

Sample Chapters from

Red Country

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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Some Kind of Coward

'Gold.' Wist made the word sound like a mystery there was no solving. 'Makes men mad.'

Shy nodded. 'Those that ain't mad already.'

They sat in front of Stupfer's Meat House, which might've sounded like a brothel but was actually the worst place to eat within fifty miles, and that with some fierce competition. Shy perched on the sacks in her wagon and Wist on the fence, where he always seemed to be, like he'd such a splinter in his arse he'd got stuck there. They watched the crowd.

'I came here to get away from people,' said Wist.

Shy nodded. 'Now look.'

Last summer you could've spent all day in town and not seen two people you didn't know. You could've spent some days in town and not seen two people. A lot can change with a few months and a gold find. Now Squaredeal was bursting at its ragged seams with bold pioneers. One-way traffic, headed west towards imagined riches, some charging through fast as the clutter would allow, some stopping off to add their own share of commerce and chaos. Wagon-wheels clattered, mules nickered and horses neighed, livestock honked and oxen bellowed. Men, women and children of all races and stations did plenty of their own honking and bellowing too, in every language and temper. It might've been quite the colourful spectacle if everywhere the blown dust hadn't leached each tone to that same grey ubiquity of dirt.

Wist sucked a noisy mouthful from his bottle. 'Quite the variety, ain't there?'

Shy nodded. 'All set on getting something for nothing.'

All struck with a madness of hope. Or of greed, depending on the observer's faith in humanity, which in Shy's case stood less than brim-full. All drunk on the chance of reaching into some freezing pool out there in the great empty and plucking up a new life with both hands. Leaving their humdrum selves behind on the bank like a shed skin and taking a short cut to happiness.

'Tempted to join 'em?' asked Wist.

Shy pressed her tongue against her front teeth and spat through the gap between. 'Not me.' If they made it across the Far Country alive, the odds were stacked high they'd spend a winter up to their arses in ice water and dig up naught but dirt. And if lightning did strike the end of your spade, what then? Ain't like rich folk got no trouble.

There'd been a time Shy thought she'd get something for nothing. Shed her skin and step away smiling. Turned out sometimes the short cut don't lead quite where you hoped, and cuts through bloody country, too.

'Just the rumour o' gold turns 'em mad.' Wist took another swallow, the knobble on his scrawny neck bobbing, and watched two would-be prospectors wrestle over the last pickaxe at a stall while the trader struggled vainly to calm them. 'Imagine how these bastards'll act if they ever close hands around a nugget.'

Shy didn't have to imagine. She'd seen it, and didn't prize the memories. 'Men don't need much beckoning on to act like animals.'

'Nor women neither,' added Wist.

Shy narrowed her eyes at him. 'Why look at me?'

'You're foremost in my mind.'

'Not sure I like being that close to your face.'

Wist showed her his tombstone teeth as he laughed, and handed her the bottle.

'Why don't you got a man, Shy?'

'Don't like men much, I guess.'

'You don't like anyone much.'

'They started it.'

'All of 'em?'

'Enough of 'em.' She gave the mouth of the bottle a good wipe and made sure she took only a sip. She knew how easy she could turn a sip into a swallow, and the swallow into a bottle, and the bottle into waking up smelling of piss with one leg in the creek. There were folk counting on her, and she'd had her fill of being a disappointment.

The wrestlers had been dragged apart and were spitting insults each in their own tongue, neither quite catching the details but both getting the gist. Looked

like the pick had vanished in the commotion, more'n likely spirited away by a canner adventurer while eyes were elsewhere.

'Gold surely can turn men mad,' muttered Wist, all wistful as his name implied. 'Still, if the ground opened and offered me the good stuff I don't suppose I'd be turning down a nugget.'

Shy thought of the farm, and all the tasks to do, and all the time she hadn't got for the doing of 'em, and rubbed her roughed-up thumbs against her chewed-up fingers. For the quickest moment a trek into the hills didn't sound such a mad notion after all. What if there really was gold up there? Scattered on some stream bed in priceless abundance, longing for the kiss of her itchy fingertips? Shy South, luckiest woman in the Near Country . . .

'Hah.' She slapped the thought away like a bothersome fly. High hopes were luxuries she couldn't stretch to. 'In my experience, the ground ain't giving aught away. No more'n the rest of us misers.'

'Got a lot, do you?'

'Eh?'

'Experience.'

She winked as she handed his bottle back. 'More'n you can imagine, old man.' A damn stretch more'n most of the pioneers, that was sure. Shy shook her head as she watched the latest crowd coming through – a set of Union worthies, by their looks, dressed for a picnic rather than a slog across a few hundred miles of lawless empty. Folk who should've been satisfied with the comfortable lives they had, suddenly deciding they'd take any chance at grabbing more. Shy wondered how long it'd be before they were limping back the other way, broken and broke. If they made it back.

'Where's Gully at?' asked Wist.

'Back on the farm, looking to my brother and sister.'

'Haven't seen him in a while.'

'He ain't been here in a while. Hurts him to ride, he says.'

'Getting old. Happens to us all. When you see him, tell him I miss him.'

'If he was here he'd have drunk your bottle dry in one swallow and you'd be cursing his name.'

'I daresay.' Wist sighed. 'That's how it is with things missed.'

By then, Lamb was fording the people-flooded street, shag of grey hair showing above the heads around him for all his stoop, an even sorrier set to his heavy shoulders than usual.

'What did you get?' she asked, hopping down from the wagon.

Lamb winced, like he knew what was coming. 'Twenty-seven?' His rumble of a voice tweaked high at the end to make a question of it, but what he was really asking was, *How bad did I fuck up?*

Shy shook her head, tongue wedged in her cheek, letting him know he'd fucked up middling to bad. 'You're some kind of a bloody coward, Lamb.' She thumped at the sacks and sent up a puff of grain dust. 'I didn't spend two days dragging this up here to give it away.'

He winced a bit more, grey-bearded face creasing around the old scars and laughter lines, all weather-worn and dirt-grained. 'I'm no good with the bartering, Shy, you know that.'

'Remind me what it is y'are good with?' she tossed over her shoulder as she strode for Clay's Exchange, letting a set of piebald goats bleat past then slipping through the traffic sideways-on. 'Except hauling the sacks?'

'That's something, ain't it?' he muttered.

The store was busier even than the street, smelling of sawn wood and spices and hard-working bodies packed tight. She had to shove between a clerk and some blacker'n black Southerner trying to make himself understood in no language she'd ever heard before, then around a washboard hung from the low rafters and set swinging by a careless elbow, then past a frowning Ghost, his red hair all bound up with twigs, leaves still on and everything. All these folk scrambling west meant money to be made, and woe to the merchant tried to put himself between Shy and her share.

'Clay?' she bellowed, nothing to be gained by whispering. 'Clay!'

The trader frowned up, caught in the midst of weighing flour out on his man-high scales. 'Shy South in Squaredeal. Ain't this my lucky day.'

'Looks that way. You got a whole town full o' saps to *swindle!*' She gave the last word a bit of air, made a few heads turn and Clay plant his big fists on his hips.

'No one's swindling no one,' he said.

'Not while I've got an eye on business.'

'Me and your father agreed on twenty-seven, Shy.'

'You know he ain't my father. And you know you ain't agreed shit 'til I've agreed it.'

Clay cocked an eyebrow at Lamb and the Northman looked straight to the ground, shifting sideways like he was trying and wholly failing to vanish. For all Lamb's bulk he'd a weak eye, slapped down by any glance that held it. He could be a loving man, and a hard worker, and he'd been a fair stand-in for a father to Ro and Pit and Shy too, far as she'd given him the chance. A good enough man, but by the dead he was some kind of coward.

Shy felt ashamed for him, and ashamed of him, and that nettled her. She stabbed her finger in Clay's face like it was a drawn dagger she'd no qualms about using. 'Squaredeal's a strange sort o' name for a town where you'd claw out a business! You paid twenty-eight last season, and you didn't have a quarter of the customers. I'll take thirty-eight.'

'What?' Clay's voice squeaking even higher than she'd predicted. 'Golden grain, is it?'

'That's right. Top quality. Threshed with my own blistered bloody hands.'

'And mine,' muttered Lamb.

'Shush,' said Shy. 'I'll take thirty-eight and refuse to be moved.'

'Don't do me no favours!' raged Clay, fat face filling with angry creases. 'Because I loved your mother I'll offer twenty nine.'

