

Sample Chapters from

The Blade Itself

Book one of *The First Law*

by Joe Abercrombie

Sample Chapters from all of Joe Abercrombie's books
are available to download from www.joeabercrombie.com

Copyright © Joe Abercrombie 2006. All rights reserved.

The Survivors

The lapping of water in his ears. That was the first thing. The lapping of water, the rustling of trees, the odd click and twitter of a bird.

Logen opened his eyes a crack. Light, blurry bright through leaves. This was death? Then why did it hurt so much? His whole left side was throbbing. He tried to take a proper breath, choked, coughed up water, spat out mud. He groaned, flopped over onto his hands and knees, dragged himself up out of the river, gasping through clenched teeth, rolled onto his back in the moss and slime and rotten sticks at the water's edge.

He lay there for a moment, staring up at the grey sky beyond the black branches, breath wheezing in his raw throat.

'I am still alive,' he croaked to himself. Still alive, in spite of the best efforts of nature, Shanka, men and beasts. Soaking wet and flat on his back, he started to chuckle. Reedy, gurgling laughter. Say one thing for Logen Ninesingers, say he's a survivor.

A cold wind blew across the rotting river bank, and Logen's laughter slowly died. Alive he might be, but staying alive, that was another question. He sat up, wincing at the pain. He tottered to his feet, leaning against the nearest tree trunk. He scraped the dirt out of his nose, his eyes, his ears. He pulled up his wet shirt to take a look at the damage.

His side was covered in bruises from the fall. Blue and purple stains all up his ribs. Tender to the touch, and no mistake, but it didn't feel like anything was broken. His leg was a mess. Torn and bloody from the Shanka's teeth. It hurt bad, but his foot still moved well enough, and that was the main thing. He'd need his foot, if he was going to get out of this.

He still had his knife in the sheath at his belt, and he was mightily glad to see it. You could never have too many knives in Logen's experience, and this was a good one, but the outlook was still bleak. He was on his own, in woods crawling with Flatheads. He had no idea where he was, but he could follow the river. The rivers all flowed north, from the mountains to the cold sea. Follow the river

southwards, against the current. Follow the river and climb up, into the High Places where the Shanka couldn't find him. That was his only chance.

It would be cold up there, this time of year. Deadly cold. He looked down at his bare feet. It was just his luck that the Shanka had come while he had his boots off, trimming his blisters. No coat either – he'd been sitting near the fire. Like this, he wouldn't last a day in the mountains. His hands and feet would turn black in the night, and he'd die bit by bit before he even reached the passes. If he didn't starve first.

'Shit,' he muttered. He had to go back to the camp. He had to hope the Flatheads had moved on, hope they'd left something behind. Something he could use to survive. That was an awful lot of hoping, but he had no choice. He never had any choices.

It had started to rain by the time Logen found the place. Spitting drops that plastered his hair to his skull, kept his clothes wet through. He pressed himself against a mossy trunk and peered out towards the camp, heart pounding, fingers of his right hand curled painful tight around the slippery grip of his knife.

He saw the blackened circle where the fire had been, half-burned sticks and ash trampled round it. He saw the big log Threetrees and Dow had been sitting on when the Flatheads came. He saw odd bits of torn and broken gear scattered across the clearing. He counted three dead Shanka crumpled on the ground, one with an arrow poking out of its chest. Three dead ones, but no sign of any alive. That was lucky. Just lucky enough to survive, as always. Still, they might be back at any moment. He had to be quick.

Logen scuttled out from the trees, casting about on the ground. His boots were still there where he'd left them. He snatched them up and dragged them on to his freezing feet, hopping around, almost slipping in his haste. His coat was there too, wedged under the log, battered and scarred from ten years of weather and war, torn and stitched back together, missing half a sleeve. His pack was lying shapeless in the brush nearby, its contents strewn out down the slope. He crouched, breathless, throwing it all back inside. A length of rope, his old clay pipe, some strips of dried meat, needle and twine, a dented flask with some liquor still sloshing inside. All good. All useful.

There was a tattered blanket snagged on a branch, wet and half caked in grime. Logen pulled it up, and grinned. His old, battered cook pot was underneath. Lying on its side, kicked off the fire in the fight maybe. He grabbed hold of it with both hands. It felt safe, familiar, dented and blackened from years of hard use. He'd had that pot a long time. It had followed him all through the wars, across the North and back again. They had all cooked in it together, out on the trail, all eaten out of it. Forley, Grim, the Dogman, all of them.

Logen looked over the campsite again. Three dead Shanka, but none of his people. Maybe they were still out there. Maybe if he took a risk, tried to look—

'No.' He said it quietly, under his breath. He knew better than that. There had been a lot of Flatheads. An awful lot. He had no idea how long he'd lain on the river bank. Even if a couple of the boys had got away, the Shanka would be hunting them, hunting them down in the forests. They were nothing but corpses now, for sure, scattered across the high valleys. All Logen could do was make for the mountains, and try to save his own sorry life. You have to be realistic. Have to be, however much it hurts.

'It's just you and me now,' said Logen as he stuffed the pot into his pack and threw it over his shoulder. He started to limp off, as fast as he could. Uphill, towards the river, towards the mountains.

Just the two of them. Him and the pot.

They were the only survivors.

Questions

Why do I do this? Inquisitor Glokta asked himself for the thousandth time as he limped down the corridor. The walls were rendered and whitewashed, though none too recently. There was a seedy feel to the place and a smell of damp. There were no windows, as the hallway was deep beneath the ground, and the lanterns cast slow flowing shadows into every corner.

Why would anyone want to do this? Glokta's walking made a steady rhythm on the grimy tiles of the floor. First the confident click of his right heel, then the tap of his cane, then the endless sliding of his left foot, with the familiar stabbing pains in the ankle, knee, arse and back. Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking.

The dirty monotony of the corridor was broken from time to time by a heavy door, bound and studded with pitted iron. On one occasion, Glokta thought he heard a muffled cry of pain from behind one. *I wonder what poor fool is being questioned in there? What crime they are guilty, or innocent of? What secrets are being picked at, what lies cut through, what treasons laid bare?* He didn't wonder long though. He was interrupted by the steps.

If Glokta had been given the opportunity to torture any one man, any one at all, he would surely have chosen the inventor of steps. When he was young and widely admired, before his misfortunes, he had never really noticed them. He had sprung down them two at a time and gone blithely on his way. No more. *They're everywhere. You really can't change floors without them. And down is worse than up, that's the thing people never realise. Going up, you usually don't fall that far.*

He knew this flight well. Sixteen steps, cut from smooth stone, a little worn toward the centre, slightly damp, like everything down here. There was no banister, nothing to cling to. *Sixteen enemies. A challenge indeed.* It had taken Glokta a long time to develop the least painful method of descending stairs. He went sideways like a crab. Cane first, then left foot, then right, with more than the usual agony as his left leg took his weight, joined by a persistent stabbing in the

neck. *Why should it hurt in my neck when I go down stairs? Does my neck take my weight? Does it?* Yet the pain could not be denied.

Glokta paused four steps from the bottom. He had nearly beaten them. His hand was trembling on the handle of his cane, his left leg aching like fury. He tongued his gums where his front teeth used to be, took a deep breath and stepped forward. His ankle gave way with a horrifying wrench and he plunged into space, twisting, lurching, his mind a cauldron of horror and despair. He stumbled onto the next step like a drunkard, fingernails scratching at the smooth wall, giving a squeal of terror. *You stupid, stupid bastard!* His cane clattered to the floor, his clumsy feet wrestled with the stones and he found himself at the bottom, by some miracle still standing.

And here it is. That horrible, beautiful, stretched out moment between stubbing your toe and feeling the hurt. How long do I have before the pain comes? How bad will it be when it does? Gasping, slack-jawed at the foot of the steps, Glokta felt a tingling of anticipation. *Here it comes...*

The agony was unspeakable, a searing spasm up his left side from foot to jaw. He squeezed his watering eyes tight shut, clamped his right hand over his mouth so hard that the knuckles clicked. His remaining teeth grated against each other as he locked his jaws together, but a high-pitched, jagged moan still whistled from him. *Am I screaming or laughing? How do I tell the difference?* He breathed in heaving gasps, through his nose, snot bubbling out onto his hand, his twisted body shaking with the effort of staying upright.

The spasm passed. Glokta moved his limbs cautiously, one by one, testing the damage. His leg was on fire, his foot numb, his neck clicked with every movement, sending vicious little stings down his spine. *Pretty good, considering.* He bent down with an effort and snatched up his cane between two fingers, drew himself up once more, wiped the snot and tears on the back of his hand. *Truly a thrill. Did I enjoy it? For most people stairs are a mundane affair. For me, an adventure!* He limped off down the corridor, giggling quietly to himself. He was still smiling ever so faintly when he reached his own door and shuffled inside.

A grubby white box with two doors facing each other. The ceiling was too low for comfort, the room too brightly lit by blazing lamps. Damp was creeping out of

one corner and the plaster had erupted with flaking blisters, speckled with black mould. Someone had tried to scrub a long bloodstain from one wall, but hadn't tried nearly hard enough.

Practical Frost was standing on the other side of the room, big arms folded across his big chest. He nodded to Glokta, with all the emotion of a stone, and Glokta nodded back. Between them stood a scarred, stained wooden table, bolted to the floor and flanked by two chairs. A naked fat man sat in one of them, hands tied tightly behind him and with a brown canvas bag over his head. His quick, muffled breathing was the only sound. It was cold down here, but he was sweating. *As well he should be.*

Glokta limped over to the other chair, leaned his cane carefully against the edge of the table top and slowly, cautiously, painfully sat down. He stretched his neck to the left and right, then allowed his body to slump into a position approaching comfort. If Glokta had been given the opportunity to shake the hand of any one man, any one at all, he would surely have chosen the inventor of chairs. *He has made my life almost bearable.*

Frost stepped silently out of the corner and took hold of the loose top of the bag between meaty, pale finger and heavy, white thumb. Glokta nodded and the Practical ripped it off, leaving Salem Rews blinking in the harsh light.

A mean, piggy, ugly little face. You mean, ugly pig, Rews. You disgusting swine. You're ready to confess right now, I'll bet, ready to talk and talk without interruption, until we're all sick of it. There was a big dark bruise across his cheek and another on his jaw above his double chin. As his watering eyes adjusted to the brightness he recognised Glokta sitting opposite him, and his face suddenly filled with hope. *A sadly, sadly misplaced hope.*

'Glokta, you have to help me!' he squealed, leaning forward as far as his bonds would allow, words bubbling out in a desperate, mumbling mess. 'I'm falsely accused, you know it, I'm innocent! You've come to help me, yes? You're my friend! You have influence here. We're friends, friends! You could say something for me! I'm an innocent man, falsely accused! I'm—'

Glokta held up his hand for silence. He stared at Rews' familiar face for a moment, as though he had never laid eyes on him before. Then he turned to Frost. 'Am I supposed to know this man?'

