her notched wooden blade into his neck and said, 'Well?'

'All right.' He waved her weakly away, hardly able to get the breath to speak. 'I'm done.'

'Ha!' she shouted in his face.

'Ha!' she shouted at the crestfallen lads about the square.

'Ha!' she shouted at Master Hunnan, and she thrust up her sword and shield in triumph and shook them at the spitting sky.

A few limp claps and mutters and that was it. There'd been far more generous applause for far meaner victories, but Thorn wasn't there for applause.

She was there to win.

Sometimes a girl is touched by Mother War, and put among the boys in the training square, and taught to fight. Among the smaller children there are always a few, but with each year that passes they turn to more suitable things, then are turned to them, then shouted and bullied and beaten to them, until the shameful weeds are rooted out and only the glorious flower of manhood remains.

If Vanstermen crossed the border, if Islanders landed on a raid, if thieves came in the night, the women of Gettland found blades soon enough, and fought to the death, and many of them damn well too. They always had. But the last time a woman passed the tests and swore the oaths and won a place on a raid?

There were stories. There were songs. But even Old Fen, who was the oldest person in Thorlby and, some said, the world, had never seen such a thing in all her countless days.

Not until now.

All that work. All that scorn. All that pain. But Thorn had beaten them. She closed her eyes, felt Mother Sea's salt wind kiss her sweaty face and thought how proud her father would be.

'I've passed,' she whispered.

'Not yet.' Thorn had never seen Master Hunnan smile. But she had never seen his frown quite so grim. 'I decide the tests you'll take. I decide when you've passed.' He looked over to the lads her age. The lads of sixteen, some already puffed with pride from passing their own tests. 'Rauk. You'll fight Thorn next.'

Rauk's brows went up, then he looked at Thorn and shrugged. 'Why not?' he said, and stepped between his fellows into the square, strapping his shield tight and plucking up a practice sword.

He was a cruel one, and skilful. Not near as strong as Brand but a lot less likely to hesitate. Still, Thorn had beaten him before and she'd—

'Rauk,' said Hunnan, his knobble-knuckled finger wandering on, 'and Sordaf, and Edwal.'

The glow of triumph drained from Thorn like the slops from a broken bath. There was a muttering among the lads as Sordaf – big, slow and with scant imagination, but a hell of a choice for stomping on someone who was down – lumbered out onto the sand, doing up the buckles on his mail with fat fingers.

Edwal – quick and narrow-shouldered with a tangle of brown curls – didn't move right off. Thorn had always thought he was one of the better ones. 'Master Hunnan, three of us—'

'If you want a place on the king's raid,' said Hunnan, 'you'll do as you're bid.'

They all wanted a place. They wanted one almost as much as Thorn did. Edwal frowned left and right, but no one spoke up. Reluctantly he slipped between the others and picked out a wooden sword.

'This isn't fair.' Thorn was used to always wearing a brave face, no matter how long the odds, but her voice then was a desperate bleat. Like a lamb herded helpless to the slaughterman's knife.

Hunnan dismissed it with a snort. 'This square is the battlefield, girl, and the battlefield isn't fair. Consider that your last lesson here.'

There were some stray chuckles at that. Probably from some of those she'd shamed with beatings one time or another. Brand watched from behind a few loose strands of hair, one hand nursing his bloody mouth. Others kept their eyes to the ground. They all knew it wasn't fair. They didn't care.

Thorn set her jaw, put her shield hand to the pouch around her neck and squeezed it tight. It had been her against the world for longer than she could remember. If Thorn was one thing, she was a fighter. She'd give them a fight they wouldn't soon forget.

Rauk jerked his head to the others and they began to spread out, aiming to surround her. Might not be the worst thing. If she struck fast enough she could pick one off from the herd, give herself some splinter of a chance against the other two.

She looked in their eyes, trying to judge what they'd do. Edwal reluctant, hanging back. Sordaf watchful, shield up. Rauk letting his sword dangle, showing off to the crowd.

Just get rid of his smile. Turn that bloody and she'd be satisfied.

