



Rogues

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And an Introduction by George R. R. Martin!

Praise for *Rogues*

“Not a single bad story in the bunch . . . The table of contents alone will make fans from all genre aisles salivate.”—*Library Journal*

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Editorial Review

Review

“Not a single bad story in the bunch . . . The table of contents alone will make fans from all genre aisles salivate.”—*Library Journal*

About the Author

George R. R. Martin is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of many novels, including the acclaimed series *A Song of Ice and Fire*—*A Game of Thrones*, *A Clash of Kings*, *A Storm of Swords*, *A Feast for Crows*, and *A Dance with Dragons*—as well as *Tuf Voyaging*, *Fevre Dream*, *The Armageddon Rag*, *Dying of the Light*, *Windhaven* (with Lisa Tuttle), and *Dreamsongs Volumes I and II*. He is also the creator of *The Lands of Ice and Fire*, a collection of maps from *A Song of Ice and Fire* featuring original artwork from illustrator and cartographer Jonathan Roberts. As a writer-producer, Martin has worked on *The Twilight Zone*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and various feature films and pilots that were never made. He lives with the lovely Parris in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Gardner Dozois has won fifteen Hugo Awards and thirty-two Locus Awards for his editing work, plus two Nebula Awards for his own writing. He was the editor of *Asimov's Science Fiction* for twenty years, and is the author or editor of more than a hundred books, including many volumes of *The Year's Best Science Fiction*.

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chapter 1

Joe Abercrombie

Joe Abercrombie is one of the fastest-rising stars in fantasy today, acclaimed by readers and critics alike for his tough, spare, no-nonsense approach to the genre. He's probably best known for his First Law trilogy, the first novel of which, *The Blade Itself*, was published in 2006; it was followed in subsequent years by *Before They Are Hanged* and *Last Argument of Kings*. He's also written the stand-alone fantasy novels *Best Served Cold* and *The Heroes*. His most recent novel is *Red Country*. In addition to writing, Abercrombie is also a freelance film editor, and lives and works in London.

In the fast-paced thriller that follows, he takes us deep into the dirty, rank, melodious, and mazelike streets of Sipani, one of the world's most dangerous cities, for a deadly game of Button, Button, Who's Got the Button?

Tough Times All Over

Joe Abercrombie

Damn, but she hated Sipani.

The bloody blinding fogs and the bloody slapping water and the bloody universal sickening stink of rot. The bloody parties and masques and revels. Fun, everyone having bloody fun, or at least pretending to. The bloody people were worst of all. Rogues every man, woman, and child. Liars and fools, the lot of them.

Carcolf hated Sipani. Yet here she was again. Who, then, she was forced to wonder, was the fool?

Braying laughter echoed from the mist ahead and she slipped into the shadows of a doorway, one hand tickling the grip of her sword. A good courier trusts no one, and Carcolf was the very best, but in Sipani, she trusted .?.?. less than no one.

Another gang of pleasure-seekers blundered from the murk, a man with a mask like a moon pointing at a woman who was so drunk she kept falling over on her high shoes. All of them laughing, one of them flapping his lace cuffs as though there never was a thing so funny as drinking so much you couldn't stand up. Carcolf rolled her eyes skyward and consoled herself with the thought that behind the masks they were hating it as much as she always did when she tried to have fun.

In the solitude of her doorway, Carcolf winced. Damn, but she needed a holiday. She was becoming a sour ass. Or, indeed, had become one and was getting worse. One of those people who held the entire world in contempt. Was she turning into her bloody father?

“Anything but that,” she muttered.

The moment the revelers tottered off into the night, she ducked from her doorway and pressed on, neither too fast nor too slow, soft booteels silent on the dewy cobbles, her unexceptional hood drawn down to an inconspicuous degree, the very image of a person with just the average amount to hide. Which, in Sipani, was quite a bit.

Over to the west somewhere, her armored carriage would be speeding down the wide lanes, wheels striking sparks as they clattered over the bridges, stunned bystanders leaping aside, driver's whip lashing at the foaming flanks of the horses, the dozen hired guards thundering after, streetlamps gleaming upon their dewy armor. Unless the Quarryman's people had already made their move, of course: the flutter of arrows, the scream of beasts and men, the crash of the wagon leaving the road, the clash of steel, and finally the great padlock blown from the strongbox with blasting powder, the choking smoke wafted aside by eager hands, and the lid flung back to reveal .?.?. nothing.

Carcolf allowed herself the smallest smile and patted the lump against her ribs. The item, stitched up safe in the lining of her coat.