The albino said nothing. The bottom part of his face was hidden by his Practical's mask, and the top half gave nothing away. He stared unblinking at the prisoner in the chair, pink eyes as dead as a corpse. He hadn't blinked once since Glokta came into the room. *How can he do that?*

'It's me, Rews!' hissed the fat man, the pitch of his voice rising steadily towards panic. 'Salem Rews, you know me, Glokta! I was with you in the war, before . . . you know . . . we're friends! We—'

Glokta held up his hand again and sat back, tapping one of his few remaining teeth with a fingernail as though deep in thought. 'Rews. The name is familiar. A merchant, a member of the Guild of Mercers. A rich man by all accounts. I remember now . . .' Glokta leaned forward, pausing for effect. 'He was a traitor! He was taken by the Inquisition, his property confiscated. You see, he had conspired to avoid the King's taxes.' Rews' mouth was hanging open. 'The King's taxes!' screamed Glokta, smashing his hand down on the table. The fat man stared, wide eyed, and licked at a tooth. *Upper right side, second from the back.*

'But where are our manners?' asked Glokta of no one in particular. 'We may or may not have known each other once, but I don't think you and my assistant have been properly introduced. Practical Frost, say hello to this fat man.'

It was an open-handed blow, but powerful enough to knock Rews clean out of his seat. The chair rattled but was otherwise unaffected. *How is that done? To knock him to the ground but leave the chair standing?* Rews sprawled gurgling across the floor, face flattened on the tiles.

'He reminds me of a beached whale,' said Glokta absently. The albino grabbed Rews under the arm and hauled him up, flung him back into the chair. Blood seeped from a cut on his cheek, but his piggy eyes were hard now. *Blows make most men soften up, but some men harden. I never would have taken this one for a tough man, but life is full of surprises.*

Rews spat blood onto the table top. 'You've gone too far here, Glokta, oh yes! The Mercers are an honourable guild; we have influence! They won't put up with this! I'm a known man! Even now my wife will be petitioning the King to hear my case!'

'Ah, your wife.' Glokta smiled sadly. 'Your wife is a very beautiful woman. Beautiful, and young. I fear, perhaps, a little too young for you. I fear she took the

opportunity to be rid of you. I fear she came forward with your books. All the books.' Rews' face paled.

'We looked at those books,' Glokta indicated an imaginary pile of papers on his left, 'we looked at the books in the treasury,' indicating another on his right. 'Imagine our surprise when we could not make the numbers add up. And then there were the night-time visits by your employees to warehouses in the old quarter, the small unregistered boats, the payments to officials, the forged documentation. Must I go on?' asked Glokta, shaking his head in profound disapproval. The fat man swallowed and licked his lips.

Pen and ink were placed before the prisoner, and the paper of confession, filled out in detail in Frost's beautiful, careful script, awaiting only the signature. *I'll get him right here and now.*

'Confess, Rews,' Glokta whispered softly, 'and put a painless end to this regrettable business. Confess and name your accomplices. We already know who they are. It will be easier on all of us. I don't want to hurt you, believe me, it will give me no pleasure.' *Nothing will.* 'Confess. Confess, and you will be spared. Exile in England is not so bad as they would have you believe. There is still pleasure to be had from life there, and the satisfaction of a day of honest work, in the service of your King. Confess!' Rews stared at the floor, licking at his tooth. Glokta sat back and sighed.

'Or not,' he said, 'and I can come back with my instruments.' Frost moved forward, his massive shadow falling across the fat man's face. 'Body found floating by the docks,' Glokta breathed, 'bloated by seawater and horribly mutilated . . . far . . . far beyond recognition.' *He's ready to talk. He's fat and ripe and ready to burst.* 'Were the injuries inflicted before or after death?' he asked the ceiling breezily. 'Was the mysterious deceased a man or a woman even?' Glokta shrugged. 'Who can say?'

There was a sharp knock at the door. Rews' face jerked up, filled with hope again. *Not now, damn it!* Frost went to the door, opened it a crack. Something was said. The door shut, Frost leaned down to whisper in Glokta's ear.

'Ith Theverar,' came the half-tongued mumble, by which Glokta understood that Severard was at the door.

Already? Glokta smiled and nodded, as if it was good news. Rews' face fell a little. *How could a man whose business has been concealment find it impossible to hide his emotions in this room?* But Glokta knew how. *It's hard to stay calm when you're terrified, helpless, alone, at the mercy of men with no mercy at all. Who could know that better than me?* He sighed, and using his most world-weary tone of voice asked, 'Do you wish to confess?'

'No!' The defiance had returned to the prisoner's piggy eyes now. He stared back, silent and watchful, and sucked. *Surprising. Very surprising. But then we're just getting started.*

'Is that tooth bothering you, Rews?' There was nothing Glokta didn't know about teeth. His own mouth had been worked on by the very best. *Or the very worst, depending on how you look at it.* 'It seems that I must leave you now, but while I'm away, I'll be thinking about that tooth. I'll be considering very carefully what to do with it.' He took hold of his cane. 'I want you to think about me, thinking about your tooth. And I also want you to think, very carefully, about signing your confession.'

Glokta got awkwardly to his feet, shaking out his aching leg. 'I think you may respond well to a straightforward beating however, so I'm going to leave you in the company of Practical Frost for half an hour.' Rews' mouth became a silent circle of surprise. The albino picked up the chair, fat man and all, and turned it slowly around. 'He's absolutely the best there is at this kind of thing.' Frost took out a pair of battered leather gloves and began to pull them carefully onto his big white hands, one finger at a time. 'You always did like to have the very best of everything, eh, Rews?' Glokta made for the door.

'Wait! Glokta!' wailed Rews over his shoulder. 'Wait I—'

Practical Frost clamped a gloved hand over the fat man's mouth and held a finger to his mask. 'Thhhhhh,' he said. The door clicked shut.

Severard was leaning against the wall in the corridor, one foot propped on the plaster behind him, whistling tunelessly beneath his mask and running a hand through his long, lanky hair. As Glokta came through the door he straightened up and gave a little bow, and it was plain by his eyes that he was smiling. *He's always smiling.*

'Superior Kalyne wants to see you,' he said in his broad, common accent, 'and I'm of the opinion that I never saw him angrier.'

'Severard, you poor thing, you must be terrified. Do you have the box?'

'I do.'

'And you took something out for Frost?'

'I did.'

'And something for your wife too, I hope?'

'Oh yes,' said Severard, his eyes smiling more than ever, 'My wife will be well taken care of. If I ever get one.'

'Good. I hasten to answer the call of the Superior. When I have been with him for five minutes, come in with the box.'

'Just barge into his office?'

'Barge in and stab him in the face for all I care.'

'I'd consider that done, Inquisitor.'

Glokta nodded, turned away, then turned back. 'Don't really stab him, eh, Severard?'

The Practical smiled with his eyes and sheathed his vicious-looking knife. Glokta rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, then limped off, his cane tapping on the tiles, his leg throbbing. Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking.

The Superior's office was a large and richly appointed room high up in the House of Questions, a room in which everything was too big and too fancy. A huge, intricate window dominated one wood-panelled wall, offering a view over the well-tended gardens in the courtyard below. An equally huge and ornate desk stood in the centre of a richly coloured carpet from somewhere warm and exotic. The head of a fierce animal from somewhere cold and exotic was mounted above a magnificent stone fireplace with a tiny, mean fire close to burning out inside.

Superior Kalyne himself made his office look small and drab. A vast, florid man in his late fifties, he had over-compensated for his thinning hair with magnificent white side whiskers. He was considered a daunting presence even within the Inquisition, but Glokta was past scaring, and they both knew it.

There was a big, fancy chair behind the desk, but the Superior was pacing up and down while he screamed, his arms waving. Glokta was seated on something which, while doubtless expensive, had clearly been designed to make its

occupant as uncomfortable as possible. *It doesn't bother me much, though. Uncomfortable is as good as I ever get.*

He amused himself with the thought of Kalyne's head mounted above the fireplace instead of that fierce animal's, while the Superior ranted at him. *He's every bit like his fireplace, the big dolt. Looks impressive, but there's not much going on underneath. I wonder how he'd respond to an interrogation? I'd start with those ridiculous side whiskers.* But Glokta's face was a mask of attention and respect.

'Well you've outdone yourself this time, Glokta, you mad cripple! When the Mercers find out about this they'll have you flayed!'

'I've tried flaying, it tickles.' *Damn it, keep your mouth shut and smile. Where's that whistling fool Severard? I'll have him flayed when I get out of here.*

'Oh yes, that's good, that's very good, Glokta, look at me laugh! And evasion of the King's taxes?' The Superior glowered down, whiskers bristling. 'The King's taxes?' he screamed, spraying Glokta with spit. 'They're all at it! The Mercers, the Spicers, all of them! Every damn fool with a boat!'

'But this was so open, Superior. It was an insult to us. I felt we had to—'

'You felt?' Kalyne was red-faced and vibrating with rage. 'You were explicitly told to keep away from the Mercers, away from the Spicers, away from all the big guilds!' He strode up and down with ever greater speed. *You'll wear your carpet out at this rate. The big guilds will have to buy you a new one.*

'You felt, did you? Well he'll have to go back! We'll have to release him and you'll have to feel your way to a grovelling apology! It's a damn disgrace! You've made me look ridiculous! Where is he now?'

'I left him in the company of Practical Frost.'

'With that mumbling animal?' The Superior tore at his hair in desperation. 'Well that's it then, isn't it? He'll be a ruin now! We can't send him back in that condition! You're finished here, Glokta! Finished! I'm going straight to the Arch Lector! Straight to the Arch Lector!'

The huge door was kicked open and Severard sauntered in carrying a wooden box. *And not a moment too soon.* The Superior stared, speechless, open-mouthed with wrath, as Severard dropped it on the desk with a thump and a jingle.

‘What the hell is the meaning of . . .’ Severard pulled open the lid, and Kalyne saw the money. *All that lovely money.* He stopped in mid-rant, mouth stuck forming the next sound. He looked surprised, then he looked puzzled, then he looked cautious. He pursed his lips and slowly sat down.

‘Thank you, Practical Severard,’ said Glokta. ‘You may go.’ The Superior was stroking thoughtfully at his side whiskers as Severard strolled out, his face returning gradually to its usual shade of pink. ‘Confiscated from Rews. The property of the Crown now, of course. I thought that I should give it to you, as my direct superior, so that you could pass it on to the Treasury.’ *Or buy a bigger desk, you leech.*

Glokta leaned forward, hands on his knees. ‘You could say, perhaps, that Rews went too far, that questions had been asked, that an example had to be made. We can’t be seen to do nothing, after all. It’ll make the big guilds nervous, keep them in line.’ *It’ll make them nervous and you can screw more out of them.* ‘Or you could always tell them that I’m a mad cripple, and blame me for it.’

The Superior was starting to like it now, Glokta could tell. He was trying not to show it, but his whiskers were quivering at the sight of all that money. ‘Alright, Glokta. Alright. Very well.’ He reached out and carefully shut the lid of the box. ‘But if you ever think of doing something like this again . . . talk to me first, would you? I don’t like surprises.’

Glokta struggled to his feet, limped towards the door. ‘Oh, and one more thing!’ He turned stiffly back. Kalyne was staring at him severely from beneath his big, fancy brows. ‘When I go to see the Mercers, I’ll need to take Rews’ confession.’

Glokta smiled broadly, showing the yawning gap in his front teeth. ‘That shouldn’t be a problem, Superior.’

Kalyne had been right. There was no way that Rews could have gone back in this condition. His lips were split and bloody, his sides covered in darkening bruises, his head lolled sideways, face swollen almost past recognition. *In short, he looks like a man ready to confess.*

‘I don’t imagine you enjoyed the last half hour, Rews, I don’t imagine you enjoyed it much at all. Perhaps it was the worst half hour of your life, I really couldn’t say. I’m thinking about what we have for you here, though, and the sad

fact is . . . that's about as good as it gets. That's the high life.' Glokta leaned forward, his face just inches from the bloody pulp of Rews' nose. 'Practical Frost's a little girl compared to me,' he whispered. 'He's a kitten. Once I get started with you, Rews, you'll be looking back on this with nostalgia. You'll be begging me to give you half an hour with the Practical. Do you understand?' Rews was silent, except for the air whistling through his broken nose.