'You never loved a thing but your purse. Anything short of thirty-eight and I'd sooner set up next to your store and offer all this through-traffic just a little less than what you're offering.'

He knew she'd do it, even if it cost her. Never make a threat you aren't at least halfway sure you'll carry through on. 'Thirty-one,' he grated out.

'Thirty-five.'

'You're holding up all these good folk, you selfish bitch!' Or rather she was giving the good folk notice of the profits he was chiselling and sooner or later they'd catch on.

'They're scum to a man, and I'll hold 'em up 'til Juvens gets back from the land of the dead if it means thirty-five.'

'Thirty-two.'

‘Thirty-five.’

‘Thirty-three and you might as well burn my store down on the way out!’

‘Don’t tempt me, fat man. Thirty-three and you can toss in a pair o’ those new shovels and some feed for my oxen. They eat almost as much as you.’ She spat in her palm and held it out.

Clay bitterly worked his mouth, but he spat all the same, and they shook. ‘Your mother was no better.’

‘Couldn’t stand the woman.’ Shy elbowed her way back towards the door, leaving Clay to vent his upset on his next customer. ‘Not that hard, is it?’ she tossed over her shoulder at Lamb.

The big old Northman fussed with the notch out of his ear. ‘Think I’d rather have settled for the twenty-seven.’

‘That’s ’cause you’re some kind of a bloody coward. Better to do it than live with the fear of it. Ain’t that what you always used to tell me?’

‘Time’s shown me the downside o’ that advice,’ muttered Lamb, but Shy was too busy congratulating herself.

Thirty-three was a good price. She’d worked over the sums, and thirty-three would leave something towards Ro’s books once they’d fixed the barn’s leaking roof and got a breeding pair of pigs to replace the ones they’d butchered in winter. Maybe they could stretch to some seed too, try and nurse the cabbage patch back to health. She was grinning, thinking on what she could put right with that money, what she could build.

You don’t need a big dream, her mother used to tell her when she was in a rare good mood, a little one will do it.

‘Let’s get them sacks shifted,’ she said.

He might’ve been getting on in years, might’ve been slow as an old favourite cow, but Lamb was strong as ever. No weight would bend the man. All Shy had to do was stand on the wagon and heft the sacks one by one onto his shoulders while he stood, complaining less than the wagon had at the load. Then he’d stroll them across, four at a time, and stack them in Clay’s yard easy as sacks of feathers. Shy might’ve been half his weight, but had the easier task and twenty-five years advantage and still, soon enough, she was leaking water faster than a fresh-dug well, vest plastered to her back and hair to her face, arms pink-chafed

by canvas and white-powdered with grain dust, tongue wedged in the gap between her teeth while she cursed up a storm.

Lamb stood there, two sacks over one shoulder and one over the other, hardly even breathing hard, those deep laugh lines striking out from the corners of his eyes. 'Need a rest, Shy?'

She gave him a look. 'A rest from your carping.'

'I could shift some o' those sacks around and make a little cot for you. Might be there's a blanket in the back there. I could sing you to sleep like I did when you were young.'

'I'm still young.'

'Ish. Sometimes I think about that little girl smiling up at me.' Lamb looked off into the distance, shaking his head. 'And I wonder – where did me and your mother go wrong?'

'She died and you're useless?' Shy heaved the last sack up and dropped it on his shoulder from as great a height as she could manage.

Lamb only grinned as he slapped his hand down on top. 'Maybe that's it.' As he turned he nearly barged into another Northman, big as he was and a lot meaner-looking. The man started growling some curse, then stopped in the midst. Lamb kept trudging, head down, how he always did from the least breath of trouble. The Northman frowned up at Shy.

'What?' she said, staring right back.

He frowned after Lamb, then walked off, scratching at his beard.

The shadows were getting long and the clouds pink in the west when Shy dumped the last sack under Clay's grinning face and he held out the money, leather bag dangling from one thick forefinger by the drawstrings. She stretched her back out, wiped her forehead on one glove, then worked the bag open and peered inside.

'All here?'

'I'm not going to rob you.'

'Damn right you're not.' And she set to counting it. *You can always tell a thief,* her mother used to say, *on account of all the care they take with their own money.*

'Maybe I should go through every sack, make sure there's grain in 'em not shit?'

Shy snorted. 'If it was shit would that stop you selling it?'

The merchant sighed. 'Have it your way.'

'I will.'

'She does tend to,' added Lamb.

A pause, with just the clicking of coins and the turning of numbers in her head. 'Heard Glama Golden won another fight in the pit up near Greyer,' said Clay. 'They say he's the toughest bastard in the Near Country and there's some tough bastards about. Take a fool to bet against him now, whatever the odds. Take a fool to fight him.'

'No doubt,' muttered Lamb, always quiet when violence was the subject.

'Heard from a man watched it he beat old Stockling Bear so hard his guts came out of his arse.'

'That's entertainment, is it?' asked Shy.

'Beats shitting your own guts.'

'That ain't much of a review.'

Clay shrugged. 'I've heard worse ones. Did you hear about this battle, up near Rostod?'

'Something about it,' she muttered, trying to keep her count straight.

'Rebels got beat again, I heard. Bad, this time. All on the run now. Those the Inquisition didn't get a hold on.'

'Poor bastards,' said Lamb.

Shy paused her count a moment, then carried on. There were a lot of poor bastards about but they couldn't all be her problem. She'd enough worries with her brother and sister, and Lamb, and Gully, and the farm without crying over others' self-made misfortunes.

'Might be they'll make a stand up at Mulkova, but they won't be standing long.' Clay made the fence creak as he leaned his soft bulk back on it, hands tucked under his armpits with the thumbs sticking up. 'War's all but over, if you can call it a war, and there's plenty of people shook off their land. Shook off or burned out or lost what they had. Passes are opened up, ships coming through. Lots of folk seeing their fortune out west all of a sudden.' He nodded at the dusty chaos in the street, still boiling over even as the sun set. 'This here's just the first trickle. There's a flood coming.'

Lamb sniffed. 'Like as not they'll find the mountains ain't one great piece of gold and soon come flooding back the other way.'

'Some will. Some'll put down roots. The Union'll be coming along after. However much land the Union get, they always want more, and what with that find out west they'll smell money. That vicious old bastard Sarmis is sitting on the border and rattling his sword for the Empire, but his sword's always rattling. Won't stop the tide, I reckon.' Clay took a step closer to Shy and spoke soft, like he had secrets to share. 'I heard tell there's already been Union agents in Hormring, talking annexation.'

'They're buying folk out?'

'They'll have a coin in one hand, sure, but they'll have a blade in the other. They always do. We should be thinking about how we'll play it, if they come to Squaredeal. We should stand together, those of us been here a while.'

'I ain't interested in politics.' Shy wasn't interested in anything might bring trouble.

'Most of us aren't,' said Clay, 'but sometimes politics takes an interest in us all the same. The Union'll be coming, and they'll bring law with 'em.'

'Law don't seem such a bad thing,' Shy lied.

'Maybe not. But taxes follow law quick as the cart behind the donkey.'

'Can't say I'm an enthusiast for taxes.'

'Just a fancier way to rob a body, ain't it? I'd rather be thieved honest with mask and dagger than have some bloodless bastard come at me with pen and paper.'

'Don't know about that,' muttered Shy. None of those she'd robbed had looked too delighted with the experience, and some a lot less than Red others. She let the coins slide back into the bag and drew the string tight.

'How's the count?' asked Clay. 'Anything missing?'

'Not this time. But I reckon I'll keep watching just the same.'

The merchant grinned. 'I'd expect no less.'

She picked out a few things they needed – salt, vinegar, some sugar since it only came in time to time, a wedge of dried beef, half a bag of nails which brought the predictable joke from Clay that she was half a bag of nails herself, which brought the predictable joke from her that she'd nail his fruits to his leg, which

brought the predictable joke from Lamb that Clay's fruits were so small she might not get a nail through. They had a bit of a chuckle over each other's quick wits.

She almost got carried away and bought a new shirt for Pit which was more'n they could afford, good price or other price, but Lamb patted her arm with his gloved hand, and she bought needles and thread instead so she could make him a shirt from one of Lamb's old ones. She probably could've made five shirts for Pit from one of Lamb's, the boy was that skinny. The needles were a new kind, Clay said were stamped out of a machine in Adua, hundreds at a press, and Shy smiled as she thought what Gully would say to that, shaking his white head at them and saying, needles from a machine, what'll be thought of next, while Ro turned them over and over in her quick fingers, frowning down as she worked out how it was done.