His smile buckled when she gave the fighting scream. Rauk caught her first blow on his shield, giving ground, and a second too, splinters flying, then she tricked him with her eyes so he lifted his shield high, went low at the last moment and caught him a scything blow in his hip. He cried out, twisting sideways so the back of his head was to her. She was already lifting her sword again.

There was a flicker at the corner of her eye and a sick crunch. She hardly felt as if she fell. But suddenly the sand was roughing her up pretty good, then she was staring stupidly at the sky.

There's your problem with going for one and ignoring the other two.

Gulls called above, circling.

The towers of Thorlby cut out black against the bright sky.

Best get up, her father said. Won't win anything on your back.

Thorn rolled, lazy, clumsy, pouch slipping from her collar and swinging on its cord, her face one great throb.

Water surged cold up the beach and around her knees and she saw Sordaf stamp down, heard a crack like a stick breaking.

She tried to scramble up and Rauk's boot thudded into her ribs and rolled her over, coughing.

The wave sucked back and sank away, blood tickling at her top lip, dripping pit-patter on the wet sand.

'Should we stop?' she heard Edwal say.

'Did I say stop?' came Hunnan's voice, and Thorn closed her fist tight around the grip of her sword, gathering one more effort.

She saw Rauk step towards her and she caught his leg as he kicked, hugged it to her chest. She jerked up hard, growling in his face, and he tumbled over backwards, arms flailing.

She tottered at Edwal, more falling than charging, Mother Sea and Father Earth and Hunnan's frown and the faces of the watching lads all tipping and reeling. He caught her, more holding her up than trying to put her down. She grabbed at his shoulder, wrist twisted, sword torn from her hand as she stumbled past, floundering onto her knees and up again, her shield flapping at her side on its torn strap as she turned, spitting and cursing, and froze.

Sordaf stood, sword dangling limp, staring.

Rauk lay propped on his elbows on the wet sand, staring.

Brand stood among the other boys, mouth hanging open, all of them staring.

Edwal opened his mouth but all that came out was a strange squelch like a fart. He dropped his practice blade and lifted a clumsy hand to paw at his neck.

The hilt of Thorn's sword was there. The wooden blade had broken to leave a long shard when Sordaf stamped on it. The shard was through Edwal's throat, the point glistening red.

'Gods,' someone whispered.

Edwal slumped down on his knees and drooled bloody froth onto the sand.

Master Hunnan caught him as he pitched onto his side. Brand and some of the others gathered around them, all shouting over each other. Thorn could hardly pick out the words over the thunder of her own heart.

She stood swaying, face throbbing, hair torn loose and whipping in her eye with the wind, wondering if this was all a nightmare. Sure it must be. Praying it might be. She squeezed her eyes shut, squeezed them, squeezed them.

As she had when they led her to her father's body, white and cold beneath the dome of the Godshall.

But that had been real, and so was this.

When she snapped her eyes open the lads were still kneeling around Edwal so all she could see was his limp boots fallen outwards. Black streaks came

curling down the sand, then Mother Sea sent a wave and turned them red, then pink, then they were washed away and gone.

And for the first time in a long time Thorn felt truly scared.

Hunnan slowly stood, slowly turned. He always frowned, hardest of all at her. But there was a brightness in his eyes now she had never seen before.

'Thorn Bathu.' He pointed at her with one red finger. 'I name you a murderer.'

IN THE SHADOWS

'Do good,' Brand's mother said to him the day she died. 'Stand in the light.'

He'd hardly understood what doing good meant at six years old. He wasn't sure he was much closer at sixteen. Here he was, after all, wasting what should have been his proudest moment, still trying to puzzle out the good thing to do.

It was a high honour to stand guard on the Black Chair. To be accepted as a warrior of Gettland in the sight of gods and men. He'd struggled for it, hadn't he? Bled for it? Earned his place? As long as Brand could remember, it had been his dream to stand armed among his brothers on the hallowed stones of the Godshall.

But he didn't feel like he was standing in the light.

'I worry about this raid on the Islanders,' Father Yarvi was saying, bringing the argument in a circle, as ministers always seemed to. 'The High King has forbidden swords to be drawn. He will take it very ill.'

'The High King forbids everything,' said Queen Laithlin, one hand on her child-swollen belly, 'and takes everything ill.'