'Show him the instruments,' whispered Glokta.

Frost stepped forward and opened the polished case with a theatrical flourish. It was a masterful piece of craftsmanship. As the lid was pulled back, the many trays inside lifted and fanned out, displaying Glokta's tools in all their gruesome glory. There were blades of every size and shape, needles curved and straight, bottles of oil and acid, nails and screws, clamps and pliers, saws, hammers, chisels. Metal, wood and glass glittered in the bright lamplight, all polished to mirror brightness and honed to a murderous sharpness. A big purple swelling under Rews' left eye had closed it completely, but the other darted over the instruments: terrified, fascinated. The functions of some were horribly obvious, the functions of others were horribly obscure. *Which scare him more, I wonder?*

'We were talking about your tooth, I think,' murmured Glokta. Rews' eye flicked up to look at him. 'Or would you like to confess?' *I have him, here he comes. Confess, confess, confess, confess . . .*

There was a sharp knock at the door. *Damn it again!* Frost opened it a crack and there was a brief whispering. Rews licked at his bloated lip. The door shut, the albino leaned to whisper in Glokta's ear.

'Ith the Arth Ector.' Glokta froze. *The money was not enough. While I was shuffling back from Kalyne's office, the old bastard was reporting me to the Arch Lector. Am I finished then?* He felt a guilty thrill at the thought. *Well, I'll see to this fat pig first.*

'Tell Severard I'm on my way.' Glokta turned back to talk to his prisoner, but Frost put a big white hand on his shoulder.

'O. The Arth Ector,' Frost pointed to the door, 'he'th ere. Ow.'

Here? Glokta could feel his eyelid twitching. *Why?* He pushed himself up using the edge of the table. *Will they find me in the canal tomorrow? Dead and bloated,*

far . . . far beyond recognition? The only emotion that he felt at the idea was a flutter of mild relief. *No more stairs.*

The Arch Lector of His Majesty's Inquisition was standing outside in the corridor. The grimy walls looked almost brown behind him, so brilliantly spotless were his long white coat, his white gloves, his shock of white hair. He was past sixty, but showed none of the infirmity of age. Every tall, clean-shaven, fine-boned inch of him was immaculately turned out. *He looks like a man who has never once in his life been surprised by anything.*

They had met once before, six years earlier when Glokta joined the Inquisition, and he hardly seemed to have changed. Arch Lector Sult. One of the most powerful men in the Union. *One of the most powerful men in the world, come to that.* Behind him, almost like outsized shadows, loomed two enormous, silent, black-masked Practicals.

The Arch Lector gave a thin smile when he saw Glokta shuffle out of his door. It said a lot, that smile. *Mild scorn, mild pity, the very slightest touch of menace. Anything but amusement.* 'Inquisitor Glokta,' he said, holding out one white-gloved hand, palm down. A ring with a huge purple stone flashed on his finger.

'I serve and obey, your Eminence.' Glokta could not help grimacing as he bent slowly forward to touch his lips to the ring. A difficult and painful manoeuvre, it seemed to take forever. When he finally hoisted himself back upright, Sult was gazing at him calmly with his cool blue eyes. A look that implied he already understood Glokta completely, and was unimpressed.

'Come with me.' The Arch Lector turned and swept away down the corridor. Glokta limped along after him, the silent Practicals marching close behind. Sult moved with an effortless, languid confidence, coat tails flapping gracefully out behind him. *Bastard.* Soon they reached a door, much like his own. The Arch Lector unlocked it and went inside, the Practicals took up positions either side of the doorway, arms folded. *A private interview then. One which I, perhaps, will never leave.* Glokta stepped over the threshold.

A box of grubby white plaster too brightly lit and with a ceiling too low for comfort. It had a big crack instead of a damp patch, but was otherwise identical to his own room. It had the scarred table, the cheap chairs, it even had a poorly cleaned bloodstain. *I wonder if they're painted on, for the effect?* One of the

Practicals suddenly pulled the door shut with a loud bang. Glokta was intended to jump, but he couldn't be bothered.

Arch Lector Sult lowered himself gracefully into one of the seats, drew a heavy sheaf of yellowing papers across the table towards him. He waved his hand at the other chair, the one that would be used by the prisoner. The implications were not lost on Glokta.

'I prefer to stand, your Eminence.'

Sult smiled at him. He had lovely, pointy teeth, all shiny white. 'No, you don't.'

He has me there. Glokta lowered himself ungracefully into the prisoner's chair while the Arch Lector turned over the first page of his wedge of documents, frowned and shook his head gently as though horribly disappointed by what he saw. *The details of my illustrious career, perhaps?*

'I had a visit from Superior Kalyne not long ago. He was most upset.' Sult's hard blue eyes came up from his papers. 'Upset with you, Glokta. He was quite vocal on the subject. He told me that you are an uncontrollable menace, that you act without a thought for the consequences, that you are a mad cripple. He demanded that you be removed from his department.' The Arch Lector smiled, a cold, nasty smile, the kind Glokta used on his prisoners. *But with more teeth.* 'I think he had it in mind that you be removed . . . altogether.' They stared at each other across the table.

Is this where I beg for mercy? Is this where I crawl on the ground and kiss your feet? Well, I don't care enough to beg and I'm far too stiff to crawl. Your Practical will have to kill me sitting down. Cut my throat. Bash my head in. Whatever. As long as they get on with it.

But Sult was in no rush. The white-gloved hands moved neatly, precisely, the pages hissed and crackled. 'We have few men like you in the Inquisition, Glokta. A nobleman, from an excellent family. A champion swordsman, a dashing cavalry officer. A man once groomed for the very top.' Sult looked him up and down as though he could hardly believe it.

'That was before the war, Arch Lector.'

'Obviously. There was much dismay at your capture, and little hope that you would be returned alive. As the war dragged on and the months passed, hope diminished to nothing, but when the treaty was signed, you were among those

prisoners returned to the Union.’ He peered at Glokta through narrowed eyes. ‘Did you talk?’

Glokta couldn’t help himself, he spluttered with shrill laughter. It echoed strangely in the cold room. Not a sound you often heard down here. ‘Did I talk? I talked until my throat was raw. I told them everything I could think of. I screamed every secret I’d ever heard. I babbled like a fool. When I ran out of things to tell them I made things up. I pissed myself and cried like a girl. Everyone does.’

‘But not everyone survives. Two years in the Emperor’s prisons. No one else lasted half that long. The physicians were sure you would never leave your bed again, but a year later you made your application to the Inquisition.’ *We both know it. We were both there. What do you want from me, and why not get on with it? I suppose some men just love the sound of their own voices.*

‘I was told that you were crippled, that you were broken, that you could never be mended, that you could never be trusted. But I was inclined to give you a chance. Some fool wins the Contest every year, and wars produce many promising soldiers, but your achievement in surviving those two years was unique. So you were sent to the North, and put in charge of one of our mines there. What did you make of England?’

A filthy sink of violence and corruption. A prison where we have made slaves of the innocent and guilty alike in the name of freedom. A stinking hole where we send those we hate and those we are ashamed of to die of hunger, and disease, and hard labour. ‘It was cold,’ said Glokta.

‘And so were you. You made few friends in England. Precious few among the Inquisition, and none among the exiles.’ He plucked a tattered letter from among the papers and cast a critical eye over it. ‘Superior Goyle told me that you were a cold fish, had no blood in you at all. He thought you’d never amount to anything, that he could make no use of you.’ *Goyle. That bastard. That butcher. I’d rather have no blood than no brains.*

‘But after three years, production was up. It was doubled in fact. So you were brought back to Adua, to work under Superior Kalyne. I thought perhaps you would learn discipline with him, but it seems I was wrong. You insist on going your own way.’ The Arch Lector frowned up at him. ‘To be frank, I think that

Kalyne is afraid of you. I think they all are. They don't like your arrogance, they don't like your methods, they don't like your . . . special insight into our work.'

'And what do you think, Arch Lector?'

'Honestly? I'm not sure I like your methods much either, and I doubt that your arrogance is entirely deserved. But I like your results. I like your results very much.' He slapped the bundle of papers closed and rested one hand on top of it, leaning across the table towards Glokta. *As I might lean towards my prisoners when I ask them to confess.* 'I have a task for you. A task that should make better use of your talents than chasing around after petty smugglers. A task that may allow you to redeem yourself in the eyes of the Inquisition.' The Arch Lector paused for a long moment. 'I want you to arrest Sepp dan Teufel.'

Glokta frowned. *Teufel?* 'The Master of the Mints, your Eminence?'

'The very same.'

The Master of the Royal Mints. An important man from an important family. A very big fish, to be hooked in my little tank. A fish with powerful friends. It could be dangerous, arresting a man like that. It could be fatal. 'May I ask why?'

'You may not. Let me worry about the whys. You concentrate on obtaining a confession.'

'A confession to what, Arch Lector?'

'Why, to corruption and high treason! It seems our friend the Master of the Mints has been most indiscreet in some of his personal dealings. It seems he has been taking bribes, conspiring with the Guild of Mercers to defraud the King. As such, it would be very useful if a ranking Mercer were to name him, in some unfortunate connection.'

It can hardly be a coincidence that I have a ranking Mercer in my interrogation room, even as we speak. Glokta shrugged. 'Once people start talking, it's shocking the names that tumble out.'

'Good.' The Arch Lector waved his hand. 'You may go, Inquisitor. I will come for Teufel's confession this time tomorrow. You had better have it.'

Glokta breathed slowly as he laboured back along the corridor.

Breath in, breath out. Calm. He had not expected to leave that room alive. *And now I find myself moving in powerful circles. A personal task for the Arch Lector, squeezing a confession to high treason from one of the Union's most trusted*

officials. The most powerful of circles, but for how long? Why me? Because of my results?

Or because I won't be missed?

'I apologise for all the interruptions today, really I do, it's like a brothel in here with all the coming and going.' Rews twisted his cracked and swollen lips into a sad smile. *Smiling at a time like this, he's a marvel. But all things must end.* 'Let us be honest, Rews. No one is coming to help you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. You will confess. The only choices you have are when, and the state you'll be in when you do. There's really nothing to be gained by putting it off. Except pain. We've got lots of that for you.'

It was hard to read the expression on Rews' bloody face, but his shoulders sagged. He dipped the pen in the ink with a trembling hand, wrote his name, slightly slanted, across the bottom of the paper of confession. *I win again. Does my leg hurt any less? Do I have my teeth back? Has it helped me to destroy this man, who I once called a friend? Then why do I do this?* The scratching of the nib on the paper was the only reply.

'Excellent,' said Glokta. Practical Frost turned the document over. 'And this is the list of your accomplices?' He let his eye scan lazily over the names. *A handful of junior Mercers, three ship's captains, an officer of the city watch, a pair of minor customs officials. A tedious recipe indeed. Let us see if we can add some spice.* Glokta turned it around and pushed it back across the table. 'Add Sepp dan Teufel's name to the list, Rews.'

The fat man looked confused. 'The Master of the Mints?' he mumbled, through his thick lips.

'That's the one.'

'But I never met the man.'

'So?' snapped Glokta. 'Do as I tell you.' Rews paused, mouth a little open. 'Write, you fat pig.' Practical Frost cracked his knuckles.

Rews licked his lips. 'Sepp . . . dan . . . Teufel,' he mumbled to himself as he wrote.