Shy paused in front of the spirits to lick her lips a moment, glass gleaming amber in the darkness, then forced herself on without, haggled harder than ever with Clay over his prices, and they were finished.

'Never come to this store again, you mad bitch!' The trader hurled at her as she climbed up onto the wagon's seat alongside Lamb. 'You've damn near ruined me!'

'Next season?'

He waved a fat hand as he turned back to his customers. 'Aye, see you then.'

She reached to take the brake off and almost put her hand in the beard of the Northman Lamb knocked into earlier. He was standing right beside the wagon, brow all ploughed up like he was trying to bring some foggy memory to mind, thumbs tucked into a sword-belt – big, simple hilt close to hand. A rough style of character, a scar borne near one eye and jagged through his scraggy beard. Shy kept a pleasant look on her face as she eased her knife out, spinning the blade about so it was hidden behind her arm. Better to have steel to hand and find no trouble than find yourself in trouble with no steel to hand.

The Northman said something in his own tongue. Lamb hunched a little lower in his seat, not even turning to look. The Northman spoke again. Lamb grunted something back, then snapped the reins and the wagon rolled off, Shy swaying with the jolting wheels. She snatched a glance over her shoulder when they'd

gone a few strides down the rutted street. The Northman was still standing in their dust, frowning after them.

‘What’d he want?’

‘Nothing.’

She slid her knife into its sheath, stuck one boot on the rail and sat back, settling her hat brim low so the setting sun wasn’t in her eyes. ‘The world’s brimming over with strange people, all right. You spend time worrying what they’re thinking, you’ll be worrying all your life.’

Lamb was hunched lower than ever, like he was trying to vanish into his own chest.

Shy snorted. ‘You’re such a bloody coward.’

He gave her a sideways look, then away. ‘There’s worse a man can be.’

They were laughing when they clattered over the rise and the shallow little valley opened out in front of them. Something Lamb had said. He’d perked up when they left town, as usual. Never at his best in a crowd.

It gave Shy’s spirits a lift besides, coming up that track that was hardly more than two faded lines through the long grass. She’d been through black times in her younger years, midnight black times, when she thought she’d be killed out under the sky and left to rot, or caught and hanged and tossed out unburied for the dogs to rip at. More than once, in the midst of nights sweated through with fear, she’d sworn to be grateful every moment of her life if fate gave her the chance to tread this unremarkable path again. Eternal gratitude hadn’t quite come about, but that’s promises for you. She still felt that bit lighter as the wagon rolled home.

Then they saw the farm, and the laughter choked in her throat and they sat silent while the wind fumbled through the grass around them. Shy couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, couldn’t think, all her veins flushed with ice-water. Then she was down from the wagon and running.

‘Shy!’ Lamb roared at her back, but she hardly heard, head full of her own rattling breath, pounding down the slope, land and sky jolting around her. Through the stubble of the field they’d harvested not a week before. Over the trampled-down fence and the chicken feathers crushed into the mud.

She made it to the yard – what had been the yard – and stood helpless. The house was all dead charred timbers and rubbish and nothing left standing but the tottering chimney-stack. No smoke. The rain must've put out the fires a day or two before. But everything was burned out. She ran around the side of the blacked wreck of the barn, whimpering a little now with each breath.

Gully was hanged from the big tree out back. They'd hanged him over her mother's grave and kicked down the headstone. He was shot through with arrows. Might've been a dozen, might've been more.

Shy felt like she was kicked in the guts and she bent over, arms hugged around herself, and groaned, and the tree groaned with her as the wind shook its leaves and set Gully's corpse gently swinging. Poor old harmless bastard. He'd called to her as they'd rattled off on the wagon. Said she didn't need to worry 'cause he'd look to the children, and she'd laughed at him and said she didn't need to worry 'cause the children would look to him, and she couldn't see nothing for the aching in her eyes and the wind stinging at them, and she clamped her arms tighter, feeling suddenly so cold nothing could warm her.

She heard Lamb's boots thumping up, then slowing, then coming steady until he stood beside her.

'Where are the children?'

They dug the house over, and the barn. Slow, and steady, and numb to begin with. Lamb dragged the scorched timbers clear while Shy scraped through the ashes, sure she'd scrape up Pit and Ro's bones. But they weren't in the house. Nor in the barn. Nor in the yard. Wilder now, trying to smother her fear, and more frantic, trying to smother her hope, casting through the grass, and clawing at the rubbish, but the closest Shy came to her brother and sister was a charred toy horse Lamb had whittled for Pit years past and the scorched pages of some of Ro's books she let blow through her fingers.

The children were vanished.

She stood there, staring into the wind, back of one raw hand against her mouth and her chest going hard. Only one thing she could think of.

'They're stolen,' she croaked.

Lamb just nodded, his grey hair and his grey beard all streaked with soot.

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

She wiped her blackened hands on the front of her shirt and made fists of them. 'We've got to get after.'

'Aye.'

She squatted down over the chewed-up sod around the tree. Wiped her nose and her eyes. Followed the tracks bent over to another battered patch of ground. She found an empty bottle trampled into the mud, tossed it away. They'd made no effort at hiding their sign. Horse-prints all around, circling the shells of the buildings. 'I'm guessing at about twenty. Might've been forty horses, though. They left the spare mounts over here.'

'To carry the children, maybe?'

'Carry 'em where?'

Lamb just shook his head.

She went on, keen to say anything that might fill the space. Keen to set to work at something so she didn't have to think. 'My way of looking at it, they came in from the west and left going south. Left in a hurry.'

'I'll get the shovels. We'll bury Gully.'

They did it quick. She shinned up the tree, knowing every foot- and handhold. She used to climb it long ago, before Lamb came, while her mother watched and Gully clapped, and now her mother was buried under it and Gully was hanged from it, and she knew somehow she'd made it happen. You can't bury a past like hers and think you'll walk away laughing.

She cut him down, and broke the arrows off, and smoothed his bloody hair while Lamb dug out a hole next to her mother. She closed his popping eyes and put her hand on his cheek and it was cold. He looked so small now, and so thin, she wanted to put a coat on him but there was none to hand. Lamb lowered him in a clumsy hug, and they filled the hole together, and they dragged her mother's stone up straight again and tramped the thrashing grass around it, ash blowing on the cold wind in specks of black and grey, whipping across the land and off to nowhere.

'Should we say something?' asked Shy.

'I've nothing to say.' Lamb swung himself up onto the wagon's seat. Might still have been an hour of light left.

'We ain't taking that,' said Shy. 'I can run faster'n those bloody oxen.'

'Not longer, though, and not with gear, and we'll do no good rushing at this. They've got what? Two, three days' start on us? And they'll be riding hard. Twenty men, you said? We have to be realistic, Shy.'

'Realistic?' she whispered at him, hardly able to believe it.

'If we chase after on foot, and don't starve or get washed away in a storm, and if we catch 'em, what then? We're not armed, even. Not with more'n your knife. No. We'll follow on fast as Scale and Calder can take us.' Nodding at the oxen, grazing a little while they had the chance. 'See if we can pare a couple off the herd. Work out what they're about.'

'Clear enough what they're about!' she said, pointing at Gully's grave. 'And what happens to Ro and Pit while we're fucking *following on*?' She ended up screaming it at him, voice splitting the silence and a couple of hopeful crows taking flight from the tree's branches.

The corner of Lamb's mouth twitched but he didn't look at her. 'We'll follow.' Like it was a fact agreed on. 'Might be we can talk this out. Buy 'em back.'

'Buy 'em? They burn your farm, and they hang your friend, and they steal your children and you want to *pay 'em* for the privilege? You're such a fucking coward!'

Still he didn't look at her. 'Sometimes a coward's what you need.' His voice was rough. Clicking in his throat. 'No shed blood's going to unburn this farm now, nor unhang Gully neither. That's done. Best we can do is get back the little ones, any way we can. Get 'em back safe.' This time the twitch started at his mouth and scurried all the way up his scarred cheek to the corner of his eye. 'Then we'll see.'

Shy took a last look as they lurched away towards the setting sun. Her home. Her hopes. How a day can change things about. Naught left but a few scorched timbers poking at the pinking sky. You don't need a big dream. She felt about as low as she ever had in all her life, and she'd been in some bad, dark, low-down places. Hardly had the strength all of a sudden to hold her head up.