Beside her, King Uthil shifted forward in the Black Chair. 'Meanwhile he orders the Islanders and the Vanstermen and any other curs he can bend to his bidding to draw their swords against us.'

A surge of anger passed through the great men and women of Gettland gathered before the dais. A week before Brand's voice would've been loudest among them.

But all he could think of now was Edwal with the wooden sword through his neck, drooling red as he made that honking pig sound. The last he'd ever make. And Thorn, swaying on the sand with her hair stuck across her blood-smeared face, jaw hanging open as Hunnan named her a murderer.

'Two of my ships taken!' A merchant's jewelled key bounced on her chest as she shook her fist towards the dais. 'And not just cargo lost but men dead!'

‘And the Vanstermen have crossed the border again!’ came a deep shout from the men’s side of the hall, ‘and burned steadings and taken good folk of Gettland as slaves!’

‘Grom-gil-Gorm was seen there!’ someone shouted, and the mere mention of the name filled the dome of the Godshall with muttered curses. ‘The Breaker of Swords himself!’

‘The Islanders must pay in blood,’ growled an old one-eyed warrior, ‘then the Vanstermen, and the Breaker of Swords too.’

‘Of course they must!’ called Yarvi to the grumbling crowd, his shrivelled crab-claw of a left hand held up for calm, ‘but when and how is the question. The wise wait for their moment, and we are by no means ready for war with the High King.’

‘One is always ready for war.’ Uthil gently twisted the pommel of his sword so the naked blade flashed in the gloom. ‘Or never.’

Edwal had always been ready. A man who stood for the man beside him, just as a warrior of Gettland was supposed to. Surely he hadn’t deserved to die for that?

Thorn cared for nothing past the end of her own nose, and her shield rim in Brand’s still-aching balls had raised her no higher in his affections. But she’d fought to the last, against the odds, just as a warrior of Gettland was supposed to. Surely she didn’t deserve to be named murderer for that?

He glanced guiltily up at the great statues of the six tall gods, towering in judgment over the Black Chair. Towering in judgment over him. He squirmed as though he was the one killed Edwal and named Thorn a murderer. All he’d done was watch.

Watch and do nothing.

‘The High King could call half the world to war with us,’ Father Yarvi was saying, patiently as a master-at-arms explains the basics to children. ‘The Vanstermen and the Throvenmen are sworn to him, the Inglings and the Lowlanders are praying to his One God, Grandmother Wexen is forging alliances in the south as well. We are hedged in by enemies and we must have friends to—
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'Steel is the answer.' King Uthil cut his minister off with a voice sharp as a blade. 'Steel must always be the answer. Gather the men of Gettland. We will teach these carrion-pecking Islanders a lesson they will not soon forget.' On the right side of the hall the frowning men beat their approval on mailed chests, and on the left the women with their oiled hair shining murmured their angry support.

Father Yarvi bowed his head. It was his task to speak for Father Peace but even he was out of words. Mother War ruled today. 'Steel it is.'

Brand should've thrilled at that. A great raid, like in the songs, and him with a warrior's place in it! But he was still trapped beside the training square, picking at the scab of what he could've done differently.

If he hadn't hesitated. If he'd struck without pity, like a warrior was supposed to, he could've beaten Thorn, and there it would've ended. Or if he'd spoken up with Edwal when Hunnan set three on one, perhaps together they could've stopped it. But he hadn't spoken up. Facing an enemy on the battlefield took courage, but you had your friends beside you. Standing alone against your friends, that was a different kind of courage. One Brand didn't pretend to have.

'And then we have the matter of Hild Bathu,' said Father Yarvi, the name bringing Brand's head jerking up like a thief's caught with his hand round a purse.

'Who?' asked the king.

'Storn Headland's daughter,' said Queen Laithlin. 'She calls herself Thorn.'

'She's done more than prick a finger,' said Father Yarvi. 'She killed a boy in the training square and is named a murderer.'

'Who names her so?' called Uthil.

'I do.' Master Hunnan's golden cloak-buckle gleamed as he stepped into the shaft of light at the foot of the dais.