'Excellent.' Glokta carefully shut the lid on his horrible, beautiful instruments. 'I'm glad for both our sakes that we won't be needing these today.'

Frost snapped the manacles shut on the prisoner's wrists and dragged him to his feet, started to march him toward the door at the back of the room. 'What now?' shouted Rews over his shoulder.

'Angland, Rews, Angland. Don't forget to pack something warm.' The door cracked shut behind him. Glokta looked at the list of names in his hands. Sepp dan Teufel's sat at the bottom. *One name. On the face of it, just like the others. Teufel. Just one more name. But such a perilous one.*

Severard was waiting outside in the corridor, smiling as always. 'Shall I put the fat man in the canal?'

'No, Severard. Put him in the next boat to Angland.'

'You're in a merciful mood today, Inquisitor.'

Glokta snorted. 'Mercy would be the canal. That swine won't last six weeks in the North. Forget him. We have to arrest Sepp dan Teufel tonight.'

Severard's eyebrows rose. 'Not the Master of the Mints?'

'None other. On the express orders of his Eminence the Arch Lector. It seems he's been taking money from the Mercers.'

'Oh, for shame.'

'We'll leave as soon as it gets dark. Tell Frost to be ready.'

The thin Practical nodded, his long hair swaying. Glokta turned and hobbled up the corridor, cane tapping on the grimy tiles, left leg burning.

Why do I do this? He asked himself again.

Why do I do this?

No Choice at All

Logen woke with a painful jolt. He was lying awkwardly, head twisted against something hard, knees drawn up towards his chest. He opened his eyes a bleary crack. It was dark, but there was a faint glow coming from somewhere. Light through snow.

Panic stabbed at him. He knew where he was now. He'd piled some snow in the entrance to the tiny cave, to try and keep in the warmth, such as it was. It must have snowed while he was sleeping, and sealed him in. If the fall had been a heavy one there could be a lot of snow out there. Drifts deeper than a man was tall. He might never get out. He could have climbed all the way up out of the high valleys just to die in a hole in the rock, too cramped for him to even stretch out his legs.

Logen twisted round in the narrow space as best he could, dug away at the snow with his numb hands, floundering at it, grappling with it, hacking through it, mouthing breathless curses to himself. Light spilled in suddenly, searing bright. He shoved the last of the snow out of the way and dragged himself through into the open air.

The sky was a brilliant blue, the sun was blazing overhead. He turned his face towards it, closed his stinging eyes and let the light wash over him. The air was painful cold in his throat. Cutting cold. His mouth was dry as dust, his tongue a piece of wood, badly carved. He scooped up snow and shoved it into his mouth. It melted, he swallowed. Cold, it made his head hurt.

There was a graveyard stink coming from somewhere. Not just his own damp and sour sweat smell, though that was bad enough. It was the blanket, starting to rot. He had two pieces of it wrapped round his hands like mittens, tied round his wrists with twine, another round his head, like a dirty, foul-smelling hood. His boots were stuffed tight with it. The rest was wrapped round and round his body, under his coat. It smelled bad, but it had saved his life last night, and that was a good trade to Logen's mind. It would stink a good deal more before he could afford to get rid of it.

He floundered to his feet and stared about. A narrow valley, steep sided and choked with snow. Three great peaks surrounded it, piles of dark grey stone and white snow against the blue sky. He knew them. Old friends, in fact. The only ones he had left. He was up in the High Places. The roof of the world. He was safe.

'Safe,' he croaked to himself, but without much joy. Safe from food, certainly. Safe from warmth, without a doubt. Neither of those things would be troubling him up here. He'd escaped the Shanka, maybe, but this was a place for the dead, and if he stayed he'd be joining them.

He was brutal hungry as it was. His belly was a great, painful hole that called to him with piercing cries. He fumbled in his pack for the last strip of meat. An old, brown, greasy thing like a dry twig. That would hardly fill the gap, but it was all he had. He tore at it with his teeth, tough as old boot leather, and choked it down with some snow.

Logen shielded his eyes with his arm and looked northward down the valley, the way he'd come the day before. The ground dropped slowly away, snow and rock giving way to the pine-covered fells of the high valleys, trees giving way to a crinkled strip of grazing land, grassy hills giving way to the sea, a sparkling line on the far horizon. Home. The thought of it made Logen feel sick.

Home. That was where his family was. His father – wise and strong, a good man, a good leader to his people. His wife, his children. They were a good family. They deserved a better son, a better husband, a better father. His friends were there too. Old and new together. It would be good to see them all again, very good. To speak to his father in the long hall. To play with his children, to sit with his wife by the river. To talk of tactics with Threetrees. To hunt with the Dogman in the high valleys, crashing through the forest with a spear, laughing like a fool.

Logen felt a sudden painful longing. He nearly choked on the pain of it. Trouble was, they were all dead. The hall was a ring of black splinters, the river a sewer. He'd never forget coming over the hill, seeing the burnt-out ruin in the valley below. Crawling through the ashes, fumbling for signs that someone got away, while the Dogman pulled at his shoulder and told him to give it up. Nothing but corpses, rotted past knowing. He was done looking for signs. They were all dead as the Shanka could make them, and that was dead for sure. He spat in the

snow, brown spit from the dry meat. Dead and cold and rotted, or burned to ashes. Gone back to the mud.

Logen set his jaw and clenched his fists under the rotten shreds of blanket. He could go back to the ruins of the village by the sea, just one last time. He could charge down with a fighting roar in his throat, the way he had done at Carleon, when he'd lost a finger and won a reputation. He could put a few Shanka out of the world. Split them like he'd split Shama Heartless, shoulder to guts so his insides fell out. He could get vengeance for his father, his wife, his children, his friends. That would be a fitting end for the one they called the Bloody-Nine. To die killing. That might be a song worth the singing.

But at Carleon he'd been young and strong, and with his friends behind him. Now he was weak, and hungry, and alone as could be. He'd killed Shama Heartless with a long sword, sharp as anything. He looked down at his knife. It might be a good one, but he'd get precious little vengeance with it. And who'd sing the song anyway? The Shanka had poor singing voices and worse imaginations, if they even recognised the stinking beggar in the blanket after they'd shot him full of arrows. Perhaps the vengeance could wait, at least until he had a bigger blade to work with. You have to be realistic, after all.

South then, and become a wanderer. There was always work for a man with his skills. Hard work perhaps, and dark, but work all the same. There was an appeal in it, he had to admit. To have no one depending on him but himself, for his decisions to hold no importance, for no one's life or death to be in his hands. He had enemies in the south, that was a fact. But the Bloody-Nine had dealt with enemies before.

He spat again. Now that he had some spit he thought he might make the most of it. It was about all he did have – spit, an old pot, and some stinking bits of blanket. Dead in the north or alive in the south. That was what it came down to, and that was no choice at all.

You carry on. That's what he'd always done. That's the task that comes with surviving, whether you deserve to live or not. You remember the dead as best you can. You say some words for them. Then you carry on, and you hope for better.

Logen took in a long, cold breath, and blew it out. 'Fare you well, my friends,' he muttered. 'Fare you well.' Then he threw his pack over his shoulder, turned, and began to flounder through the deep snow. Downwards, southwards, out of the mountains.

It was raining, still. A soft rain that coated everything in cold dew, collected on the branches, on the leaves, on the needles, and dripped off in great fat drops that soaked through Logen's wet clothes and onto his wet skin.

He squatted, still and silent, in the damp brush, water running down his face, the bright blade of his knife glistening with wet. He felt the great motion of the forest and heard all its thousand sounds. The countless crawling of the insects, the blind scuttling of the moles, the timid rustling of the deer, the slow pulsing of the sap in the old tree trunks. Each thing alive in the forest was in search of its own kind of food, and he was the same. He let his mind settle on an animal close to him, moving cautiously through the woods to his right. Delicious. The forest grew silent but for the endless dripping of water from the branches. The world shrank down to Logen and his next meal.

When he reckoned it was close enough, he sprang forward and bore it down onto the wet ground. A young deer. It kicked and struggled but he was strong and quick, and he stabbed his knife into its neck and chopped the throat out. Hot blood surged from the wound, spilled out across Logen's hands, onto the wet earth.

He picked up the carcass and slung it over his shoulders. That would be good in a stew, maybe with some mushrooms. Very good. Then, once he'd eaten, he would ask the spirits for guidance. Their guidance was pretty useless, but the company would be welcome.

When he reached his camp it was close to sunset. It was a dwelling fit for a hero of Logen's stature – two big sticks holding a load of damp branches over a hollow in the dirt. Still, it was halfway dry in there, and the rain had stopped. He would have a fire tonight. It was a long time since he'd had a treat like that. A fire, and all his own.

Later, well fed and rested, Logen pressed a lump of chagga into his pipe. He'd found it growing a few days before at the base of a tree, big moist yellow discs of it. He'd broken off a good chunk for himself, but it hadn't dried out enough to

smoke until today. Now he took a burning twig from the fire and stuck it in the bowl, puffing away hard until the fungus caught and began to burn, giving off its familiar earthy-sweet smell.

Logen coughed, blew out brown smoke and stared into the shifting flames. His mind went back to other times and other campfires. The Dogman was there, grinning, the light gleaming on his pointy teeth. Tul Duru was sitting opposite, big as a mountain, laughing like thunder. Forley the Weakest too, with those nervous eyes darting around, always a little scared. Rudd Threetrees was there, and Harding Grim, saying nothing. He never did say anything. That was why they called him Grim.

They were all there. Only they weren't. They were all dead, gone back to the mud. Logen tapped the pipe out into the fire and shoved it away. He had no taste for it now. His father had been right. You should never smoke alone.

He unscrewed the cap of the battered flask, took a mouthful, and blew it out in a spray of tiny drops. A gout of flame went up into the cold air. Logen wiped his lips, savouring the hot, bitter taste. Then he sat back against the knotted trunk of a pine, and waited.

It was a while before they came. Three of them. They came silently from the dancing shadows among the trees and made slowly for the fire, taking shape as they moved into the light.

'Ninefingers,' said the first.

'Ninefingers,' the second.

'Ninefingers,' the third, voices like the thousand sounds of the forest.

'You're right welcome to my fire,' said Logen. The spirits squatted and stared at him without expression. 'Only three tonight?'

The one on the right spoke first. 'Every year fewer of us wake from the winter. We are all that remain. A few more winters will pass, and we will sleep also. There will be none of us left to answer your call.'

Logen nodded sadly. 'Any news from the world?'

'We heard a man fell off a cliff but washed up alive, then crossed the High Places at the start of spring, wrapped in a rotten blanket, but we put no faith in such rumours.'

'Very wise.'

'Bethod has been making war,' said the spirit in the centre.

Logen frowned. 'Bethod is always making war. That's what he does.'

'Yes. He has won so many fights now, with your help, he has given himself a golden hat.'

'Shit on that bastard,' said Logen, spitting into the fire. 'What else?'

'North of the mountains, the Shanka run around and burn things.'

'They love the fire,' said the spirit in the centre.

'They do,' said the one on the left, 'even more than your kind, Ninefingers. They love and fear it.' The spirit leaned forwards. 'We heard there is a man seeking for you in the moors to the south.'

'A powerful man,' said the one in the centre.

'A Magus of the Old Time,' the one on the left.

Logen frowned. He'd heard of these Magi. He met a sorcerer once, but he'd been easy to kill. No unnatural powers in particular, not that Logen had noticed. But a Magus was something else.

'We heard that the Magi are wise and strong,' said the spirit in the centre, 'and that such a one could take a man far and show him many things. But they are crafty too, and have their own purposes.'