'Why'd they have to burn it all?' she whispered.

'Some men just like to burn,' said Lamb.

Shy looked around at him, the outline of his battered frown showing below his battered hat, the dying sun glimmering in one eye, and thought how strange it

was, that he could be so calm. A man who hadn't the guts to argue over prices, thinking death and kidnap through. Being realistic about the end of all they'd worked for.

'How can you sit so level?' she whispered at him. 'Like . . . like you knew it was coming.'

Still he didn't look at her. 'It's always coming.'

The Easy Way

'I have suffered many disappointments.' Nicomo Cosca, captain general of the Company of the Gracious Hand, leaned back stiffly upon one elbow as he spoke. 'I suppose every great man faces them. Abandons dreams wrecked by betrayal and finds new ones to pursue.' He frowned towards Mulkova, columns of smoke drifting from the burning city and up into the blue heavens. 'I have abandoned very many dreams.'

'That must have taken tremendous courage,' said Sworbreck, eyeglasses briefly twinkling as he looked up from his notes.

'Indeed! I lose count of the number of times my death has been prematurely declared by one optimistic enemy or another. Forty years of trials, struggles, challenges, betrayals. Live long enough . . . you see everything ruined.' Cosca shook himself from his reverie. 'But it hasn't been boring, at least! What adventures along the way, eh, Temple?'

Temple winced. He had borne personal witness to five years of occasional fear, frequent tedium, intermittent diarrhoea, failure to avoid the plague, and avoiding fighting as if it was the plague. But he was not paid for the truth. Far from it.

'Heroic,' he said.

'Temple is my notary. He prepares the contracts and sees them honoured. One of the cleverest bastards I ever met. How many languages do you speak, Temple?'

'Fluently, no more than six.'

'Most important man in the whole damn Company! Apart from me, of course.' A breeze washed across the hillside and stirred the wispy white hairs about Cosca's liver-spotted pate. 'I so look forward to telling you my stories, Sworbreck!' Temple restrained another grimace of distaste. 'The Siege of Dagoska!' Which ended in utter disaster. 'The Battle of Afieri!' Shameful debacle. 'The Years of Blood!' Sides changed like shirts. 'The Kadiri Campaign!' Drunken fiasco. 'I even kept a goat for several years. A stubborn beast, but loyal, you'd have to give her that . . .'

Sworbreck achieved the not-inconsiderable feat of performing an obsequious bow while sitting cross-legged against a slab of fallen masonry. 'I have no doubt my readers will thrill to your exploits.'

'Enough to fill twenty volumes!'

'Three will be more than adequate—'

'I was once Grand Duke of Visserine, you know.' Cosca waved down attempts at abasement which had, in fact, not happened. 'Don't worry, you need not call me Excellency – we are all informal here in the Company of the Gracious Hand, are we not, Temple?'

Temple took a long breath. 'We are all informal.' Most of them were liars, all of them were thieves, some of them were killers. Informality was not surprising.

'Sergeant Friendly has been with me even longer than Temple, ever since we deposed Grand Duke Orso and placed Monzcarro Murcatto on the throne of Talins.'

Sworbreck looked up. 'You know the Grand Duchess?'

'Intimately. I consider it no exaggeration to say I was her close friend and mentor. I saved her life at the siege of Muris, and she mine! The story of her rise to power is one I must relate to you at some stage, a noble business. There are precious few persons of quality I have not fought for or against at one time or another. Sergeant Friendly?'

The neckless sergeant looked up, face a blank slab.

'What have you made of your time with me?'

'I preferred prison.' And he returned to rolling his dice, an activity which could fully occupy him for hours at a time.

'He is such a wag, that one!' Cosca waved a bony finger at him, though there was no evidence of a joke. In five years Temple had never heard Sergeant Friendly make a joke. 'Sworbreck, you will find the Company alive with joshing good fun!'

Not to mention simmering feuds, punishing laziness, violence, disease, looting, treachery, drunkenness and debauchery fit to make a devil blush.

'These five years,' said Temple, 'I've hardly stopped laughing.'

There was a time he had found the Old Man's stories hilarious, enchanting, stirring. A magical glimpse of what it was to be without fear. Now they made him

feel sick. Whether Temple had learned the truth or Cosca had forgotten it, it was hard to say. Perhaps a little of both.

‘Yes, it’s been quite a career. Many proud moments. Many triumphs. But defeats, too. Every great man has them. Regrets are the cost of the business, Sazine always used to say. People have often accused me of inconsistency but I feel that I have always, at any given junction, done the same thing. Exactly what I pleased.’ The aged mercenary’s fickle attention having wandered back to his imagined glorious past, Temple began to ease away, slipping around a broken column. ‘I had a happy childhood but a wild youth, filled with ugly incidents, and at seventeen I left my birthplace to seek my fortune with only my wits, my courage, and my trusty blade . . .’

The sounds of boasting mercifully faded as Temple retreated down the hillside, stepping from the shadow of the ancient ruin and into the sun. Whatever Cosca might say, there was little joshing good fun going on down here.

Temple had seen wretchedness. He had lived through more than his share. But he had rarely seen people so miserable as the Company’s latest batch of prisoners: a dozen of the fearsome rebels of Starikland chained naked, bloody, filthy and dead-eyed to a stake in the ground. It was hard to imagine them a threat to the greatest nation in the Circle of the World. It was hard to imagine them as humans. Only the tattoos on their forearms showed some last futile defiance.

Fuck the Union. Fuck the King. Read the nearest, a line of bold script from elbow to wrist. A sentiment with which Temple had increasing sympathy. He was developing a sneaking feeling he had found his way onto the wrong side. Again. But it’s not always easy to tell when you’re picking. Perhaps, as Kahdia once told him, you are on the wrong side as soon as you pick one. But it had been Temple’s observation that it was those caught in the middle that always get the worst of it. And he was done with getting the worst.

Sufeen stood by the prisoners, an empty canteen in one hand.

‘What are you about?’ asked Temple.

‘He is wasting water,’ said Bermi, lounging in the sun nearby and scratching at his blond beard.

‘On the contrary,’ said Sufeen. ‘I am trying to administer God’s mercy to our prisoners.’

One had a terrible wound in his side, undressed. His eyes flickered, his lips mouthed meaningless orders or meaningless prayers. Once you could smell a wound there was little hope. But the outlook for the others was no better. ‘If there is a God, He is a smarmy swindler and never to be trusted with anything of importance,’ muttered Temple. ‘Mercy would be to kill them.’

Bermi concurred. ‘I’ve been saying so.’

‘But that would take courage.’ Sufeen lifted his scabbard, offering up the hilt of his sword. ‘Have you courage, Temple?’

Temple snorted.

Sufeen let the weapon drop. ‘Nor I. And so I give them water, and have not enough even of that. What is happening at the top of the hill?’

‘We await our employers. And the Old Man is feeding his vanity.’

‘That’s a hell of an appetite to satisfy,’ said Bermi, picking daisies and flicking them away.

‘Bigger every day. It rivals Sufeen’s guilt.’

‘This is not guilt,’ said Sufeen, frowning towards the prisoners. ‘This is righteousness. Did the priests not teach you that?’

‘Nothing like a religious education to cure a man of righteousness,’ muttered Temple. He thought of Haddish Kahdia speaking the lessons in the plain white room, and his younger self scoffing at them. Charity, mercy, selflessness. How conscience is that piece of Himself that God puts in every man. A splinter of the divine. One that Temple had spent long years struggling to prise out. He caught the eye of one of the rebels. A woman, hair tangled across her face. She reached out as far as the chains would allow. For the water or the sword, he could not say. *Grasp your future!* called the words inked into her skin. He pulled out his own canteen, frowned as he weighed it in his hand.

‘Some guilt of your own?’ asked Sufeen.

It might have been a while since he wore them, but Temple had not forgotten what chains felt like. ‘How long have you been a scout?’ he snapped.

‘Eighteen years.’

‘You should know by now that conscience is a shitty navigator.’

'It certainly doesn't know the country out here,' added Bermi.

Sufeen spread wide his hands. 'Who then shall show us the way?'

'Temple!' Cosca's cracked howl, floating from above.

'Your guide calls,' said Sufeen. 'You will have to give them water later.'

Temple tossed him the canteen as he headed back up the hillside. 'You do it. Later, the Inquisition will have them.'