She gathered herself, took a couple of steps, and sprang from the canal side, clearing three strides of oily water to the deck of a decaying barge, timbers creaking under her as she rolled and came smoothly up. To go around by the Fintine bridge was quite the detour, not to mention a well-traveled and well-watched way, but this boat was always tied here in the shadows, offering a shortcut. She had made sure of it. Carcolf left as little to chance as possible. In her experience, chance could be a real bastard.

A wizened face peered out from the gloom of the cabin, steam issuing from a battered kettle. “Who the hell are you?”

“Nobody.” Carcolf gave a cheery salute. “Just passing through!” and she hopped from the rocking wood to the stones on the far side of the canal and was away into the mold-smelling mist. Just passing through. Straight to the docks to catch the tide and off on her merry way. Or her sour-assed one, at least. Wherever Carcolf went, she was nobody. Everywhere, always passing through.

Over to the east, that idiot Pombrine would be riding hard in the company of four paid retainers. He hardly

looked much like her, what with the moustache and all, but swaddled in that ever-so-conspicuous embroidered cloak of hers, he did well enough for a double. He was a penniless pimp who smugly believed himself to be impersonating her so she could visit a lover, a lady of means who did not want their tryst made public. Carcolf sighed. If only. She consoled herself with the thought of Pombrine's shock when those bastards Deep and Shallow shot him from his saddle, expressed considerable surprise at the moustache, then rooted through his clothes with increasing frustration, and finally, no doubt, gutted his corpse only to find .?.?. nothing.

Carcolf patted that lump once again and pressed on with a spring in her step. Here went she, down the middle course, alone and on foot, along a carefully prepared route of back streets, of narrow ways, of unregarded shortcuts and forgotten stairs, through crumbling palaces and rotting tenements, gates left open by surreptitious arrangement and, later on, a short stretch of sewer that would bring her out right by the docks with an hour or two to spare.

After this job, she really had to take a holiday. She tongued at the inside of her lip, where a small but unreasonably painful ulcer had lately developed. All she did was work. A trip to Adua, maybe? Visit her brother, see her nieces? How old would they be now? Ugh. No. She remembered what a judgmental bitch her sister-in-law was. One of those people who met everything with a sneer. She reminded Carcolf of her father. Probably why her brother had married the bloody woman .?.?.

Music was drifting from somewhere as she ducked beneath a flaking archway. A violinist, either tuning up or of execrable quality. Neither would have surprised her. Papers flapped and rustled upon a wall sprouting with moss, ill-printed bills exhorting the faithful citizenry to rise up against the tyranny of the Snake of Talins. Carcolf snorted. Most of Sipani's citizens were more interested in falling over than rising up, and the rest were anything but faithful.

She twisted about to tug at the seat of her trousers, but it was hopeless. How much do you have to pay for a new suit of clothes before you avoid a chafing seam just in the worst place? She hopped along a narrow way beside a stagnant section of canal, long out of use, gloopy with algae and bobbing rubbish, plucking the offending fabric this way and that to no effect. Damn this fashion for tight trousers! Perhaps it was some kind of cosmic punishment for her paying the tailor with forged coins. But then Carcolf was considerably more moved by the concept of local profit than that of cosmic punishment, and therefore strove to avoid paying for anything wherever possible. It was practically a principle with her, and her father always said that a person should stick to their principles—

Bloody hell, she really was turning into her father.

“Ha!”

A ragged figure sprang from an archway, the faintest glimmer of steel showing. With an instinctive whimper, Carcolf stumbled back, fumbling her coat aside and drawing her own blade, sure that death had found her at last. The Quarryman one step ahead? Or was it Deep and Shallow, or Kurrikan's hirelings .?.? but no one else showed themselves. Only this one man, swathed in a stained cloak, unkempt hair stuck to pale skin by the damp, a mildewed scarf masking the bottom part of his face, bloodshot eyes round and scared above.

“Stand and deliver!” he boomed, somewhat muffled by the scarf.

Carcolf raised her brows. “Who even says that?”

A slight pause, while the rotten waters slapped the stones beside them. “You’re a woman?” There was an almost apologetic turn to the would-be robber’s voice.

“If I am, will you not rob me?”

“Well .?.?. er .?.?.” The thief seemed to deflate somewhat, then drew himself up again. “Stand and deliver anyway!”

“Why?” asked Carcolf.

The point of the robber’s sword drifted uncertainly. “Because I have a considerable debt to .?.?. that’s none of your business!”

“No, I mean, why not just stab me and strip my corpse of valuables, rather than giving me the warning?”

Another pause. “I suppose .?.?. I hope to avoid violence? But I warn you I am entirely prepared for it!”

He was a bloody civilian. A mugger who had blundered upon her. A random encounter. Talk about chance being a bastard! For him, at least. “You, sir,” she said, “are a shitty thief.”