'What does he want?'

'Ask him.' Spirits cared little for the business of men, they were always weak on the details. Still, this was better than the usual talk about trees.

'What will you do, Ninefingers?'

Logen considered a moment. 'I will go south and find this Magus, and ask him what he wants from me.'

The spirits nodded. They didn't show whether they thought it was a good idea or bad. They didn't care.

'Farewell then, Ninefingers,' said the spirit on the right, 'perhaps for the last time.'

'I'll try to struggle on without you.'

Logen's wit was wasted on them. They rose and moved away from the fire, fading gradually into the darkness. Soon they were gone, but Logen had to admit they had been more use than he dared to hope. They had given him a purpose.

He would head south in the morning, head south and find this Magus. Who knew? He might be a good talker. Had to be better than being shot full of arrows for nothing, at least. Logen looked into the flames, nodding slowly to himself.

He remembered other times and other campfires, when he had not been alone.

Playing With Knives

It was a beautiful spring day in Adua, and the sun shone pleasantly through the branches of the aromatic cedar, casting a dappled shade on the players beneath. A pleasing breeze fluttered through the courtyard, so the cards were clutched tightly or weighted down with glasses or coins. Birds twittered from the trees, and the shears of a gardener clacked across from the far side of the lawn, making faint, agreeable echoes against the tall white buildings of the quadrangle. Whether or not the players found the large sum of money in the centre of the table pleasant depended, of course, on the cards they held.

Captain Jezal dan Luthar certainly liked it. He had discovered an uncanny talent for the game since he gained his commission in the King's Own, a talent which he had used to win large sums of money from his comrades. He didn't really need the money, of course, coming from such a wealthy family, but it had allowed him to maintain an illusion of thrift while spending like a sailor. Whenever Jezal went home, his father bored everyone on the subject of his good fiscal planning, and had rewarded him by buying his Captaincy just six months ago. His brothers had not been happy. Yes, the money was certainly useful, and there's nothing half so amusing as humiliating one's closest friends.

Jezal half sat, half lay back on his bench with one leg stretched out, and allowed his eyes to wander over the other players. Major West had rocked his chair so far onto its back legs that he looked in imminent danger of tipping over entirely. He was holding his glass up to the sun, admiring the way that the light filtered through the amber spirit inside. He had a faint, mysterious smile which seemed to say, 'I am not a nobleman, and may be your social inferior, but I won a Contest and the King's favour on the battlefield and that makes me the better man, so you children will damn well do as I say.' He was out of this hand though, and, in Jezal's opinion, far too cautious with his money anyway.

Lieutenant Kaspas was sitting forward, frowning and scratching his sandy beard, staring intently at his cards as though they were sums he didn't understand. He was a good-humoured young man but an oaf of a card player, and

was always most appreciative when Jezal bought him drinks with his own money. Still, he could well afford to lose it: his father was one of the biggest landowners in the Union.

Jezal had often observed that the ever so slightly stupid will act more stupidly in clever company. Having lost the high ground already they scramble eagerly for the position of likeable idiot, stay out of arguments they will only lose, and can hence be everyone's friend. Kaspas look of baffled concentration seemed to say, 'I am not clever, but honest and likeable, which is much more important. Cleverness is overrated. Oh, and I'm very, very rich, so everyone likes me regardless.'

'I believe I'll stay with you,' said Kaspas, and tossed a small stack of silver coins onto the table. They broke and flashed in the sun with a cheerful jingle. Jezal absently added up the total in his head. A new uniform perhaps? Kaspas always got a little quivery when he really held good cards, and he was not trembling now. To say that he was bluffing was to give him far too much credit; more likely he was simply bored with sitting out. Jezal had no doubt that he would fold up like a cheap tent on the next round of betting.

Lieutenant Jalenhorm scowled and tossed his cards onto the table. 'I've had nothing but shit today!' he rumbled. He sat back in his chair and hunched his brawny shoulders with a frown that said, 'I am big and manly, and have a quick temper, so I should be treated with respect by everyone.' Respect was precisely what Jezal never gave him at the card table. A bad temper might be useful in a fight, but it's a liability where money is concerned. It was a shame his hand hadn't been a little better, or Jezal could've bullied him out of half his pay. Jalenhorm drained his glass and reached for the bottle.

That just left Brint, the youngest and poorest of the group. He licked his lips with an expression at once careful and slightly desperate, an expression which seemed to say, 'I am not young or poor. I can afford to lose this money. I am every bit as important as the rest of you.' He had a lot of money today; perhaps his allowance had just come in. Perhaps that was all he had to live on for the next couple of months. Jezal planned to take that money away from him and waste it all on women and drink. He had to stop himself giggling at the thought. He could

giggle when he'd won the hand. Brint sat back and considered carefully. He might be some time making his decision, so Jezal took his pipe from the table.

He lit it at the lamp provided especially for that purpose and blew ragged smoke rings up into the branches of the cedar. He wasn't half as good at smoking as he was at cards, unfortunately, and most of the rings were no more than ugly puffs of yellow-brown vapour. If he was being completely honest, he didn't really enjoy smoking. It made him feel a bit sick, but it was very fashionable and very expensive, and Jezal would be damned if he would miss out on something fashionable just because he didn't like it. Besides, his father had bought him a beautiful ivory pipe the last time he was in the city, and it looked very well on him. His brothers had not been happy about that either, come to think of it.

'I'm in,' said Brint.

Jezal swung his leg off the bench. 'Then I raise you a hundred marks or so.' He shoved his whole stack into the centre of the table. West sucked air through his teeth. A coin fell from the top of the pile, landed on its edge and rolled along the wood. It dropped to the flags beneath with the unmistakable sound of falling money. The head of the gardener on the other side of the lawn snapped up instinctively, before he returned to his clipping of the grass.

Kaspa shoved his cards away as though they were burning his fingers and shook his head. 'Damn it but I'm an oaf of a card player,' he lamented, and leaned back against the rough brown trunk of the tree.

Jezal stared straight at Lieutenant Brint, a slight smile on his face, giving nothing away. 'He's bluffing,' rumbled Jalenhorm, 'don't let him push you around, Brint.'

'Don't do it, Lieutenant,' said West, but Jezal knew he would. He had to look as if he could afford to lose. Brint didn't hesitate, he pushed all his own coins in with a careless flourish.

'That's a hundred, give or take.' Brint was trying his hardest to sound masterful in front of the older officers, but his voice had a charming note of hysteria.

'Good enough,' said Jezal, 'we're all friends here. What do you have, Lieutenant?'

'I have earth.' Brint's eyes had a slightly feverish look to them as he showed his cards to the group.

Jezal savoured the tense atmosphere. He frowned, shrugged, raised his eyebrows. He scratched his head thoughtfully. He watched Brint's expression change as he changed his own. Hope, despair, hope, despair. At length Jezal spread his cards out on the table. 'Oh look. I have suns, again.'

Brint's face was a picture. West gave a sigh and shook his head. Jalenhorm frowned. 'I was sure he was bluffing,' he said.

'How does he do it?' asked Kaspas, flicking a stray coin across the table.

Jezal shrugged. 'It's all about the players, and nothing about the cards.' He began to scoop up the heap of silver while Brint looked on, teeth gritted, face pale. The money jingled into the bag with a pleasant sound. Pleasant to Jezal, anyway. A coin dropped from the table and fell next to Brint's boot. 'You couldn't fetch that for me could you Lieutenant?' asked Jezal, with a syrupy smile.

Brint stood up quickly, knocking into the table and making the coins and glasses jump and rattle. 'I've things to do,' he said in a thick voice, then shouldered roughly past Jezal, barging him against the trunk of the tree, and strode off toward the edge of the courtyard. He disappeared into the officers' quarters, head down.

'Did you see that?' Jezal was becoming ever more indignant with each passing moment. 'Barging me like that, it's damn impolite! And me his superior officer as well! I've a good mind to put him on report!' A chorus of disapproving sounds greeted this mention of reports. 'Well, he's a bad loser is all!'

Jalenhorm looked sternly out from beneath his brows. 'You shouldn't bite him so hard. He isn't rich. He can't afford to lose.'

'Well if he can't afford to lose he shouldn't play!' snapped Jezal, upset. 'Who's the one told him I was bluffing? You should keep your big mouth shut!'

'He's new here,' said West, 'he just wants to fit in. Weren't you new once?'

'What are you, my father?' Jezal remembered being new with painful clarity, and the mention of it made him feel just a little ashamed.

Kaspas waved his hand. 'I'll lend him some money, don't worry.'

'He won't take it,' said Jalenhorm.

'Well, that's his business.' Kaspas closed his eyes and turned his face up to the sun. 'Hot. Winter is truly over. Must be getting past midday.'

'Shit!' shouted Jezal, starting up and gathering his things. The gardener paused in his trimming of the lawn and looked over at them. 'Why didn't you say something, West?'

'What am I, your father?' asked the Major. Kaspas sniggered.

'Late again,' said Jalenhorm, blowing out his cheeks. 'The Lord Marshal will not be happy!'

Jezal snatched up his fencing steels and ran for the far side of the lawn. Major West ambled after him. 'Come on!' shouted Jezal.

'I'm right behind you, Captain,' he said. 'Right behind you.' 'Jab, jab, Jezal, jab, jab!' barked Lord Marshal Varuz, whacking him on the arm with his stick.

'Ow,' yelped Jezal, and hefted the metal bar again.

'I want to see that right arm moving, Captain, darting like a snake! I want to be blinded by the speed of those hands!'

Jezal made a couple more clumsy lunges with the unwieldy lump of iron. It was utter torture. His fingers, his wrist, his forearm, his shoulder, were burning with the effort. He was soaked to the skin with sweat; it flew from his face in big drops. Marshal Varuz flicked his feeble efforts away. 'Now, cut! Cut with the left!'

Jezal swung the big smith's hammer at the old man's head with all the strength in his left arm. He could barely lift the damn thing on a good day. Marshal Varuz stepped effortlessly aside and whacked him in the face with the stick.

'Yow!' wailed Jezal, as he stumbled back. He fumbled the hammer and it dropped on his foot. 'Aaargh!' The iron bar clanged to the floor as he bent down to grab his screaming toes. He felt a stinging pain as Varuz whacked him across the arse, the sharp smack echoing across the courtyard, and he sprawled onto his face.

'That's pitiful!' shouted the old man. 'You are embarrassing me in front of Major West!' The Major had rocked his chair back and was shaking with muffled laughter. Jezal stared at the Marshal's immaculately polished boots, seeing no pressing need to get up.

'Up, Captain Luthar!' shouted Varuz. 'My time at least is valuable!'

'Alright! Alright!' Jezal clambered wearily to his feet and stood there swaying in the hot sun, panting for air, running with sweat.

Varuz stepped close to him and sniffed at his breath. 'Have you been drinking today already?' he demanded, his grey moustaches bristling. 'And last night too, no doubt!' Jezal had no reply. 'Well damn you, then! We have work to do, Captain Luthar, and I cannot do it alone! Four months until the Contest, four months to make a master swordsman of you!'

Varuz waited for a reply, but Jezal could not think of one. He was only really doing this to make his father happy, but somehow he didn't think that was what the old soldier wanted to hear, and he could do without being hit again. 'Bah!' Varuz barked in Jezal's face, and turned away, stick clenched tight behind him in both hands.

'Marshal Var—' Jezal began, but before he could finish the old soldier span around and jabbed him right in the stomach.

'Gargh,' said Jezal as he sank to his knees. Varuz stood over him.