'Always the easy way, eh, Temple?' called Sufeen after him.

'Always,' muttered Temple. He made no apology for it.

'Welcome, gentlemen, welcome!' Cosca swept off his outrageous hat as their illustrious employers approached, riding in tight formation around a great fortified wagon. Even though the Old Man had, thank God, quit spirits yet again a few months before, he still seemed always slightly drunk. There was a floppy flourish to his knobby hands, a lazy drooping of his withered eyelids, a rambling music to his speech. That and you could never be entirely sure what he would do or say next. There had been a time Temple had found that constant uncertainty thrilling, like watching the lucky wheel spin and wondering if his number would come up. Now it felt more like cowering beneath a storm-cloud and waiting for the lightning.

'General Cosca.' Superior Pike, head of his August Majesty's Inquisition in Starikland and the most powerful man within five hundred miles, was the first to dismount. His face was burned beyond recognition, eyes darkly shadowed in a mask of mottled pink, the corner of his mouth curled up in what was either a smile or a trick of the ravages of fire. A dozen of his hulking Practicals, dressed and masked in black and bristling with weaponry, arranged themselves watchfully about the ruin.

Cosca grinned across the valley towards the smouldering city, unintimidated. 'Mulkova burns, I see.'

'Better that it burn in Union hands than prosper under the rebels,' said Inquisitor Lorsen as he got down: tall and gaunt, his eyes bright with zeal. Temple envied him that. To feel certain in the right no matter what wrongs you took part in.

'Quite so,' said Cosca. 'A sentiment with which her citizens no doubt all agree! Sergeant Friendly you know, and this is Master Temple, notary to my company.'

General Brint dismounted last, the operation rendered considerably more difficult since he had lost most of an arm at the Battle of Osrung along with his entire sense of humour, and wore the left sleeve of his crimson uniform folded and pinned to his shoulder. 'You are prepared for legal disagreements, then,' he said, adjusting his sword-belt and eyeing Temple as if he was the morning plague cart.

'The second thing a mercenary needs is a good weapon.' Cosca clapped a fatherly hand on Temple's shoulder. 'The first is good legal advice.'

'And where does an utter lack of moral scruple feature?'

'Number five,' said Temple. 'Just behind a short memory and a ready wit.'

Superior Pike was considering Sworbreck, still scribbling notes. 'And on what does this man advise you?'

'That is Spillion Sworbreck, my biographer.'

'No more than a humble teller of tales!' Sworbreck gave the Superior a flamboyant bow. 'Though I freely confess that my prose has caused grown men to weep.'

'In a good way?' asked Temple.

If he heard, the author was too busy praising himself to respond. 'I compose stories of heroism and adventure to inspire the Union's citizens! Widely distributed now, via the wonders of the new Rimaldi printing press. You have heard, perhaps, of my *Tales of Harod the Great* in five volumes?' Silence. 'In which I mine the mythic splendour of the origin of the Union itself?' Silence. 'Or the eight-volume sequel, *The Life of Casamir, Hero of Angland*?' Silence. 'In which I hold up the mirror of past glories to expose the moral collapse of the present day?'

'No.' Pike's melted face betrayed no emotion.

'I will have copies sent to you, Superior!'

'You could use readings from them to force confessions from your prisoners,' murmured Temple, under his breath.

'Do not trouble yourself,' said Pike.

'No trouble! General Cosca has permitted me to accompany him on his latest campaign while he relates the details of his fascinating career as a soldier of fortune! I mean to make him the subject of my most celebrated work to date!'

The echoes of Sworbreck's words faded into a crushing silence.

'Remove this man from my presence,' said Pike. 'His manner of expression offends me.'

Sworbreck backed down the hillside with an almost reckless speed, shepherded by two Practicals. Cosca continued without the slightest hint of embarrassment.

'General Brint!' and he seized the general's remaining hand in both of his. 'I understand you have some concerns about our participation in the assault—'

'It was the lack of it that bothered me!' snapped Brint, twisting his fingers free.

Cosca pushed out his lips with an air of injured innocence. 'You feel we fell short of our contractual obligations?'

'You've fallen short of honour, decency, professionalism—'

'I recall no reference to them in the contract,' said Temple.

'You were ordered to attack! Your failure to do so cost the lives of several of my men, one a personal friend!'

Cosca waved a lazy hand, as though personal friends were ephemera that could hardly be expected to bear on an adult discussion. 'We were engaged here, General Brint, quite hotly.'

'In a bloodless exchange of arrows!'

'You speak as though a bloody exchange would be preferable.' Temple held out his hand to Friendly. The sergeant produced the contract from an inside pocket. 'Clause eight, I believe.' He swiftly found the place and presented it for inspection. 'Technically, any exchange of projectiles constitutes engagement. Each member of the Company is, in fact, due a bonus as a result.'

Brint looked pale. 'A bonus, too? Despite the fact that not one man was wounded.'

Cosca cleared his throat. 'We do have a case of dysentery.'

'Is that a joke?'

'Not to anyone who has suffered the ravages of dysentery, I assure you!'

'Clause nineteen . . .' Paper crackled as Temple thumbed through the densely written document. 'Any man rendered inactive by illness during the discharge of his contractual obligations is to be considered a loss to the Company.' A further

payment is therefore due for the replacement of losses. Not to mention those for prisoners taken and delivered—'

'It all comes down to money, doesn't it?'

Cosca shrugged so high his gilt epaulettes tickled his earlobes. 'What else would it come down to? We are mercenaries. Better motives we leave to better men.'

Brint gazed at Temple, positively livid. 'You must be delighted with your wriggling, you Gurkish worm.'

'You were happy to put your name to the terms, General.' Temple flipped over the back page to display Brint's overwrought signature. 'My delight or otherwise does not enter the case. Nor does my wriggling. And I am generally agreed to be half-Dagoskan, half-Styrian, since you bring my parentage into—'

'You're a brown bastard son of a whore.'

Temple only smiled. 'My mother was never ashamed of her profession – why should I be?'

The general stared at Superior Pike, who had taken a seat on a lichen-splattered block of masonry, produced a haunch of bread and was trying to entice birds down from the crumbling ruin with faint kissing sounds. 'Am I to understand that you approve of this licensed banditry, Superior? This contractual cowardice, this outrageous—'

'General Brint.' Pike's voice was gentle, but somewhere in it had a screeching edge which, like the movement of rusty hinges, enforced wincing silence. 'We all appreciate the diligence you and your men have displayed. But the war is over. We won.' He tossed some crumbs into the grass and watched a tiny bird flit down and begin to peck. 'It is not fitting that we quibble over who did what. You signed the contract. We will honour it. We are not barbarians.'

'We are not.' Brint gave Temple, then Cosca, then Friendly a furious glare. They were all, each in his way, unmoved. 'I must get some air. There is a sickening *stench* here!' And with some effort the general hauled himself back into his saddle, turned his horse and thundered away, pursued by several aides-de-camp.

'I find the air quite pleasant,' said Temple brightly, somewhat relieved that confrontation at least was over.

'Pray forgive the general,' said Pike 'He is very much committed to his work.'

'I try always to be forgiving of other men's foibles,' said Cosca. 'I have enough of my own, after all.'

Pike did not attempt to deny it. 'I have further work for you even so. Inquisitor Lorsen, could you explain?' And he turned back to his birds, as though his meeting was with them and the rest a troublesome distraction.

Lorsen stepped forward, evidently relishing his moment. 'The rebellion is at an end. The Inquisition is weeding out all those disloyal to the crown. Some few rebels have escaped, however, scattering through the passes and into the uncivilised west where, no doubt, they will foment new discord.'

'Cowardly bastards!' Cosca slapped at his thigh. 'Could they not stand and be slaughtered like decent men? I'm all for fermentation but fomentation is a damned imposition!'

Lorsen narrowed his eyes as though at a contrary wind, and ploughed on. 'For political reasons, his Majesty's armies are unable to pursue them.'

'Political reasons . . .' offered Temple, 'such as a border?'

'Precisely,' said Lorsen.

Cosca examined his ridged and yellowed fingernails. 'Oh, I've never taken those very seriously.'

'Precisely,' said Pike.

'We want the Company of the Gracious Hand to cross the mountains and pacify the Near Country as far west as the Sokwaya River. This rot of rebellion must be excised once and for all.' Lorsen cut at imaginary filth with the edge of his hand, voice rising as he warmed to his subject. 'We must clean out this sink of depravity which has too long been allowed to fester on our border! This . . . overflowing latrine! This backed-up sewer, endlessly disgorging its ordure of chaos into the Union!'

