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Opening extract from
**The Thief-Taker's
Apprentice**

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THE
THIEF-TAKER'S
APPRENTICE



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BERREN

The crowd had come to watch three men die. Most of them had no idea who the three men were. Nor did they particularly care. They'd come into Four Winds Square for the spectacle, for a bit of blood, for a Sun-day afternoon of entertainment. They'd come for the jugglers and the fire-breathers, the pies and the pastry-sellers, the singers and the speakers. They'd come for everything the city had to offer, and that's what they got.

The thief ran through them with practised ease. The crowd barely noticed he was there. He slipped between the larger bodies around him like an eel between a fisherman's fingers, finding space where none seemed to exist. If anyone had asked him how old he was, he might have said twelve or he might have said sixteen, depending on who was doing the asking. The truth probably lay somewhere in between. The truth was that he didn't know and he didn't much care. He was small for a boy who might nearly have been a man, and his name was Berren.

He'd come for the executions like everyone else, but he'd come for the crowd too. A watcher, perched on one of the rooftops around the square and taking an interest in his progress, would have seen him pause now and then amid all his motion. Each pause marked the crowd as a fraction poorer and Berren as a token richer. The same watcher, if he stared for long enough, would have seen that Berren was

slowly meandering his way towards the front of the crowd. When the executioner and his charges finally emerged, Berren had every intention of watching from as close as he could get.

After a time the crowd began to hush. At one end of the square stood a wooden platform, built especially for the occasion. For the last few hours a succession of dancers and jugglers and other petty entertainers had paid for the privilege of using it. The crowd had largely ignored them, talking amongst themselves. The coming of quiet meant something worth watching was about to happen. Berren began to worm his way further forwards. He was a head shorter than most of the people around him, and navigated by the simple expedient of watching where everyone else was looking, and then heading that way. From time to time he caught a fleeting glimpse of the platform. A man in yellow robes was standing there now, making slow gestures with his hands. Even Berren knew enough to know that the yellow made him a priest.

As he reached the front of the crowd, his progress slowed. He changed direction and edged sideways until he reached the corner of the square. Four Winds Square was in the centre of the Courts District of Deephaven city. The buildings around it were high and made of stone, with tall doors of heavy wood and dark wobbly glass in their windows. Each of the doors had a stone lintel protruding a good six inches from the wall. Boys smaller than him filled them, jostling for space, squeezed up precariously close to the ends but never quite falling off. Berren spotted a gap on the corner of one of them. He scaled the wall and made it his own. It was too narrow to be properly comfortable, but from up there he could see everything. That more than made up for having to constantly push himself against the stone and the grumbling boys next to him.

The priest was gone. The executioner had ascended the

platform now, a big brawny man standing with his legs braced apart, holding an axe that was almost as tall as he was. Behind the executioner stood the three who'd been sentenced to die, chained and surrounded by guards. Beside them, someone bald and dressed in fine clothes was making another speech of some sort. The crowd wasn't very interested. They hadn't come for speeches and they were talking restlessly again, so that Berren could barely hear anything that was said. Snatches reached him, the occasional two or three words, not enough to make any sense. He didn't care any more than the rest of the crowd. Executions were a rarity. He was here to see people have their heads cut off, not to listen to boring speeches. The crowd agreed. It was late spring, the month of Floods, and the stifling afternoons of humid summer heat were arriving early this year.

Berren wondered briefly what the three men had done. He knew a thing or two about how the city punished thieves. Boys like him caught cutting purses usually got a beating and that was that. Berren had had plenty of those. If the watch knew your face and you got unlucky then you got a branding or maybe had a finger cut off. He shuddered to think about that sort of thing. Losing a finger, that was ... well, something he didn't want to think about. Just as well Master Hatchet kept things sweet with the watch around his piece of the city. Master Hatchet was a bear in a man's body, but that wasn't his secret. His boys, when they weren't thieving, kept the streets around Shipwrights and the south end of the Fishing Quarter clear of animal filth. Most particularly, they kept Reeper Hill clear of animal filth. Every morning and every evening and all through the night, Hatchet would have someone up there with a dung-cart. Keeping sweet with the ladies on Reeper Hill mattered more to Master Hatchet than anything else. Their favour was what gave him clout.

People lost their whole hands sometimes. He'd heard of

it but he'd never seen it happen. Mostly, if the city decided it couldn't stand to put up with you any more, you got loaded onto a barge and shipped off up the river to the imperial mines. The mines were somewhere in the north, hundreds and thousands of miles away where it was always raining and cold and no one ever came back. Berren didn't know what you had to do to have your head cut off, though. Every now and then the city just decided to put on a show and that was that. They didn't do it very often, which was why today there was such a crowd come out to watch.

