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Not a single bad story in the bunch . . . The table of contents alone will make fans from all genre aisles drool. -Library Journal
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 Dreamsong's Volume 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 with original artwork from illustrator 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 was the author or editor of more than a hundred books. He won fifteen Hugo Awards, a World Fantasy Award, and the Quodrapated Locus Awards for his editing work, as well as two Nebula Awards and a Sidewise Award for his own writing. He was editor of the leading science fiction magazine, Asimov's Science Fiction, for twenty years, and editor of the anthology series The Year's Best Science Fiction for 35 years. Gardner Dozois, a member of the Science Fiction Hall of Fame, died in 2018.
chapter 1Joe AbercrombieJoe Abercrombie is one of the fastest rising stars in fantasy today, praised by readers and critics alike for his tough, spare, no-nonsense approach to the genre. He is probably best known for his first law trilogy, the first novel which, The Blade Itself, was published in 2006; it was followed in the subsequent years of before being hung and last argument of kings. He has also written the stand-alone fantasy novels Best Served Cold and The Heroes. His latest novel is Red Country. In addition to writing, Abercrombie is also a freelance film editor, and lives and works in London.In the fast thriller that follows, he takes us deep into the filthy, rank, melodic, and maze-like 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 OverJoe AbercrombieDamn, but she hated Sipani.The bloody dazzling mists and the bloody slapping water and the bloody universal nauseating stinks of rot. The bloody parties and masks and revels. Funny, everyone is having fun, or at least pretending to. The bloody people were the worst of all. Rogues every man, woman and child. Liars and fools, all of them. Carcolf hated Sipani. But here she was again. Who, then, she was forced to wonder, was the fool? Braying laughter sounded the fog ahead and she slipped into the shadows of a doorway, one hand tickling the grip of her sword. A good courier doesn't trust anyone, and Carcolf was the very best, but in Sipani she relied on . . . less than none. Another gang of pleasure-seekers blundered from the murk, a man with a mask as a moon points to a woman who was so drunk she kept falling over on her high shoes. All of them laughing, one of them flaunting his lace cuffs, as if there was never a thing as funny as drinking so much you couldn't stand up. Carcolf rolled her eyes skyward and consoled herself with the idea that behind the masks they hated it as much as she always did when she tried to have fun. In the loneliness of her doorway, Carcolf flashed. Hell, but she needed a vacation. She was getting mad. Or, yes, had become one and got worse. One of the people who held the whole world in contempt. Was she turning into her father? Anything but that, she muttered. The moment revelers flattered into the night, she emerged from her doorway and pressed on, neither too fast nor too slow, soft bootheels silent on the dewy cobbles, her unusual cap pulled down to a discreet degree, the very image of someone with just the average amount to hide. Which in Sipani was quite a lot. Over west somewhere, her armored cart would be speeding down the wide lanes, wheels striking sparks as they flattered over the bridges, stunned onlookers leaping aside, the driver's whip lashing on the frothy flanks of the horses, the dozen hired guards thundering after, street lamps shining on their dewy armor. Unless Quarryman's people had already made their move, of course: the flutter of arrows, the screams of animals and men, the crash of the wagon leaving the road, the clash of steel, and finally the large padlock blown from the strongbox with blasting powder, choking smoke wafted to the side of eager hands, and the lid slung back to reveal . . . Nothing. Carcolf allowed her slightest smile and patted the lump against her ribs. The object, sewn up safely in the lining of her coat. She collected herself, took a few steps, and jumped from the canal side, clearing three steps of oily water to the covered by a rotting barge, timber creaking beneath her as she rolled and came up smoothly. Walking around the Fintine bridge was something of a detour, not to mention a well-traveled and well-monitored way, but this boat was always bound here in the shadows, offering a shortcut. She had taken care of it. Carcolf left as little to chance as possible. In her experience, chance can be a real bastard. A wizened face peeked out from the darkness of the cabin, steam emitting from a battered boiler. Who the hell are you? No. Carcolf gave a cheerful salute. Just passing through! and she jumped from the rocking tree to on the other side of the canal and was gone in the mold-smelling mist. I'm just passing through. Straight to the harbour to catch the tide and out in her merry way. Or her sure-assed one, at least. Wherever Carcolf went, she was nobody. Everywhere, always passing through. Over to the east, the idiot Pombrine would ride hard in the company of four paid drivers. He looked almost not much like what with the moustache and all but swaddled in this still so conspicuous embroidered cape of hers, he did well enough for a double. He was a poor pimp who smugly believed herself to be impersonating her so she could visit a lover, a lady of means who didn't want their tryst published. Carcolf sighed. If only. She consoled herself with the thought of Pombrine's shock when these bastards Deep and Shallow shot him from his saddle, expressed considerable surprise over the moustache, then rooted through his clothes with increasing frustration, and finally, no doubt, cleaned his corpse only to find . . . Nothing. Carcolf patted that lump again and pressed on with a spring in her crotch. Here she walked, down the middle lane, alone and on foot, along