Temple reflected that, for a man who professed himself opposed to ordure, Inquisitor Lorsen certainly relished a shit-based metaphor.

'Well, no one enjoys a backed-up sewer,' conceded Cosca. 'Except the sewer-men themselves, I suppose, who scratch out their wretched livings in the sludge. Unblocking the drains is a speciality of ours, isn't it, Sergeant Friendly?'

The big man looked up from his dice long enough to shrug.

‘Temple is the linguist but perhaps I might in this case interpret?’ The Old Man twisted the waxed tips of his grey moustaches between finger and thumb. ‘You wish us to visit a plague upon the settlers of the Near Country. You wish us to make stern examples of every rebel sheltered and every person who gives them shelter. You wish us to make them understand that their only future is with the grace and favour of his August Majesty. You wish us to force them into the welcoming arms of the Union. Do I come close to the mark?’

‘Close enough,’ murmured Superior Pike.

Temple found that he was sweating. When he wiped his forehead his hand trembled. But what could he do?

‘The Paper of Engagement is already prepared.’ Lorsen produced his own sheaf of crackling documents, a heavy seal of red wax upon its bottom corner.

Cosca waved it away. ‘My notary will look it over. All the legal fiddle-faddle quite swims before my eyes. I am a simple soldier.’

‘Admirable,’ said Pike, his hairless brows raised by the slightest fraction.

Temple’s ink-spotted forefinger traced through the blocks of calligraphy, eyes flickering from one point of interest to another. He realised he was picking nervously at the corners of the pages and made himself stop.

‘I will accompany you on the expedition,’ said Lorsen. ‘I have a list of settlements suspected of harbouring rebels. Or rebellious sentiment.’

Cosca grinned. ‘Nothing more dangerous than sentiment!’

‘In particular, his Eminence the Arch Lector offers a bonus of fifty thousand marks for the capture, alive, of the chief instigator of the insurrection, the one the rebels call Conthus. He goes also under the name of Symok. The Ghosts call him Black Grass. At the massacre in Rostod he used the alias—’

‘No further aliases, I beg you!’ Cosca massaged the sides of his skull as if they pained him. ‘Since suffering a head-wound at the Battle of Aferi I have been cursed with an appalling memory for names. It is a source of constant embarrassment. But Sergeant Friendly has all the details. If your man Conshus—’

‘Conthus.’

‘What did I say?’

‘Conshus.’

‘There you go! If he’s in the Near Country, he’ll be yours.’

'Alive,' snapped Lorsen. 'He must answer for his crimes. He must be made a lesson of. He must be put on display!'

'And he'll make a most educational show, I'm sure!'

Pike flicked another pinch of crumbs to his gathering flock. 'The methods we leave to you, captain general. We would only ask that there be something left in the ashes to annex.'

'As long as you realise a Company of mercenaries is more club than scalpel.'

'His Eminence has chosen the method and understands its limitations.'

'An inspirational man, the Arch Lector. We are close friends, you know.'

'His one firm stipulation, clear in the contract, as you see, is that you avoid any Imperial entanglements. Any and all, am I understood?' That grating note entered Pike's voice again. 'Legate Sarmis still haunts the border like an angry phantom. I do not suppose he will cross it but even so he is a man decidedly not to be trifled with, a most bloody-minded and bloody-handed adversary. His Eminence desires no further wars at present.'

'Do not concern yourself, I avoid fighting wherever possible.' Cosca slapped happily at the hilt of his blade. 'A sword is for rattling, not for drawing, eh?'

'We have a gift for you, also.' Superior Pike indicated the fortified wagon, an oaken monster bound in riveted iron and hauled by a team of eight muscular horses. It was halfway between conveyance and castle, with slitted windows and a crenelated parapet about the top, from which defenders might presumably shoot at circling enemies. Far from the most practical of gifts, but then Cosca had never been interested in practicalities.

'For me?' The Old Man pressed his withered hands to his gilded breastplate. 'It shall be my home from home out in the wilderness!'

'There is a . . . *secret* within,' said Lorsen. 'Something his Eminence would very much like to see tested.'

'I love surprises! Ones that don't involve armed men behind me, anyway. You may tell his Eminence it will be my honour.' Cosca stood, wincing as his aged knees audibly clicked. 'How does the Paper of Engagement appear?'

Temple looked up from the penultimate page. 'Er . . .' The contract was closely based on the one he had drawn up for their previous engagement, was watertight in every particular, was even more generous in several. 'Some issues

with supply,' he stammered, fumbling for objections. 'Food and weaponry are covered but the clause really should include—'

'Details. No cause for delay. Let's get the papers signed and the men ready to move. The longer they sit idle, the harder to get them off their arses. No force of nature so dangerous to life and commerce as mercenaries without employment.' Except, perhaps, mercenaries with employment.

'It would be prudent to allow me a little longer to—'

Cosca came close, setting his hand on Temple's shoulder again. 'Have you a legal objection?'

Temple paused, clutching for some words which might carry weight with a man with whom nothing carried any weight. 'Not a legal objection, no.'

'A financial objection?' offered Cosca.

'No, General.'

'Then . . . ?'

'Do you remember when we first met?'

Cosca suddenly flashed that luminous smile of which only he was capable, good humour and good intentions radiating from his deep-lined face. 'Of course. I wore that blue uniform, you the brown rags.'

'You said . . .' It hardly felt possible, now. 'You said we would do good together.'

'And haven't we, in the main? Legally *and* financially?' As though the entire spectrum of goodness ranged between those twin poles.

'And . . . morally?'

The Old Man's forehead furrowed as though it was a word in a foreign tongue. 'Morally?'

'General, please.' Temple fixed Cosca with his most earnest expression. And Temple knew he could be earnest, when he truly believed. Or had a great deal to lose. 'I beg you. Do not sign this paper. This will not be war, it will be murder.'

Cosca's brows went up. 'A fine distinction, to the buried.'

'We are not judges! What happens to the people of these towns once the men get among them, hungry for plunder? Women and children, General, who had no part in any rebellion. We are better than this.'

'We are? You did not say so in Kadir. You persuaded me to sign that contract, if I recall.'

‘Well—’

‘And in Styria, was it not you who encouraged me to take back what was mine?’

‘You had a valid claim—’

‘Before we took ship to the North, you helped me persuade the men. You can be damned persuasive when you have a mind.’

‘Then let me persuade you now. Please, General Cosca. Do not sign.’

There was a long pause. Cosca heaved in a breath, his forehead creasing yet more deeply. ‘A *conscientious* objection, then.’

‘Conscience is,’ muttered Temple hopefully, ‘a splinter of the divine?’ Not to mention a shitty navigator, and it had led him into some dangerous waters now. He realised he was picking nervously at the hem of his shirt as Cosca gazed upon him. ‘I simply have a feeling this job . . .’ He struggled for words that might turn the tide of inevitability. ‘Will go bad,’ he finished, lamely.

‘Good jobs rarely require the services of mercenaries.’ Cosca’s hand squeezed a little tighter at his shoulder and Temple felt Friendly’s looming presence behind him. Still, and silent, and yet very much *there*. ‘Men of conscience and conviction might find themselves better suited to other lines of work. His Majesty’s Inquisition offers a righteous cause, I understand?’

Temple swallowed as he looked across at Superior Pike, who had now attracted a twittering avian crowd. ‘I’m not sure I care for their brand of righteousness.’

‘Well, that’s the thing about righteousness,’ murmured Cosca, ‘everyone has their own brand. Gold, on the other hand, is universal. In my considerable experience, a man is better off worrying about what is good for his purse than what is simply . . . good.’

‘I just—’

Cosca squeezed still more firmly. ‘Without wishing to be harsh, Temple, it isn’t all about *you*. I have the welfare of the whole company to think of. Five hundred men.’

‘Five hundred and twelve,’ said Friendly.

‘Plus one with dysentery. I cannot inconvenience them for the sake of your *feelings*. That would be . . . *immoral*. I need you, Temple. But if you wish to

leave . . .' Cosca issued a weighty sigh. 'In spite of all your promises, in spite of my generosity, in spite of everything we have been through together, well . . .' He held out an arm towards burning Mulkova and raised his brows. 'I suppose the door is always open.'