'Master Hunnan.' A rare smile touched the corner of the king's mouth. 'I remember well our bouts together in the training square.'

'Treasured memories, my king, though painful ones for me.'

'Ha! You saw this killing?'

'I was testing my eldest students to judge those worthy to join your raid. Thorn Bathu was among them.'

'She embarrasses herself, trying to take a warrior's place!' one woman called.

'She embarrasses us all,' said another.

'A woman has no place on the battlefield!' came a gruff voice from among the men, and heads nodded on both sides of the room.

'Is Mother War herself not a woman?' The king pointed up at the Tall Gods looming over them. 'We only offer her the choice. The Mother of Crows picks the worthy.'

'And she did not pick Thorn Bathu,' said Hunnan. 'The girl has a poisonous temper.' Very true. 'She failed the test I set her.' Partly true. 'She lashed out against my judgment and killed the boy Edwal.' Brand blinked. Not quite a lie, but far from all the truth. Hunnan's grey beard wagged as he shook his head. 'And so I lost two pupils.'

'Careless of you,' said Father Yarvi.

The master-at-arms bunched his fists but Queen Laithlin spoke first. 'What would be the punishment for such a murder?'

'To be crushed with stones, my queen.' The minister spoke calmly, as if they considered crushing a beetle, not a person, and that a person Brand had known most of his life. One he'd disliked almost as long, but even so.

'Will anyone here speak for Thorn Bathu?' thundered the king.

The echoes of his voice faded to leave the silence of a tomb. Now was the time to tell the truth. To do good. To stand in the light. Brand looked across the Godshall, the words tickling at his lips. He saw Rauk in his place, smiling. Sordaf too, his doughy face a mask. They didn't make the faintest sound.

And nor did Brand.

'It is a heavy thing to order the death of one so young.' Uthil stood from the Black Chair, mail rattling and skirts rustling as everyone but the queen knelt. 'But we cannot turn from the right thing simply because it is a painful thing.'

Father Yarvi bowed still lower. 'I will dispense your justice according to the law.'

Uthil held his hand out to Laithlin, and together they came down the steps of the dais. On the subject of Thorn Bathu, crushing with rocks was the last word.

Brand stared in sick disbelief. He'd been sure among all those lads someone would speak, for they were honest enough. Or Hunnan would tell his part in it,

for he was a respected master-at-arms. The king or the queen would draw out the truth, for they were wise and righteous. The gods wouldn't allow such an injustice to pass. Someone would do something.

Maybe, like him, they were all waiting for someone else to put things right.

The king walked stiffly, drawn sword cradled in his arms, his iron-grey stare wavering neither right nor left. The queen's slightest nods were received like gifts, and with the odd word she let it be known that this person or that should enjoy the favour of visiting her counting house upon some deep business. They came closer, and closer yet.

Brand's heart beat loud in his ears. His mouth opened. The queen turned her freezing gaze on him for an instant, and in shamed and shameful silence he let the pair of them sweep past.

His sister was always telling him it wasn't up to him to put the world right. But if not him, who?

'Father Yarvi!' he blurted, far too loud, and then, as the minister turned towards him, croaked far too soft, 'I need to speak to you.'

'What about, Brand?' That gave him a pause. He hadn't thought Yarvi would have the vaguest notion who he was.

'About Thorn Bathu.'

A long silence. The minister might only have been a few years older than Brand, pale-skinned and pale-haired as if the colour was washed out of him, so gaunt a stiff breeze might blow him away and with a crippled hand besides, but close up there was something chilling in the minister's eye. Something that caused Brand to wilt under his gaze.

But there was no going back, now. 'She's no murderer,' he muttered.

'The king thinks she is.'

Gods, his throat felt dry, but Brand pressed on, the way a warrior was supposed to. 'The king wasn't on the sands. The king didn't see what I saw.'

'What did you see?'

'We were fighting to win places on the raid—'

'Never again tell me what I already know.'

This wasn't running near as smoothly as Brand had hoped. But so it goes, with hopes. 'Thorn fought me, and I hesitated . . . she should've won her place. But Master Hunnan set three others on her.'

Yarvi glanced towards the people flowing steadily out of the Godshall, and eased a little closer. 'Three at once?'