“I, madam, am a gentleman.”

“You, sir, are a dead gentleman.” Carcolf stepped forward, weighing her blade, a stride length of razor steel lent a ruthless gleam from a lamp in a window somewhere above. She could never be bothered to practice, but nonetheless she was far more than passable with a sword. It would take a great deal more than this stick of gutter trash to get the better of her. “I will carve you like—”

The man darted forward with astonishing speed, there was a scrape of steel, and before Carcolf even thought of moving, the sword was twitched from her fingers and skittered across the greasy cobbles to plop into the canal.

“Ah,” she said. That changed things. Plainly her attacker was not the bumpkin he appeared to be, at least when it came to swordplay. She should have known. Nothing in Sipani is ever quite as it appears.

“Hand over the money,” he said.

“Delighted.” Carcolf plucked out her purse and tossed it against the wall, hoping to slip past while he was distracted. Alas, he pricked it from the air with impressive dexterity and whisked his sword point back to prevent her escape. It tapped gently at the lump in her coat.

“What have you got .?.?. just there?”

From bad to much, much worse. “Nothing, nothing at all.” Carcolf attempted to pass it off with a false chuckle, but that ship had sailed and she, sadly, was not aboard, any more than she was aboard the damn ship still rocking at the wharf for the voyage to Thond. She steered the glinting point away with one finger. “Now I have an extremely pressing engagement, so if—” There was a faint hiss as the sword slit her coat open.

Carcolf blinked. “Ow.” There was a burning pain down her ribs. The sword had slit her open too. “Ow!” She subsided to her knees, deeply aggrieved, blood oozing between her fingers as she clutched them to her side.

“Oh .?.?. oh no. Sorry. I really .?.?. really didn’t mean to cut you. Just wanted, you know .?.?.”

“Ow.” The item, now slightly smeared with Carcolf’s blood, dropped from the gashed pocket and tumbled across the cobbles. A slender package perhaps a foot long, wrapped in stained leather.

“I need a surgeon,” gasped Carcolf, in her best I-am-a-helpless-woman voice. The Grand Duchess had always accused her of being overdramatic, but if you can’t be dramatic at a time like that, when can you? It was likely she really did need a surgeon, after all, and there was a chance that the robber would lean down to help her and she could stab the bastard in the face with her knife. “Please, I beg you!”

He loitered, eyes wide, the whole thing plainly gone further than he had intended. But he edged closer only to reach for the package, the glinting point of his sword still leveled at her.

A different and even more desperate tack, then. She strove to keep the panic out of her voice. “Look, take the money, I wish you joy of it.” Carcolf did not, in fact, wish him joy, she wished him rotten in his grave. “But we will both be far better off if you leave that package!”

His hand hovered. “Why, what’s in it?”

“I don’t know. I’m under orders not to open it!”

“Orders from who?”

Carcolf winced. “I don’t know that either, but—”

Kurtis took the packet. Of course he did. He was an idiot, but not so much of an idiot as that. He snatched up the packet and ran. Of course he ran. When didn’t he?

He tore down the alleyway, heart in mouth, jumped a burst barrel, caught his foot and went sprawling, almost impaled himself on his own drawn sword, slithered on his face through a slick of rubbish, scooping a mouthful of something faintly sweet and staggering up, spitting and cursing, snatching a scared glance over his shoulder—

There was no sign of pursuit. Only the mist, the endless mist, whipping and curling like a thing alive.

He slipped the packet, now somewhat slimy, into his ragged cloak and limped on, clutching at his bruised buttock and still struggling to spit that rotten-sweet taste from his mouth. Not that it was any worse than his breakfast had been. Better, if anything. You know a man by his breakfast, his fencing master always used to tell him.

He pulled up his damp hood with its faint smell of onions and despair, plucked the purse from his sword, and slid blade back into sheath as he slipped from the alley and insinuated himself among the crowds, that faint snap of hilt meeting clasp bringing back so many memories. Of training and tournaments, of bright futures and the adulation of the crowds. Fencing, my boy, that’s the way to advance! Such knowledgeable audiences in Styria, they love their swordsmen there, you’ll make a fortune! Better times, when he had not dressed in rags, or been thankful for the butcher’s leftovers, or robbed people for a living. He grimaced. Robbed women. If you could call it a living. He stole another furtive glance over his shoulder. Could he have killed her? His skin prickled with horror. Just a scratch. Just a scratch, surely? But he had seen blood. Please, let it have been a scratch! He rubbed his face as though he could rub the memory away, but it was stuck fast. One

by one, things he had never imagined, then told himself he would never do, then that he would never do again, had become his daily routine.

Users Review

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