'You are going to go on a little run for me, Captain.'

'Aaaargh.'

'You are going to run from here to the Tower of Chains. You are going to run up the tower to the parapet. We will know when you have arrived, as the Major and I will be enjoying a relaxing game of squares on the roof,' he indicated the six-storey building behind him, 'in plain view of the top of the tower. I will be able to see you with my eye-glass, so there will be no cheating this time!' and he whacked Jezal on the top of the head.

'Ow,' said Jezal, rubbing his scalp.

'Having shown yourself on the roof, you will run back. You will run as fast as you can, and I know this to be true, because if you have not returned by the time we have finished our game, you will go again.' Jezal winced. 'Major West is an excellent hand at squares, so it should take me half an hour to beat him. I suggest you begin at once.'

Jezal lurched to his feet and jogged toward the archway at the far side of the courtyard, muttering curses.

'You'll need to go faster than that, Captain!' Varuz called after him. Jezal's legs were blocks of lead, but he urged them on.

'Knees up!' shouted Major West cheerily.

Jezal clattered down the passageway, past a smirking porter sitting by the door, and out onto the broad avenue beyond. He jogged past the ivy-covered walls of the University, cursing the names of Varuz and West under his heaving breath, then by the near windowless mass of the House of Questions, its heavy front gate sealed tight. He passed a few colourless clerks hurrying this way and that, but the Agriont was quiet at this time of the afternoon, and Jezal saw nobody of interest until he passed into the park.

Three fashionable young ladies were sitting in the shade of a spreading willow by the lake, accompanied by an elderly chaperone. Jezal upped his pace immediately, and replaced his tortured expression with a nonchalant smile.

'Ladies,' he said as he flashed past. He heard them giggling to one another behind him and silently congratulated himself, but slowed to half the speed as soon as he was out of sight.

'Varuz be damned,' he said to himself, nearly walking as he turned onto the Kingsway, but had to speed up again straight away. Crown Prince Ladisla was not twenty strides off, holding forth to his enormous, brightly coloured retinue.

'Captain Luthar!' shouted his Highness, sunlight flashing off his outrageous golden buttons, 'run for all you're worth! I have a thousand marks on you to win the Contest!'

Jezal had it on good authority that the Prince had backed Bremer dan Gorst to the tune of two thousand marks, but he still bowed as low as he possibly could while running. The prince's entourage of dandies cheered and shouted half-hearted encouragements at his receding back. 'Bloody idiots,' hissed Jezal under his breath, but he would have loved to be one of them.

He passed the huge stone effigies of six hundred years of High Kings on his right, the statues of their loyal retainers, slightly smaller, on his left. He nodded to the great Magus Bayaz just before he turned into the Square of Marshals, but the wizard frowned back as disapprovingly as ever, the awe-inspiring effect only slightly diminished by a streak of white pigeon shit on his stony cheek.

With the Open Council in session the square was almost empty, and Jezal was able to amble over to the gate of the Halls Martial. A thick set sergeant nodded to him as he passed through, and Jezal wondered whether he might be from his own company – the common soldiers all looked the same, after all. He ignored the man and ran on between the towering white buildings.

‘Perfect,’ muttered Jezal. Jalenhorm and Kaspas were sitting by the door to the Tower of Chains, smoking pipes and laughing. The bastards must have guessed that he’d be coming this way.

‘For honour, and glory!’ bellowed Kaspas, rattling his sword in its scabbard as Jezal ran by. ‘Don’t keep the Lord Marshal waiting!’ he shouted from behind, and Jezal heard the big man roaring with amusement.

‘Bloody idiots,’ panted Jezal, shouldering open the heavy door, breath rasping as he started up the steep spiral staircase. It was one of the highest towers in the Agriont: there were two hundred and ninety-one steps in all. ‘Bloody steps,’ he cursed to himself. By the time he reached the hundredth his legs were burning and his chest was heaving. By the time he reached the two-hundredth he was a wreck. He walked the rest of the way, every footfall torture, and eventually burst out through a turret onto the roof and leaned on the parapet, blinking in the sudden brightness.

To the south the city was spread out below him, an endless carpet of white houses stretching all around the glittering bay. In the other direction, the view over the Agriont was even more impressive. A great confusion of magnificent buildings piled one upon the other, broken up by green lawns and great trees, circled by its wide moat and its towering wall, studded with a hundred lofty towers. The Kingsway sliced straight through the centre toward the Lords’ Round, its bronze dome shining in the sunlight. The tall spires of the University stood behind, and beyond them loomed the grim immensity of the House of the Maker, rearing high over all like a dark mountain, casting its long shadow across the buildings below.

Jezal fancied that he saw the sun glint on Marshal Varuz’ eye-glass in the distance. He cursed once again and made for the stairs.

Jezal was immensely relieved when he finally made it to the roof and saw that there were still a few white pieces on the board.

Marshal Varuz frowned up at him. 'You are very lucky. The Major has put up an exceptionally determined defence.' A smile broke West's features. 'You must somehow have earned his respect, even if you have yet to win mine.'

Jezal bent over with his hands on his knees, blowing hard and dripping sweat onto the floor. Varuz took the long case from the table, walked over to Jezal and flipped it open. 'Show us your forms.'

Jezal took the short steel in his left hand and the long in his right. They felt light as feathers after the heavy iron. Marshal Varuz backed away a step. 'Begin.'

He snapped into the first form, right arm extended, left close to the body. The blades swished and weaved through the air, glittering in the afternoon sun as Jezal moved from one familiar stance to the next with a practised smoothness. At length he was finished, and he let the steels drop to his sides.

Varuz nodded. 'The Captain has fast hands, has he not?'

'Truly excellent,' said Major West, smiling broadly. 'A damn sight better than ever I was.'

The Lord Marshal was less impressed. 'Your knees are too far bent in the third form, and you must strive for more extension on the left arm in the fourth, but otherwise,' he paused, 'passable.' Jezal breathed a sigh of relief. That was high praise indeed.

'Hah!' shouted the old man, striking him in the ribs with the end of the case. Jezal sank to the floor, hardly able to breathe. 'Your reflexes need work, though, Captain. You should always be ready. Always. If you have steels in your hands, you damn well keep them up.'

'Yes, sir,' croaked Jezal.

'And your stamina is a disgrace, you are blowing like a carp. I have it on good authority that Bremer dan Gorst runs ten miles a day, and barely shows a sweat.' Marshal Varuz leaned down over him. 'From now on you will do the same. Oh yes. A circuit of the wall of the Agriont every morning at six, followed by an hour of sparring with Major West, who has been kind enough to agree to act as your partner. I am confident that he will point up all the little weaknesses in your technique.'

Jezal winced and rubbed his aching ribs. 'As for the carousing, I want an end to it. I am all for revelry in its proper place, but there will be time for celebration

after the Contest, providing you have worked hard enough to win. Until then, clean living is what we need. Do you understand me, Captain Luthar?' He leaned down further, pronouncing every word with great care. 'Clean. Living. Captain.'

'Yes, Marshal Varuz,' mumbled Jezal.

Six hours later he was drunker than shit. Laughing like a lunatic he plunged out into the street, head spinning. The cold air slapped him hard in the face, the mean little buildings weaved and swayed, the ill-lit road tipped like a sinking ship. Jezal wrestled manfully with the urge to vomit, took a swaggering step out into the street, turned to face the door. Smearly bright light and loud sounds of laughter and shouting washed out at him. A ragged shape flew from the tavern and struck him in the chest. Jezal grappled with it desperately, then fell. He hit the ground with a bone-jarring crash.

The world was dark for a moment, then he found himself squashed into the dirt with Kaspas on top of him. 'Damn it!' he gurgled, tongue thick and clumsy in his mouth. He shoved the giggling Lieutenant away with his elbow, rolled over and lurched up, stumbling about as the street see-sawed around him. Kaspas lay on his back in the dirt, choking with laughter, reeking of cheap booze and sour smoke. Jezal made a lame attempt to brush the dirt from his uniform. There was a big wet patch on his chest that smelled of beer. 'Damn it!' he mumbled again. When had that happened?

He became aware of some shouting on the other side of the road. Two men grappling in a doorway. Jezal squinted hard, strained against the gloom. A big man had hold of some well-dressed fellow, and seemed to be tying his hands behind his back. Now he was forcing some kind of bag over his head. Jezal blinked in disbelief. It was far from a reputable area, but this seemed somewhat strong.

The door of the tavern banged open and West and Jalenhorm came out, deep in drunken conversation, something about someone's sister. Bright light cut across the street and illuminated the two struggling men starkly. The big one was dressed all in black, with a mask over the lower part of his face. He had white hair, white eyebrows, skin white as milk. Jezal stared at the white devil across the road, and he glared back with narrowed pink eyes.

'Help!' It was the fellow with the bag on his head, his voice shrill with fear. 'Help, I am—' The white man dealt him a savage blow in the midriff and he folded up with a sigh.

'You there!' shouted West.

Jalenhorm was already rushing across the street.

'What?' said Kaspá, propped up on his elbows in the road.

Jezał's mind was full of mud, but his feet seemed to be following Jalenhorm, so he stumbled along with them, feeling very sick. West came behind him. The white ghost started up and turned to stand between them and his prisoner. Another man moved briskly out of the shadows, tall and thin, dressed all in black and masked, but with long greasy hair. He held up a gloved hand.

'Gentlemen,' his whining commoner's voice was muffled by his mask, 'gentlemen please, we're on the King's business!'

'The King conducts his business in the day-time,' growled Jalenhorm.

The new arrival's mask twitched slightly as he smiled. 'That's why he needs us for the night-time stuff, eh, friend?'

'Who is this man?' West was pointing at the fellow with the bag on his head.

The prisoner was struggling up again. 'I am Sepp dan - oof!' The white monster silenced him with a heavy fist in the face, knocking him limp into the road.

Jalenhorm put a hand on the hilt of his sword, jaw clenching, and the white ghost loomed forward with a terrible speed. Close up he was even more massive, alien, and terrifying. Jalenhorm took an involuntary step back, stumbled on the rutted surface of the road and pitched onto his back with a crash. Jezał's head was thumping.

'Back!' bellowed West. His sword whipped out of its scabbard with a faint ringing.

'Thaaaaah!' hissed the monster, fists clenched like two big white rocks.

'Aargh,' gurgled the man with the bag on his head.

Jezał's heart was in his mouth. He looked at the thin man. The thin man's eyes smiled back. How could anyone smile at a time like this? Jezał was surprised to see that he had a long, ugly knife in his hand. Where did that come from? He fumbled drunkenly for his sword.

'Major West!' came a voice from the shadows down the street. Jezal paused, uncertain, steel halfway out. Jalenhorn scrambled to his feet, the back of his uniform crusted with mud, pulled out his own sword. The pale monster stared at them unblinking, not retreating a finger's breadth.

'Major West!' came the voice again, accompanied now by a clicking, scraping sound. West's face had turned pale. A figure emerged from the shadows, limping badly, cane tapping on the dirt. His broad-brimmed hat obscured the upper part of his face, but his mouth was twisted into a strange smile. Jezal noticed with a sudden wave of nausea that his four front teeth were missing. He shuffled towards them, ignoring all the naked steel, and offered his free hand to West.

The Major slowly sheathed his sword, took the hand and shook it limply. 'Colonel Glokta?' he asked in a husky voice.