'Edwal was one of them. She never meant to kill him—'

'How did she do against those three?'

Brand blinked, wrong-footed. 'Well . . . she killed more of them than they did of her.'

'That's in no doubt. I was but lately consoling Edwal's parents, and promising them justice. She is sixteen winters, then?'

'Thorn?' Brand wasn't sure what that had to do with her sentence. 'I . . . think she is.'

'And has held her own in the square all this time against the boys?' He gave Brand a look up and down. 'Against the men?'

'Usually she does better than hold her own.'

'She must be very fierce. Very determined. Very hard-headed.'

'From what I can tell her head's bone all the way through.' Brand realized he wasn't helping and mumbled weakly, 'but . . . she's not a bad person.'

'None are, to their mothers.' Father Yarvi pushed out a heavy sigh. 'What would you have me do?'

'What . . . would I what?'

'Do I free this troublesome girl and make enemies of Hunnan and the boy's family, or crush her with stones and appease them? Your solution?'

Brand hadn't expected to give a solution. 'I suppose . . . you should follow the law?'

'The law?' Father Yarvi snorted. 'The law is more Mother Sea than Father Earth, always shifting. The law is a mummer's puppet, Brand, it says what I say it says.'

'Just thought I should tell someone . . . well . . . the truth?'

'As if the truth is precious. I can find a thousand truths under every autumn leaf, Brand: everyone has their own. But you thought no further than passing the

burden of your truth to me, did you? My epic thanks, preventing Gettland sliding into war with the whole Shattered Sea gives me not enough to do.'

'I thought . . . this was doing good.' Doing good seemed of a sudden less a burning light before him, clear as Mother Sun, and more a tricking glimmer in the murk of the Godshall.

'Whose good? Mine? Edwal's? Yours? As we each have our own truth so we each have our own good.' Yarvi edged a little closer, spoke a little softer. 'Master Hunnan may guess you shared your truth with me, what then? Have you thought on the consequences?'

They settled on Brand now, cold as a fall of fresh snow. He looked up, saw the gleam of Rauk's eye in the shadows of the emptying hall.

'A man who gives all his thought to doing good, but no thought to the consequences . . .' Father Yarvi lifted his withered hand and pressed its one crooked finger into Brand's chest. 'That is a dangerous man.'

And the minister turned away, the butt of his elf staff tapping against stones polished to glass by the passage of years, leaving Brand to stare wide-eyed into the gloom, more worried than ever.

He didn't feel like he was standing in the light at all.

JUSTICE

Thorn sat and stared down at her filthy toes, pale as maggots in the darkness.

She had no notion why they took her boots. She was hardly going to run, chained by her left ankle to one damp-oozing wall and her right wrist to the other. She could scarcely reach the gate of her cell, let alone rip it from its hinges. Apart from picking the scabs under her broken nose till they bled, all she could do was sit and think.

Her two least favourite activities.

She heaved in a ragged breath. Gods, the place stank. The rotten straw and the rat droppings stank and the bucket they never bothered to empty stank and the mould and rusting iron stank and after two nights in there she stank worst of all.

Any other day she would've been swimming in the bay, fighting Mother Sea, or climbing the cliffs, fighting Father Earth, or running or rowing or practising with her father's old sword in the yard of their house, fighting the blade-scarred posts and pretending they were Gettland's enemies as the splinters flew – Grom-gil-Gorm, or Styr of the Islands, or even the High King himself.

But she would swing no sword today. She was starting to think she had swung her last. It seemed a long, hard way from fair. But then, as Hunnan said, fair wasn't a thing a warrior could rely on.

'You've a visitor,' said the key-keeper, a weighty lump of a woman with a dozen rattling chains about her neck and a face like a bag of axes. 'But you'll have to make it quick.' And she hauled the heavy door squealing open.

'Hild!'

This once Thorn didn't tell her mother she'd given that name up at six years old, when she pricked her father with his own dagger and he called her 'thorn'. It took all the strength she had to unfold her legs and stand, sore and tired and suddenly, pointlessly ashamed of the state she was in.

Even if she hardly cared for how things looked, she knew her mother did. When Thorn shuffled into the light her mother pressed one pale hand to her mouth. 'Gods, what did they do to you?'