Temple swallowed. He could have left. He could have said he wanted no part of this. Enough is enough, damn it! But that would have taken courage. That would have left him with no armed men at his back. Alone, and weak, and a victim once again. That would have been hard to do. And Temple always took the easy way. Even when he knew it was the wrong way. Especially then, in fact, since easy and wrong make such good company. Even when he had a damn good notion it would end up being the hard way, even then. Why think about tomorrow when today is such a thorny business?

Perhaps Kahdia would have found some way to stop this. Something involving supreme self-sacrifice, most likely. Temple, it hardly needed to be said, was not Kahdia. He wiped away a fresh sheen of sweat, forced a queasy smile onto his face and bowed. 'I remain always honoured to serve.'

'Excellent!' And Cosca plucked the contract from Temple's limp hand and spread it out to sign upon a sheered-off column.

Superior Pike stood, brushing crumbs from his shapeless black coat and sending birds scattering. 'Do you know what's out there, in the west?'

He let the question hang a moment. Below them the faint jingling, groaning, snapping could be heard of his Practicals dragging the prisoners away. Then he answered himself.

'The future. And the future does not belong to the Old Empire – their time is a thousand years past. Nor does it belong to the Ghosts, savages that they are. Nor does it belong to the fugitives, adventurers and opportunist scum who have put the first grasping roots into its virgin soil. No. The future belongs to the Union. We must seize it.'

'We must not be afraid to do what is necessary to seize it,' added Lorsen.

'Never fear, gentlemen.' Cosca grinned as he scratched out the parting swirl of his signature. 'We will seize the future together.'

Just Men

The rain had stopped. Shy peered through trees alive with the tap-tap of falling water, past a felled trunk abandoned on its trestles, part-stripped, the drawknife left wedged under a curl of bark, and towards the blackened bones of the house.

‘Not hard bastards to follow,’ muttered Lamb. ‘Leave burned-out buildings wherever they go.’

Probably they thought they’d killed anyone cared enough to follow. What might happen once they noticed Lamb and Shy toddling after in their rickety wagon, she was trying not to think about.

Time was she’d thought out everything, every moment of every day – hers, Lamb’s, Gully’s, Pit and Ro’s, too – all parcelled into its proper place with its proper purpose. Always looking forwards, the future better than the now, its shape clear to her as a house already built. Hard to believe since that time it was just five nights spent under the flapping canvas in the back of the cart. Five mornings waking stiff and sore to a dawn like a pit yawning under her feet. Five days following the sign across the empty grassland and into the woods, one eye on her black past, wondering what part of it had crept from the cold earth’s clutches and stolen her life while she was grinning at tomorrow.

Her fingertips rubbed nervously against her palm. ‘Shall we take a look?’ Truth was she was scared what she might find. Scared of looking and scared of not looking. Worn out and scared of everything with a hollow space where her hopes used to be.

‘I’ll go round the back.’ Lamb brushed his knees off with his hat and started circling the clearing, twigs crunching under his boots, a set of startled pigeons yammering into the white sky, giving anyone about fair notice of their arrival. Not that there was anyone about. Leastways, no one living.

There was an overgrown vegetable patch out back, stubborn soil scraped away to make a trench no more than ankle-deep. Next to it a soaked blanket was stretched over something lumpy. From the bottom stuck a pair of boots and a pair of bony bare feet with dirt under the bluish nails.

Lamb squatted down, took one corner and peeled it back. A man's face and a woman's, grey and slack, both with throats cut deep. The woman's head lolled, the wound in her neck yawning wet and purple.

'Ah.' Shy pressed her tongue into the gap between her front teeth and stared at the ground. Would've taken quite the optimist to expect anything else, and she by no means qualified, but those faces still tore at something in her. Worry for Pit and Ro, or worry for herself, or just a sick memory of a sick time when bodies weren't such strange things for her to see.

'Leave 'em be, you bastards!'

First thing Shy took in was the gleam on the arrowhead. Next was the hand that held the drawn bow, knuckles white on dark wood. Last was the face behind – a boy maybe sixteen, a mop of sandy hair stuck to pale skin with the wet.

'I'll kill you! I'll do it!' He eased from the bushes, feet fishing for firm earth to tread on, shadows sliding across his tight face and his hand trembling on the bow.

Shy made herself stay still, some trick to manage with her first two burning instincts to get at him or get away. Her every muscle was itching to do one or the other, and there'd been a time Shy had chased off wherever her instincts led. But since they'd usually led her by an unpleasant route right into the shit, she let the bastards run off without her this time and just stood, looking this boy steady in the eyes. Scared eyes, which was no surprise, open wide and shining in the corners. She kept her voice soft, like they'd met at a harvest dance and had no burned-out buildings, dead folk or drawn bows between them.

'What's your name?'

His tongue darted over his lips, point of the arrow wobbling and making her chest horrible itchy about where it was aimed.

'I'm Shy. This is Lamb.'

The boy's eyes flicked across, and his bow too. Lamb didn't flinch, just put the blanket back how he'd found it and slowly stood. Seeing him with the boy's fresh eyes, he looked anything but harmless. Even with that tangle of grey beard you could tell a man would have to be real careless with his razor to pick up scars like Lamb's by accident. Shy had always guessed he'd got them in some war up North,

but if he'd been a fighter once there was no fight in him now. Some kind of coward like she'd always said. But this boy wasn't to know.

'We been following some men.' Shy kept her voice soft, soft, coaxing the boy's eyes and his arrow's point back to her. 'They burned our farm, up near Squaredeal. They burned it, and they killed a man worked for us, and they took my sister and my little brother . . .' Her voice cracked and she had to swallow and press it out smooth again. 'We been following on.'

'Reckon they been here, too,' said Lamb.

'We been tracking 'em. Maybe twenty men, moving quick.' The arrow-point started to drift down. 'They stopped off at a couple more farms on the way. Same thing. Then we followed 'em into the woods. And here.'

'I'd been hunting,' said the boy quietly.

Shy nodded. 'We were in town. Selling our crop.'

'I came back, and . . .' That point made it right down to the ground, much to Shy's relief. 'Nothing I could've done.'

'No.'

'They took my brother.'

'What was his name?'

'Evin. He was nine years old.'

Silence, with just the trees still dripping and the gentle creak as the boy let his bowstring go slack.

'You know who they were?' asked Lamb.

'I didn't see 'em.'

'You know why they took your brother?'

'I said I wasn't here, didn't I? I wasn't here.'

'All right,' said Shy, calming. 'I know.'

'You following after 'em?' asked the boy.

'We're just about keeping up,' said Lamb.

'Going to get your sister and your brother back?'

'Count on it,' said Shy, as if sounding certain made it certain.

'Can you get mine, too?'

Shy looked at Lamb, and he looked back, and he didn't say nothing. 'We can try,' she said.

'Reckon I'll be coming along with you, then.'

Another silence. 'You sure?' asked Lamb.

'I can do what needs doing, y'old bastard!' screamed the boy, veins popping from his neck.

Lamb didn't twitch a muscle. 'We don't know what'll need doing yet.'

'There's room in the wagon, though, if you want to take your part.' Shy held her hand out to the boy, and he looked at it for a moment, then stepped forward and shook it. He squeezed it too hard, that way men do when they're trying to prove they're tougher than they are.

'My name's Leef.'

Shy nodded towards the two bodies. 'These your folks?'

The boy blinked down at them. 'I been trying to do the burying, but the ground's hard, and I got nothing to dig with.' He rubbed at his broken fingernails with his thumb. 'I been trying.'

'Need some help?' she asked.

His face crushed up, and he hung his head, and he nodded, wet hair dangling.

'We all need some help, time to time,' said Lamb. 'I'll get them shovels down.'

Shy reached out, checked a moment, then gently put her hand on the boy's shoulder. She felt him tense, thought he'd shake it off, but he didn't and she was glad. Maybe she needed it there more than he did.

On they went, gone from two to three but otherwise not much changed. Same wind, same sky, same tracks to be followed, same worried silence between them. The wagon was wearing out on the battered tracks, lurching more with each mile rattled behind those patient oxen. One of the wheels had near shook itself to pieces inside its iron tyre. Shy felt some sympathy, behind her frown she was all shook to pieces herself. They loaded out the gear and let the oxen loose to crop grass, and Lamb lifted one side of the wagon with a grunt and a shrug while Shy did the best she could with the tools she had and her half-sack of nails, Leef eager to do his part but that no more than passing her the hammer when she asked.