'Your humble servant, though I'm no longer an army man. I'm with the King's Inquisition now.' He reached up slowly and removed his hat. His face was deathly pale, deeply lined, close-cropped hair scattered with grey. His eyes stared out feverish bright from deep, dark rings, the left one noticeably narrower than the right, pink-rimmed and glistening wet. 'And these are my assistants, Practicals Severard,' the lanky one gave a mockery of a bow, 'and Frost.'

The white monster jerked the prisoner to his feet with one hand. 'Hold on,' said Jalenhorn, stepping forward, but the Inquisitor put a gentle hand on his arm.

'This man is a prisoner of His Majesty's Inquisition, Lieutenant Jalenhorn.' The big man paused, surprised to be called by name. 'I realise your motives are of the best, but he is a criminal, a traitor. I have a warrant for him, signed by Arch Lector Sult himself. He is most unworthy of your assistance, believe me.'

Jalenhorn frowned and stared balefully at Practical Frost. The pale devil looked terrified. About as terrified as a stone. He hauled the prisoner over his shoulder without apparent effort and turned up the street. The one called Severard smiled with his eyes, sheathed his knife, bowed again and followed his companion, whistling tunelessly as he sauntered off.

The Inquisitor's left eyelid began to flutter and tears rolled down his pale cheek. He wiped it carefully on the back of his hand. 'Please forgive me. Honestly. It's coming to something when a man can't control his own eyes, eh? Damn

weeping jelly. Sometimes I think I should just have it out, and make do with a patch.' Jezal's stomach roiled. 'How long has it been, West? Seven years? Eight?'

A muscle was working on the side of the Major's head. 'Nine.'

'Imagine that. Nine years. Can you believe it? It seems like only yesterday. It was on the ridge, wasn't it, where we parted?'

'On the ridge, yes.'

'Don't worry, West, I don't blame you in the least.' Glokta slapped the Major warmly on the arm. 'Not for that, anyway. You tried to talk me out of it, I remember. I had time enough to think about it in Gurkhul, after all. Lots of time to think. You were always a good friend to me. And now young Collem West, a Major in the King's Own, imagine that.' Jezal had not the slightest idea what they were talking about. He wanted only to be sick, then go to bed.

Inquisitor Glokta turned toward him with a smile, displaying once again the hideous gap in his teeth. 'And this must be Captain Luthar, for whom everyone has such high hopes in the coming Contest. Marshal Varuz is a hard master, is he not?' He waved his cane weakly at Jezal. 'Jab, jab, eh, Captain? Jab, jab.'

Jezal felt his bile rising. He coughed and looked down at his feet, willing the world to remain motionless. The Inquisitor looked around expectantly at each of them in turn. West looked pale. Jalenhorm mud-stained and sulky. Kaspera was still sitting in the road. None of them had anything to say.

Glokta cleared his throat. 'Well, duty calls,' he bowed stiffly, 'but I hope to see you all again. Very soon.' Jezal found himself hoping he never saw the man again.

'Perhaps we might fence again sometime?' muttered Major West.

Glokta gave a good natured laugh. 'Oh, I would enjoy that, West, but I find that I'm ever so slightly crippled these days. If you're after a fight, I'm sure that Practical Frost could oblige you,' he looked over at Jalenhorm, 'but I must warn you, he doesn't fight like a gentleman. I wish you all a pleasant evening.' He placed his hat back on his head then turned slowly and shuffled off down the dingy street.

The three officers watched him limp away in an interminable, awkward silence. Kaspera finally stumbled over. 'What was all that about?' he asked.

'Nothing,' said West through gritted teeth. 'Best we forget it ever happened.'

Teeth and Fingers

Time is short. We must work quickly. Glokta nodded to Severard, and he smiled and pulled the bag off Sepp dan Teufel's head.

The Master of the Mints was a strong, noble-looking man. His face was already starting to bruise. 'What is the meaning of this?' he roared, all bluster and bravado. 'Do you know who I am?'

Glokta snorted. 'Of course we know who you are. Do you think we are in the habit of snatching people from the streets at random?'

'I am the Master of the Royal Mints!' yelled the prisoner, struggling at his bonds. Practical Frost looked on impassively, arms folded. The irons were already glowing orange in the brazier. 'How dare you . . .'

'We cannot have these constant interruptions!' shouted Glokta. Frost kicked Teufel savagely in the shin and he yelped with pain. 'How can our prisoner sign his paper of confession if his hands are tied? Please release him.'

Teufel stared suspiciously around as the albino untied his wrists. Then he saw the cleaver. The polished blade shone mirror bright in the harsh lamp light. *Truly a thing of beauty. You'd like to have that, wouldn't you, Teufel? I bet you'd like to cut my head off with it.* Glokta almost hoped that he would, his right hand seemed to be reaching for it, but he used it to shove the paper of confession away instead.

'Ah,' said Glokta, 'the Master of the Mints is a right-handed gentleman.'

'A right-handed gentleman,' Severard hissed in the prisoner's ear.

Teufel was staring across the table through narrowed eyes. 'I know you! Glokta, isn't it? The one who was captured in Gurkhul, the one they tortured. Sand dan Glokta, am I right? Well, you're in over your head this time, I can tell you! Right in over your head! When High Justice Marovia hears about this . . .'

Glokta sprang to his feet, his chair screeching on the tiles. His left leg was agony, but he ignored it. 'Look at this!' he hissed, then opened his mouth wide, giving the horrified prisoner a good look at his teeth. *Or what's left of them.* 'You see that? You see? Where they cracked out the teeth above, they left them below,

and where they took them out below, they left them above, all the way to the back. See?' Glokta pulled his cheeks back with his fingers so Teufel could get a better view. 'They did it with a tiny chisel. A little bit each day. It took months.' Glokta sat down stiffly, then smiled wide.

'What excellent work, eh? The irony of it! To leave you half your teeth, but not a one of 'em any use! I have soup most days.' The Master of the Mints swallowed hard. Glokta could see a drop of sweat running down his neck. 'And the teeth were just the beginning. I have to piss sitting down like a woman, you know. I'm thirty-five years old, and I need help getting out of bed.' He leaned back again and stretched out his leg with a wince. 'Every day is its own little hell for me. Every day. So tell me, can you seriously believe that anything you might say could scare me?'

Glokta studied his prisoner, taking his time. *No longer half so sure of himself.* 'Confess,' he whispered. 'Then we can ship you off to Angland and still get some sleep tonight.'

Teufel's face had turned almost as pale as Practical Frost's, but he said nothing. *The Arch Lector will be here soon. Already on his way, most likely. If there is no confession when he arrives . . . we'll all be off to Angland. At best.* Glokta took hold of his cane and got to his feet. 'I like to think of myself as an artist, but artistry takes time and we have wasted half the evening searching for you in every brothel in the city. Thankfully, Practical Frost has a keen nose and an excellent sense of direction. He can sniff out a rat in a shithouse.'

'A rat in a shithouse,' echoed Severard, eyes glittering bright in the orange glow from the brazier.

'We are on a tight schedule so let me be blunt. You will confess to me within ten minutes.'

Teufel snorted and folded his arms. 'Never.'

'Hold him.' Frost seized the prisoner from behind and folded him in a vice-like grip, pinning his right arm to his side. Severard grabbed hold of his left wrist and spread his fingers out on the scarred table-top. Glokta curled his fist round the smooth grip of the cleaver, the blade scraping against the wood as he pulled it slowly towards him. He stared down at Teufel's hand. *What beautiful*

fingernails he has. How long and glossy. You cannot work down a mine with nails like that. Glokta raised the cleaver high.

'Wait!' screamed the prisoner.

Bang! The heavy blade bit deep into the table top, neatly paring off Teufel's middle fingernail. He was breathing fast now, and there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead. *Now we'll see what kind of a man you really are.*

'I think you can see where this is going,' said Glokta. 'You know, they did it to a corporal who was captured with me, one cut a day. He was a tough man, very tough. They made it past his elbow before he died.' Glokta lifted the cleaver again. 'Confess.'

'You couldn't . . .'

Bang! The cleaver took off the very tip of Teufel's middle finger. Blood bubbled out on to the table top. Severard's eyes were smiling in the lamp light. Teufel's jaw dropped. *But the pain will be a while coming.* 'Confess!' bellowed Glokta.

Bang! The cleaver took off the top of Teufel's ring finger, and a little disc out of his middle finger which rolled a short way and dropped off onto the floor. Frost's face was carved from marble. 'Confess!'

Bang! The tip of Teufel's index finger jumped in the air. His middle finger was down to the first joint. Glokta paused, wiping the sweat from his forehead on the back of his hand. His leg was throbbing with the exertion. Blood was dripping onto the tiles with a steady tap, tap, tap. Teufel was staring wide-eyed at his shortened fingers.

Severard shook his head. 'That's excellent work, Inquisitor.' He flicked one of the discs of flesh across the table. 'The precision . . . I'm in awe.'

'Aaaargh!' screamed the Master of the Mints. *Now it dawns on him.* Glokta raised the cleaver once again.

'I will confess!' shrieked Teufel, 'I will confess!'

'Excellent,' said Glokta brightly.

'Excellent,' said Severard.

'Etherer,' said Practical Frost.

The Wide and Barren North

The Magi are an ancient and mysterious order, learned in the secrets of the world, practised in the ways of magic, wise and powerful beyond the dreams of men. That was the rumour. Such a one should have ways of finding a man, even a man alone in the wide and barren North. If that was so, then he was taking his time about it.

Logen scratched at his tangled beard and wondered what was keeping the great one. Perhaps he was lost. He asked himself again if he should have stayed in the forests, where food at least was plentiful. But to the south the spirits had said, and if you went south from the hills you came to these withered moors. So here he had waited in the briars and the mud, in bad weather, and mostly gone hungry.

His boots were worn out anyway, so he had set his miserable camp not far from the road, the better to see this wizard coming. Since the wars, the North was full of dangerous scum – deserting warriors turned bandit, peasants fled from their burned-out land, leaderless and desperate men with nothing left to lose, and so on. Logen wasn't worried, though. No one had a reason to come to this arsehole of the world. No one but him and the Magus.

So he sat and waited, looked for food, didn't find any, sat and waited some more. At this time of year the moors were often soaked by sudden downpours, but he would have smoky, thorny little fires by night if he could, to keep his flagging spirits up and attract any passing wizards. It had been raining this evening, but it had stopped a while before and it was dry enough for a fire. Now he had his pot over it, cooking a stew with the last of the meat he had brought with him from the forest. He would have to move on in the morning, and look for food. The Magus could catch up with him later, if he still cared.

He was stirring his meagre meal, and wondering whether to go back north or move on south tomorrow, when he heard the sound of hooves on the road. One horse, moving slowly. He sat back on his coat and waited. There was a neigh, the jingle of a harness. A rider came over the rise. With the watery sun low on the

horizon behind, Logen couldn't see him clearly, but he sat stiff and awkward in his saddle, like a man not used to the road. He urged his horse gently in the direction of the fire and reined in a few yards away.

'Good evening,' he said.

He was not in the least what Logen had been expecting. A gaunt, pale, sickly-looking young man with dark rings round his eyes, long hair plastered to his head by the drizzle and a nervous smile. He seemed more wet than wise, and certainly didn't look powerful beyond the dreams of men. He looked mostly hungry, cold, and ill. He looked something like Logen felt, in fact.

'Shouldn't you have a staff?'

The young man looked surprised. 'I don't . . . that is to say . . . er . . . I'm not a Magus.' He trailed off and licked his lips nervously.

'The spirits told me to expect a Magus, but they're often wrong.'