Thorn waved at her face, chains rattling. 'This happened in the square.'

Her mother came close to the bars, eyes rimmed with weepy pink. 'They say you murdered a boy.'

'It wasn't murder.'

'You killed a boy, though?'

Thorn swallowed, dry throat clicking. 'Edwal.'

'Gods,' whispered her mother again, lip trembling. 'Oh, gods, Hild, why couldn't you...'

'Be someone else?' Thorn finished for her. Someone easy, someone normal. A daughter who wanted to wield nothing weightier than a needle, dress in southern silk instead of mail and harbour no dreams beyond wearing some rich man's key.

'I saw this coming,' said her mother, bitterly. 'Ever since you went to the square. Ever since we saw your father dead, I saw this coming.'

Thorn felt her cheek twitch. 'You can take comfort in how right you were.'

'You think there's any comfort for me in this? They say they're going to crush my only child with stones!'

Thorn felt cold then, very cold. It was an effort to take a breath. As though they were piling the rocks on her already. 'Who said?'

'Everyone says.'

'Father Yarvi?' The minister spoke the law. The minister would speak the judgment.

'I don't know. I don't think so. Not yet.'

Not yet, that was the limit of her hopes. Thorn felt so weak she could hardly grip the bars. She was used to wearing a brave face, however scared she was. But Death is a hard mistress to face bravely. The hardest.

'You'd best go.' The key-keeper started to pull Thorn's mother away.

'I'll pray,' she called, tears streaking her face. 'I'll pray to Father Peace for you!'

Thorn wanted to say, 'Damn Father Peace', but she could not find the breath. She had given up on the gods when they let her father die in spite of all her prayers, but a miracle was looking like her best chance.

'Sorry,' said the key-keeper, shouldering shut the door.

'Not near as sorry as me.' Thorn closed her eyes and let her forehead fall against the bars, squeezed hard at the pouch under her dirty shirt. The pouch that held her father's fingerbones.

We don't get much time, and time feeling sorry for yourself is time wasted. She kept every word he'd said close to her heart, but if there'd ever been a moment for feeling sorry for herself, this had to be the one. Hardly seemed like justice. Hardly seemed fair. But try telling Edwal about fair. However you shared out the blame, she'd killed him. Wasn't his blood crusted up her sleeve?

She'd killed Edwal. Now they'd kill her.

She heard talking, faint beyond the door. Her mother's voice – pleading, wheedling, weeping. Then a man's, cold and level. She couldn't quite catch the words, but they sounded like hard ones. She flinched as the door opened, jerking back into the darkness of her cell, and Father Yarvi stepped over the threshold.

He was a strange one. A man in a minister's place was almost as rare as a woman in the training square. He was only a few years Thorn's elder but he had an old eye. An eye that had seen things. They told strange stories of him. That he had sat in the Black Chair, but given it up. That he had sworn a deep-rooted oath of vengeance. That he had killed his Uncle Odem with the curved sword he always wore. They said he was cunning as Father Moon, a man rarely to be trusted and never to be crossed. And in his hands – or in his one good one, for the other was a crooked lump – her life now rested.

'Thorn Bathu,' he said. 'You are named a murderer.'

All she could do was nod, her breath coming fast.

'Have you anything to say?'

Perhaps she should've spat her defiance. Laughed at Death. They said that was what her father did, when he lay bleeding his last at the feet of Grom-gil-Gorm. But all she wanted was to live.

'I didn't mean to kill him,' she gurgled up. 'Master Hunnan set three of them on me. It wasn't murder!'

'A fine distinction to Edwal.'

True enough, she knew. She was blinking back tears, shamed at her own cowardice, but couldn't help it. How she wished she'd never gone to the square now, and learned to smile well and count coins like her mother always wanted. But you'll buy nothing with wishes.

'Please, Father Yarvi, give me a chance.' She looked into his calm, cold, grey-blue eyes. 'I'll take any punishment. I'll do any penance. I swear it!'

He raised one pale brow. 'You should be careful what oaths you make, Thorn. Each one is a chain about you. I swore to be revenged on the killers of my father and the oath still weighs heavy on me. That one might come to weigh heavy on you.'