The boy on the lintel next to him nudged him. "Scuse me. You ever seen one of these before?"

Berren looked at him with all the scorn he could muster. The boy must have been eight. "Course I have," he lied. 'Lots.' He snorted and shook his head as though it was the stupidest question in the world, but the boy didn't give up.

'What happens, then?'

'Wait and see.'

'Is there lots of blood? I hope there's lots.'

'Did you know that the heads, after they get chopped off, they can still move their eyes and wrinkle their nose and talk and things like that for hours before they die?' Hatchet himself had told him that.

The boy's eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped. 'No! Really? Can you go and talk to them afterwards?'

Berren shrugged. 'I suppose. If you want to. If they don't take them away.' Then the man on the platform did something that got Berren's full attention. He stopped talking and held up a purse. The crowd's murmuring subsided, enough that Berren caught a few words of what he said next. Something about a reward. Something about ten gold emperors. *Ten* gold emperors.

A new man came forward from behind the executioner. The one who'd caught the men about to be killed. The thief-taker. From what Berren could see, there was nothing

special about him. He didn't have particularly rich clothes. He didn't have a fancy sword or anything like that. If Berren had seen him in the street, he would have thought him a shopkeeper, or maybe a foreman from the docks. But now ...

Now he had a purse, given to him by the man with the fine clothes. Now Berren would think of him as a man who had ten emperors in his pocket ...

'What's happening?' asked the boy beside him, craning his neck and squinting to see. Berren cuffed him silent. Ten emperors! His eyes went wide even thinking about it. He felt himself wobble and almost tumbled off the lintel. He'd never heard of such a fortune!

The man who now had this fortune stepped back while the executioner came forward again. The prisoners were dragged to the front of the platform so that everyone could see. The executioner made a big show of his axe, holding it high so everyone could see that too. He spun and twirled it, the axe head tracing wild arcs in the air, until he brought it down on a thick lump of wood and split it. Splinters showered all around. The crowd roared. The three prisoners were forced down into the three blocks that waited for them. Berren barely noticed. He was watching the man with the ten emperors, lurking in the shadows at the back of the platform.

Suddenly the executioner brought down his axe again. The boy beside him let out a soft whistle of awe. Berren's heart leapt. One of the prisoners had been beheaded and he hadn't even seen it! The body was still there but the head was gone. He noted the dark spattered streaks across the planks and the stain where the head had fallen. The executioner was holding it up in the air now, gripping its hair, making sure everyone got a good look at his handiwork.

Berren's eyes began to dart back and forth, from the man in the shadows to the executioner and back again, back and

forth, back and forth. He didn't dare lose track of the man with ten emperors in his pocket but he wanted to see the head, too. He squinted, trying to see if it was still moving. A waning trickle of blood still dripped from its neck; he couldn't see it, but he could see the dark stains, spattering across the pale wood around the headsman's feet.

Abruptly the executioner turned and tossed the head away into a large basket lined with straw that was on the platform behind him. He stood beside his second victim and raised his axe. The man in the shadows hadn't moved. Berren held his breath and let his eyes settle on the axe. He watched it start to fall, slowly it seemed. His own heart thumped in his chest, slow and hard, and he felt a thrilling tightness inside him. As the axe struck flesh, he gasped with glee. Skin and bone parted. Blood sprayed further than Berren could spit. He was almost rigid with exhilaration.

One of the dead man's legs twitched with such force that it almost twisted the body off its block. The executioner shied away in surprise. One foot slipped in the pool of blood. When he caught his balance, he gave the severed head a hefty kick. The head rolled away and fell down somewhere under the platform. The crowd laughed, but by then Berren was already searching again for the man in the shadows.

The man still hadn't moved. Berren sighed with relief.

For the last execution, he allowed himself to relax and take in everything the executioner did. He appreciated the careful preparation, the cleaning of the axe head, the touch of a sharpening stone. When it fell, he watched and grinned. The last one was every bit as good as the first. Not as much blood as he'd hoped, but still quite a bit. When the executioner picked up the last head and held it up for the crowd to view, Berren strained his eyes to see whether anything was still moving. He squinted. He was sure he saw the dead head blink.

He turned to the boy beside him, overflowing with excitement. 'Did you see that? He blinked! Did you see it?'

The younger boy's goggling eyes stayed riveted to the head. 'Yeh yeh, it did, yeh.'

Berren stared intently at the head again, peering in case there was more. Finally, when the executioner turned to go, Berren sent his gaze back in search of the man in the shadows.

He was gone.