'Oh . . . well, I'm an apprentice. But my Master, the great Bayaz,' and he bowed his head reverently, 'is none other than the First of the Magi, great in High Art and learned in deep wisdom. He sent me to find you,' he looked suddenly doubtful, 'and bring you . . . you are Logen Ninefingers?'

Logen held up his left hand and looked at the pale young man through the gap where his middle finger used to be. 'Oh good.' The apprentice breathed a sigh of relief, then suddenly stopped himself. 'Oh, that is to say . . . er . . . sorry about the finger.'

Logen laughed. It was the first time since he dragged himself out of the river. It wasn't very funny but he laughed loud. It felt good. The young man smiled and slipped painfully from the saddle. 'I am Malacus Quai.'

'Malacus what?'

'Quai,' he said, making for the fire.

'What kind of a name is that?'

'I am from the Old Empire.'

Logen had never heard of any such place. 'An empire, eh?' 'Well, it was, once. The mightiest nation in the Circle of the World.' The young man squatted down stiffly by the fire. 'But the glory of the past is long faded. It's not much more than a huge battlefield now.' Logen nodded. He knew well enough what one of those

looked like. 'It's far away. In the west of the world.' The apprentice waved his hand vaguely.

Logen laughed again. 'That's east.'

Quai smiled sadly. 'I am a seer, though not, it seems, a very good one. Master Bayaz sent me to find you, but the stars have not been auspicious and I became lost in the bad weather.' He pushed his hair out of his eyes and spread his hands. 'I had a packhorse, with food and supplies, and another horse for you, but I lost them in a storm. I fear I am no outdoorsman.'

'Seems not.'

Quai took a flask from his pocket and leaned across with it. Logen took it from him, opened it, took a swig. The hot liquor ran down his throat, warmed him to the roots of his hair. 'Well, Malacus Quai, you lost your food but you kept hold of what really mattered. It takes an effort to make me smile these days. You're right welcome at my fire.'

'Thank you.' The apprentice paused and held his palms out to the meagre flames. 'I haven't eaten for two days.' He shook his head, hair flapping back and forth. 'It has been . . . a difficult time.' He licked his lips and looked at the pot.

Logen passed him the spoon. Malacus Quai stared at it with big round eyes. 'Have you eaten?'

Logen nodded. He hadn't, but the wretched apprentice looked famished and there was barely enough for one. He took another swig from the flask. That would do for him, for now. Quai attacked the stew with relish. When it was done he scraped the pot out, licked the spoon, then licked the edge of the pot for good measure. He sat back against a big rock. 'I am forever in your debt, Logen Ninefingers, you've saved my life. I hardly dared hope you'd be so gracious a host.'

'You're not quite what I expected either, being honest.' Logen pulled at the flask again, and licked his lips. 'Who is this Bayaz?'

'The First of the Magi, great in High Art and learned in deep wisdom. I fear he will be most seriously displeased with me.'

'He's to be feared, then?'

'Well,' replied the apprentice weakly, 'he does have a bit of a temper.'

Logen took another swallow. The warmth was spreading through his body now, the first time he had felt warm in weeks. There was a pause. 'What does he want from me, Quai?'

There was no reply. The soft sound of snoring came from across the fire. Logen smiled and, wrapping himself in his coat, lay down to sleep as well.

The apprentice woke with a sudden fit of coughing. It was early morning and the dingy world was thick with mist. It was probably better that way. There was nothing to see but miles of mud, rock, and miserable brown gorse. Everything was coated in cold dew, but Logen had managed to get a sad tongue of fire going. Quai's hair was plastered to his pallid face. He rolled onto his side and coughed phlegm onto the ground.

'Aaargh,' he croaked. He coughed and spat again.

Logen secured the last of his meagre gear on the unhappy horse. 'Morning,' he said, looking up at the white sky, 'though not a good one.'

'I will die. I will die, and then I will not have to move.'

'We've got no food, so if we stay here you will die. Then I can eat you and go back over the mountains.'

The apprentice smiled weakly. 'What do we do?'

What indeed? 'Where do we find this Bayaz?'

'At the Great Northern Library.'

Logen had never heard of it, but then he'd never been that interested in books. 'Which is where?'

'It's south of here, about four days' ride, beside a great lake.'

'Do you know the way?'

The apprentice tottered to his feet and stood, swaying slightly, breathing fast and shallow. He was ghostly pale and his face had a sheen of sweat. 'I think so,' he muttered, but he hardly looked certain.

Neither Quai nor his horse would make four days without food, even providing they didn't get lost. Food had to be the first thing. To follow the road through the woods to the south was the best option, despite the greater risk. They might get killed by bandits, but the forage would be better, and the hunger would likely kill them otherwise.

'You'd better ride,' said Logen.

'I lost the horses, I should be the one to walk.'

Logen put his hand on Quai's forehead. It was hot and clammy. 'You've a fever. You'd better ride.'

The apprentice didn't try to argue. He looked down at Logen's ragged boots. 'Can you take my boots?'

Logen shook his head. 'Too small.' He knelt down over the smouldering remains of the fire and pursed his lips.

'What are you doing?'

'Fires have spirits. I will keep this one under my tongue, and we can use it to light another fire later.' Quai looked too ill to be surprised. Logen sucked up the spirit, coughed on the smoke, shuddered at the bitter taste. 'You ready to leave?'

The apprentice raised his arms in a hopeless gesture. 'I am packed.'

Malacus Quai loved to talk. He talked as they made their way south across the moors, as the sun climbed into the grimy skies, as they entered the woods toward evening time. His illness did nothing to stop his chatter, but Logen didn't mind. It was a long time since anyone had talked to him, and it helped to take his mind off his feet. He was starving and tired, but it was his feet that were the problem. His boots were tatters of old leather, his toes cut and battered, his calf was still burning from the Shanka's teeth. Every step was an ordeal. Once they had called him the most feared man in the North. Now he was afraid of the smallest sticks and stones in the road. There was a joke in there somewhere. He winced as his foot hit a pebble.

'... so I spent seven years studying with Master Zacharus. He is great among the Magi, the fifth of Juvens' twelve apprentices, a great man.' Everything connected with the Magi seemed to be great in Quai's eyes. 'He felt I was ready to come to the Great Northern Library and study with Master Bayaz, to earn my staff. But things have not been easy for me here. Master Bayaz is most demanding and ...'

The horse stopped and snorted, shied and took a hesitant step back. Logen sniffed the air and frowned. There were men nearby, and badly washed ones. He should have noticed it sooner but his attention had been on his feet. Quai looked down at him. 'What is it?'

As if in answer a man stepped out from behind a tree perhaps ten strides ahead, another a little further down the road. They were scum, without a doubt. Dirty, bearded, dressed in ragged bits of mismatched fur and leather. Not, on the whole, unlike Logen. The skinny one on the left had a spear with a barbed head. The big one on the right had a heavy sword speckled with rust, and an old dented helmet with a spike on top. They moved forward, grinning. There was a sound behind and Logen looked over his shoulder, his heart sinking. A third man, with a big boil on his face, was making his way cautiously down the road toward them, a heavy wood axe in his hands.

Quai leaned down from his saddle, eyes wide with fear. 'Are they bandits?'

'You're the fucking seer,' hissed Logen through gritted teeth.

They stopped a stride or two in front. The one with the helmet seemed to be in charge. 'Nice horse,' he growled. 'Would you lend it to us?' The one with the spear grinned as he took hold of the bridle.

Things had taken a turn for the worse alright. A moment ago that had hardly seemed possible, but fate had found a way. Logen doubted that Quai would be much use in a fight. That left him alone against three or more, and with only a knife. If he did nothing him and Malacus would end up robbed, and more than likely killed. You have to be realistic about these things.

He looked the three bandits over again. They didn't expect a fight, not from two unarmed men – the spear was sideways on, the sword pointed at the ground. He didn't know about the axe, so he'd have to trust to luck with that one. It's a sorry fact that the man who strikes first usually strikes last, so Logen turned to the one with the helmet and spat the spirit in his face.

It ignited in the air and pounced on him hungrily. His head burst into spitting flames, the sword clattered to the ground. He clawed desperately at his face and his arms caught fire as well. He reeled screaming away.

Quai's horse startled at the flames and reared up, snorting. The skinny man stumbled back with a gasp and Logen leaped at him, grabbed the shaft of the spear with one hand and butted him in the face. His nose crunched against Logen's forehead and he staggered away with blood streaming down his chin. Logen jerked him back with the spear, swung his right arm round in a wide arc

and punched him in the neck. He went down with a gurgle and Logen tore the spear from his hands.

He felt movement behind him and dropped to the ground, rolling away to his left. The axe whistled through the air above his head and cut a long slash in the horse's side, spattering drops of blood across the ground and ripping the buckle on the saddle girth open. Boil-face tottered away, spinning around after his axe. Logen sprang at him but his ankle twisted on a stone and he tottered like a drunkard, yelping at the pain. An arrow hummed past his face from somewhere in the trees behind and was lost in the bushes on the other side of the road. The horse snorted and kicked, eyes rolling madly, then took off down the road at a crazy gallop. Malacus Quai wailed as the saddle slid off its back and he was flung into the bushes.

There was no time to think about him. Logen charged at the axe-man with a roar, aiming the spear at his heart. He brought his axe up in time to nudge the point away, but not far enough. The spear spitted him through the shoulder, spun him round. There was a sharp crack as the shaft snapped, Logen lost his balance and pitched forward, bearing Boil-face down into the road. The spear-point sticking out of his back cut a deep gash into Logen's scalp as he fell on top of him. Logen seized hold of the axe-man's matted hair with both hands, pulled his head back and mashed his face into a rock.

He lurched to his feet, head spinning, wiping blood out of his eyes just in time to see an arrow zip out of the trees and thud into a trunk a stride or two away. Logen hurtled at the archer. He saw him now, a boy no more than fourteen, reaching for another arrow. Logen pulled out his knife. The boy was nocking the arrow to his bow, but his eyes were wide with panic. He fumbled the string and drove the arrow through his hand, looking greatly surprised.

Logen was on him. The boy swung the bow at him but he ducked below it and jumped forward, driving the knife up with both hands. The blade caught the boy under the chin and lifted him into the air, then snapped off in his neck. He dropped on top of Logen, the jagged shard of the knife cutting a long gash in his arm. Blood splattered everywhere, from the cut on Logen's head, from the cut on Logen's arm, from the gaping wound in the boy's throat.

He shoved the corpse away, staggered against a tree and gasped for breath. His heart was pounding, the blood roaring in his ears, his stomach turning over. 'I am still alive,' he whispered, 'I am still alive.' The cuts on his head and his arm were starting to throb. Two more scars. It could have been a lot worse. He scraped the blood from his eyes and limped back to the road.

Malacus Quai was standing, staring ashen-faced at the three corpses. Logen took him by the shoulders, looked him up and down. 'You hurt?'

Quai only stared at the bodies. 'Are they dead?'

The corpse of the big one with the helmet was still smoking, making a disgustingly appetising smell. He had a good pair of boots on, Logen noticed, a lot better than his own. The one with the boil had his neck turned too far around to be alive, that and he had the broken spear through him. Logen rolled the skinny one over with his foot. He still had a look of surprise on his bloody face, eyes staring up at the sky, mouth open.

'Must've crushed his windpipe,' muttered Logen. His hands were covered in blood. He grabbed one with the other to stop them from trembling.

'What about the one in the trees?'

Logen nodded. 'What happened to the horse?'

'Gone,' muttered Quai hopelessly. 'What do we do?'

'We see if they've got any food.' Logen pointed to the smoking corpse. 'And you help me get his boots off.'