'Heavier than the stones they'll crush me with?' She held her open palms out, as close to him as the chains would allow. 'I swear a sun oath and a moon oath. I'll do whatever service you think fit.'

The minister frowned at her dirty hands, reaching, reaching. He frowned at the desperate tears leaking down her face. He cocked his head slowly on one side, as though he was a merchant judging her value. Finally he gave a long, unhappy sigh. 'Oh, very well.'

There was a silence then, while Thorn turned over what he'd said. 'You're not going to crush me with stones?'

He waved his crippled hand so the one finger flopped back and forth. 'I have trouble lifting the big ones.'

More silence, long enough for relief to give way to suspicion. 'So . . . what's the sentence?'

'I'll think of something. Release her.'

The jailer sucked her teeth as if opening any lock left a wound, but did as she was bid. Thorn rubbed at the chafe-marks the iron cuff left on her wrist, feeling strangely light without its weight. So light she wondered if she was dreaming. She squeezed her eyes shut, then grunted as the key-keeper tossed her boots over and they hit her in the belly. Not a dream, then.

She couldn't stop herself smiling as she pulled them on.

'Your nose looks broken,' said Father Yarvi.

'Not the first time.' If she got away from this with no worse than a broken nose she would count herself blessed indeed.

'Let me see.'

A minister was a healer first, so Thorn didn't flinch when he came close, prodded gently at the bones under her eyes, brow wrinkled with concentration.

'Ah,' she muttered.

'Sorry, did that hurt?'

'Just a litt—'

He forced one finger up her nostril, pressing his thumb mercilessly into the bridge of her nose. Thorn gasped, forced down onto her knees, there was a crack and a white-hot pain in her face, tears flooding more freely than ever.

'That got it,' he said, wiping his hand on her shirt.

'Gods!' she whimpered, clutching her throbbing face.

'Sometimes a little pain now can save a great deal later.' Father Yarvi was already walking for the door, so Thorn tottered up and, still wondering if this was some trick, crept after him.

'Thanks for your kindness.' she muttered as she passed the key-keeper

The woman glared back. 'I hope you never need it again.'

'No offence, but so do I.' And Thorn followed Father Yarvi along the dim corridor and up the steps, blinking into the light.

He might have had one hand but his legs worked well enough, setting quite a pace as he stalked across the yard of the citadel, the breeze making the branches of the old cedar whisper above them.

'I should speak to my mother—' she said, hurrying to catch up.

'I already have. I told her I had found you innocent of murder but you had sworn an oath to serve me.'

'But . . . how did you know I'd—'

'It is a minister's place to know what people will do.' Father Yarvi snorted. 'As yet you are not too deep a well to fathom, Thorn Bathu.'

They passed beneath the Screaming Gate, out of the citadel and into the city, down from the great rock and towards Mother Sea. They went by switching steps and narrow ways, sloping steeply between tight-crammed houses and the people tight-crammed between them.

'I'm not going on King Uthil's raid, am I?' A fool's question, doubtless, but now Thorn stepped from Death's shadow there was light enough to mourn her ruined dreams.

Father Yarvi was not in a mourning mood. 'Be thankful you're not going in the ground.'

They passed down the Street of Anvils, where Thorn had spent long hours gazing greedily at weapons like a beggar child at pastries. Where she had ridden on her father's shoulders, giddy-proud as the smiths begged him to notice their work. But the bright metal set out before the forges only seemed to mock her now.

'I'll never be a warrior of Gettland.' She said it soft and sorry, but Yarvi's ears were sharp.

'As long as you live, what you might come to be is in your own hands, first of all.' The minister rubbed gently at some faded marks on his neck. 'There is always a way, Queen Laithlin used to tell me.'

Thorn found herself walking a little taller at the name alone. Laithlin might not be a fighter, but Thorn could think of no one she admired more. 'The Golden Queen is a woman no man dares take lightly,' she said.

'So she is.' Yarvi looked at Thorn sidelong. 'Learn to temper stubbornness with sense and maybe one day you will be the same.'