The tracks led to a river and forded at a shallow spot. Calder and Scale weren't too keen on the crossing but in the end Shy goaded them over to a tall mill-house, stone-built on three stories. Those they were chasing hadn't bothered to try and

burn this one and its wheel still slapped around merrily in the chattering water. Two men and a woman were hanged together in a bunch from the attic window. One had a broken neck stretched out way too long, another feet burned raw, dangling a stride above the mud.

Leef stared up big-eyed. 'What kind o' men do a thing like this?'

'Just men,' said Shy. 'Thing like this don't take no one special.' Though at times it felt to her that they were following something else. Some mad storm blowing mindless through this abandoned country, churning up the dirt and leaving bottles and shit and burned buildings and hanged folk scattered in its wake. A storm that snatched away all the children to who knew where and to what purpose? 'You care to go up there, Leef, and cut these folks down?'

He looked like he didn't much care to, but he drew his knife and went inside to do it anyway.

'Feels like we're doing a lot of burying lately,' she muttered.

'Good thing you got Clay to throw them shovels in,' said Lamb.

She laughed at that, then realised what she was laughing at and turned it into an ugly cough. Leef's head showed at the window and he leaned out, started cutting at the ropes, making the bodies tremble. 'Seems wrong, us having to clean up after these bastards.'

'Someone has to.' Lamb held one of the shovels out to her. 'Or do you want to leave these folks swinging?'

Towards evening, the low sun setting the edges of the clouds to burn and the wind making the trees dance and sweeping patterns in the grass, they came upon a campsite. A big fire had smouldered out under the eaves of a wood, a circle of charred branches and sodden ash three strides across. Shy hopped from the wagon while Lamb was still cooing Scale and Calder to a snorting halt, and she drew her knife and gave the fire a poke, turned up some embers still aglow.

'They were here overnight,' she called.

'We're catching 'em, then?' asked Leef as he jumped down, nocking an arrow loose to his bow.

'I reckon.' Though Shy couldn't help wondering if that was a good thing. She dragged a length of frayed rope from the grass, found a cobweb torn between bushes at the treeline, then a shred of cloth left on a bramble.

'Someone come this way?' asked Leef.

'More'n one. And fast.' Shy slipped through after, keeping low, crept down a muddy slope, slick dirt and fallen leaves treacherous under her boots, trying to keep her balance and peer into the dimness—

She saw Pit, face down by a fallen tree, looking so small there among the knotted roots. She wanted to scream but had no voice, no breath even. She ran, slid on her side in a shower of dead leaves and ran again. She squatted by him, back of his head a clotted mass, hand trembling as she reached out, not wanting to see his face, having to see it. She held her breath as she wrestled him over, his body small but stiff as a board, brushed away the leaves stuck to his face with fumbling fingers.

'Is it your brother?' muttered Leef.

'No.' She was almost sick with relief. Then with guilt that she was relieved, when this boy was dead. 'Is it yours?'

'No,' said Leef.

Shy slid her hands under the dead child and picked him up, struggled up the slope, Leef behind her. Lamb stood staring between the trees at the top, a black shape stamped from the glow of sunset.

'Is it him?' came his cracking voice. 'Is it Pit?'

'No.' Shy laid him on the flattened grass, arms stuck out wide, head tipped back rigid.

'By the dead.' Lamb had his fingers shoved into his grey hair, gripping at his head like it might burst.

'Might be he tried to get away. They made a lesson of him.' She hoped Ro didn't try it. Hoped she was too clever to. Hoped she was cleverer than Shy had been at her age. She leaned on the wagon with her back to the others, squeezed her eyes shut and wiped the tears away. Dug the bastard shovels out and brought them back.

'More fucking digging,' spat Leef, hacking at the ground like it was the one stole his brother.

'Better off digging than getting buried,' said Lamb.

Shy left them to the graves and the oxen to their grazing and spread out in circles, keeping low, fingers combing at the cold grass, trying to read the signs in the fading light. Trying to feel out what they'd done, what they'd do next.

'Lamb.'

He grunted as he squatted beside her, slapping the dirt from his gloves. 'What is it?'

'Looks like three of 'em peeled off here, heading south and east. The rest struck on due west. What do you think?'

'I try not to. You're the tracker. Though when you got so damn good at it, I've no notion.'

'Just a question of thinking it through.' Shy didn't want to admit that chasing men and being chased are sides to one coin, and at being chased she'd two years of the harshest practice.

'They split up?' asked Leef.

Lamb fussed at that notch out of his ear as he looked off south. 'Some style of a disagreement?'

'Could be,' said Shy. 'Or maybe they sent 'em to circle around, check if anyone was following.'

Leef fumbled for an arrow, eyes darting about the horizon.

Lamb waved him down. 'If they'd a mind to check, they'd have seen us by now.' He kept looking south, off along the treeline towards a low ridge, the way Shy thought those three had gone. 'No. I reckon they had enough. Maybe it all went too far for 'em. Maybe they started thinking they might be the next left hanging. Either way we'll follow. Hope to catch 'em before the wheels come off this cart for good. Or off me either,' he added as he dragged himself up wincing into the wagon's seat.

'The children ain't with those three,' said Leef, turning sullen.

'No.' Lamb settled his hat back on. 'But they might point us the right way. We need to get this wagon fixed up proper, find some new oxen or get ourselves some horses. We need food. Might be those three—'

'You fucking old coward.'

There was a pause. Then Lamb nodded over at Shy. 'Me and her spent years chewing over that topic and you got naught worth adding to the conversation.'

Shy looked at them, the boy stood on the ground glowering up, the big old man looking down calm and even from his seat.

Leef curled his lip. 'We need to keep after the children or—'

'Get up on the wagon, boy, or you'll be keeping after the children alone.'

Leef opened his mouth again but Shy caught him by the arm first. 'I want to catch 'em just as much as you, but Lamb's right – there's twenty men out there, bad men, and armed, and willing. There's nothing we could do.'

'We got to catch 'em sooner or later, don't we?' snapped Leef, breathing hard. 'Might as well be now while my brother and yours are still alive!'

Shy had to admit he'd a point but there was no help for it. She held his eye and said it to his face, calm but with no give. 'Get on the wagon, Leef.'

This time he did as he was told, and clambered up among their gear and sat there silent with his back to them.

Shy perched her bruised arse next to Lamb as he snapped the reins and got Scale and Calder reluctantly on the move. 'What do we do if we catch these three?' she muttered, keeping her voice down so Leef wouldn't hear it. 'Chances are they're going to be armed and willing, too. Better armed than us, that's sure.'

'Reckon we'll have to be more willing, then.'

Her brows went up at that. This big, gentle Northman who used to run laughing through the wheat with Pit on one shoulder and Ro on the other, used to sit out at sunset with Gully, passing a bottle between them in silence for hours at a time, who'd never once laid a hand on her growing up in spite of some sore provocations, talking about getting red to the elbows like it was nothing.

Shy knew it wasn't nothing.

She closed her eyes and remembered Jeg's face after she stabbed him, bloody hat brim jammed down over his eyes, pitching in the street, still muttering, *Smoke, Smoke*. That clerk in the store, staring at her as his shirt turned black. The look Dodd had as he gawped down at her arrow in his chest. *What did you do that for?*

She rubbed her face hard with one hand, sweating of a sudden, heart banging in her ears hard as it had then, and she twisted inside her greasy clothes like she could twist free of the past. But it had good and caught her up. For Pit and Ro's sake she had to get her hands red again. She curled her fingers around the grip of

her knife, took a hard breath and set her jaw. No choice then. No choice now. And for men the likes of the ones they followed no tears needed shedding.

'When we find 'em,' her voice sounding tiny in the gathering darkness, 'can you follow my lead?'

'No,' said Lamb.

'Eh?' He'd been following her lead so long she'd never thought he might find some other path.

When she looked at him, his old, scarred face was twisted like he was in pain. 'I made a promise to your mother. 'Fore she died. Made a promise to look to her children. Pit and Ro . . . and I reckon it covers you too, don't it?'

'I guess,' she muttered, far from reassured.

'I broke a lot of promises in my life. Let 'em wash away like leaves on the water.' He rubbed at his eyes with the back of one gloved hand. 'I mean to keep that one. So when we find 'em . . . you'll be following my lead. This time.'

'All right.' She could say so, if it helped him.

Then she could do what needed doing.