It seemed that day was still some way off. Wherever they passed people bowed, and muttered softly, 'Father Yarvi,' and stepped aside to give the minister of Gettland room, but shook their heads darkly at Thorn as she skulked after him, filthy and disgraced, through the gates of the city and out onto the swarming dockside. They wove between sailors and merchants from every nation around the Shattered Sea and some much farther off, Thorn ducking under fishermen's dripping nets and around their glittering, squirming catches.

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'Skekenhouse.'

She stopped short, gaping, and was nearly knocked flat by a passing barrow. She had never in her life been further than a half-day's walk from Thorlby.

'Or you could stay here,' Yarvi tossed over his shoulder. 'They have the stones ready.'

She swallowed, then hurried again to catch him up. 'I'll come.'

'You are as wise as you are beautiful, Thorn Bathu.'

That was either a double compliment or a double insult, and she suspected the latter. The old planks of a wharf clonked under their boots, salt water slapping at the green-furred supports below. A ship rocked beside it, small but sleek and with white-painted doves mounted at high prow and stern. Judging by the bright shields ranged down each side, it was manned and ready to sail.

'We're going now?' she asked.

'I am summoned by the High King.'

'The High . . . King?' She looked down at her clothes, stiff with dungeon filth, crusted with her blood and Edwal's. 'Can I change, at least?'

'I have no time for your vanity.'

'I stink.'

'We will haul you behind the ship to wash away the reek.'

'You will?'

The minister raised one brow at her. 'You have no sense of humour, do you?'

'Facing Death can sap your taste for jokes,' she muttered.

'That's the time you need it most.' A thickset old man was busy casting off the prow rope, and tossed it aboard as they walked up. 'But don't worry. Mother Sea will have given you more washing than you can stomach by the time we reach Skekenhouse.' He was a fighter: Thorn could tell that from the way he stood, his broad face battered by weather and war.

'The gods saw fit to take my strong left hand.' Yarvi held up his twisted claw and wiggled the one finger. 'But they gave me Rulf instead.' He clapped it down on the old man's meaty shoulder. 'Though it hasn't always been easy, I find myself content with the bargain.'

Rulf raised one tangled brow. 'D'you want to know how I feel about it?'

'No,' said Yarvi, hopping aboard the ship. Thorn could only shrug at the grey-bearded warrior and hop after. 'Welcome to the *South Wind*.'

She worked her mouth and spat over the side. 'I don't feel too welcome.'

Perhaps forty grizzled-looking oarsmen sat upon their sea chests, glaring at her, and she had no doubts what they were thinking. *What is this girl doing here?*

'Some ugly patterns keep repeating,' she murmured.

Father Yarvi nodded. 'Such is life. It is a rare mistake you make only once.'

'Can I ask a question?'

'I have the sense that if I said no, you would ask anyway.'

'I'm not too deep a well to fathom, I reckon.'

'Then speak.'

'What am I doing here?'

'Why, holy men and deep-cunning women have been asking that question for a thousand years and never come near an answer.'

'Try talking to Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver on the subject,' grunted Rulf, pushing them clear of the wharf with the butt of a spear. 'He'll bore your ears off with his talk of whys and wherefores.'

'Who is it indeed,' muttered Yarvi, frowning off towards the far horizon as though he could see the answers written in the clouds, 'that can plumb the gods' grand design? Might as well ask where the elves went!' And the old man and the young grinned at each other. Plainly this act was not new to them.

'Very good,' said Thorn. 'I mean, why have you brought me onto this ship?'

'Ah.' Yarvi turned to Rulf. 'Why do you think, rather than taking the easy road and crushing her, I have endangered all our lives by bringing the notorious killer Thorn Bathu onto my ship?'

Rulf leaned on his spear a moment, scratching at his beard. 'I've really no idea.'

Yarvi looked at Thorn with his eyes very wide. 'If I don't share my thinking with my own left hand, why ever would I share it with the likes of you? I mean to say, you stink.'

Thorn rubbed at her temples. 'I need to sit down.'

Rulf put a fatherly hand on her shoulder. 'I understand.' He shoved her onto the nearest chest so hard she went squawking over the back of it and into the lap of the man behind. 'This is your oar.'