a carefully prepared route backstreets, by narrow ways, by unrebounding shortcuts and forgotten stairs, through crumbling palaces and decaying leases, gates left open by hidden arrangement and later a short stretch of sewer that would bring her out right by the harbour with an hour or two to go. After this job, she really had to take a vacation. She tongued on the inside of her lip, where a small but unreasonably painful wound had last developed. She was just working. A trip to Adua, perhaps? Visit her brother, see her nieces? How old would they be now? Uh. No. She remembered what a judgmental her sister-in-law was. One of those who met everything with a sneer. She reminded Carcolf of her father. That's probably why her brother had married that woman... Music was drifting from a place when she ducked under a peeling archway. A violinist, either tuning up or execrable quality. None of them would have surprised her. Papers clapped and rattled on a wall sprouting with moss, poorly printed bills admonishing the faithful citizens to rise up against the tyranny of Snake of Talins. Carcolf sniffed. Most of Sipani's citizens were more interested in falling over than ascending, and the rest were anything but faithful. She twisted herself by tugging on the seat of her pants, but it was hopeless. How much should you pay for a new suit of clothes before avoiding a rubbing nail just in the worst place? She hopped along a narrow road next to a stagnant part of the canal, long out of use, gloopy with algae and rocking waste, picking the illegal substance this way and to no effect. Damn this fashion for tight pants! Maybe it was some kind of cosmic punishment. She pays the tailor with counterfeit coins. But then carcolf was considerably more moved by the concept of local profit than the cosmic penalty, and therefore strived to avoid paying for anything where 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 became her father. Ha! A tattered figure jumped from an archway, the faintest glimpse of steel showing. With an instinctive whining, Carcolf stumbled back, fumbled her coat aside and pulled her own blade, sure that death had found her eventually. Quarryman one step ahead? Or was it Deep and Shallow, or Kurrikan's hirelings. . . but no one else appeared. Only this one man, swathed in a stained cape, unkempt hair stuck to the pale skin of the moist, a meowed scarf masking the lower part of his face, bloodshot eyes around and scared above. Stand and deliver!, he boomed, somewhat subdued by the scarf. Carcolf raised his brows. Who even says that? A little pause while the rotten water struck the stones next to them. You're a woman? There was an almost apologetic turn to the would-be robber's voice. If I am, won't you me? Well... Is... The thief seemed to deflate something, then pulled up again. Stand and deliver anyway! Why?, asked Carcolf.The point of the robber's sword drifted precariously. Because I have a significant debt to . . . It's none of your business! No, I mean, why not just stab me and deprive my corpse of valuables, rather than give me the warning? Another break. I suppose . . . I hope to avoid violence? But I warn you that I'm totally prepared for it! He was a civilian. An assailant who had blundered on her. A chance meeting. Talk about the chance to be a bastard! At least for him. You, sir, she said, are a shitty thief. I, ma'am, am a gentleman. You, sir, are a dead gentleman. Carcolf stepped forward, weighing her blade, a stride of the razor, lent a reckless glimpse from a lamp in a window somewhere above. She could never be bothered to rehearse, but nonetheless she was far more than viable with a sword. It would take a lot more than this stick of the gutter trash to get the better of her. I'll cut you as-The man darted forward with astonishing speed, there was a scrape of steel, and before Carcolf even thought of moving, the sword was twitching from her fingers and skittered over greasy cobblestones to plop into the canal. Ah, she said. It changed things. Clearly her attacker was not the bumpkin he seemed to be, at least when it came to swordplay. She should have known. Nothing in Sipani is ever quite as it seems. Give me the money, he said. Happy. Carcolf picked out of her purse 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 escaping. It gently knocked on the lump in her coat. What do you have . . . right there? From bad to much, much worse. Nothing, nothing at all. Carcolf tried to give it out with a fake chuckle, but that ship had sailed and she, unfortunately, was not on board, more than she was on board the damn ship still rocking on the dock for the journey to Thond. She steered the glinting point away with a finger. Now I have an extremely urgent commitment, so if- There was a slight his as the sword cut her coat open. Carcolf winced. Ow. There was a burning pain down her ribs. The sword had cut her up, too. Ow! She fell to her knees, deeply aggrieved, blood seeping between her fingers as she grabbed them to her side. Oh... oh no. Sorry. I really . . . It wasn't meant to cut. Just wanted, you know. Ow. The object, now slightly smeared with Carcolf's blood, fell from the gassed pocket and tumbled over the cobblestones. A slim package maybe a foot long, wrapped in colored 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 that she really needed 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, Please! He loitered, eyes wide, it all clearly gone further than he intended. But he edged closer only to reach the package, glinting point of his sword still leveled at her. A different and even more desperate tack, then. She aspired to keep the panic out of her voice. Take the money, I wish you the benefit of it. Carcolf didn't want him to rejoice, she wanted him rotten in his grave. But he will both be much better off if you leave this package! His hand hovered. Why, what's in it? I don't know. I'm under orders not to open it! Orders from whom? Carcolf winced. I don't know, but Kurtis took the package. Of course he did. He was an idiot, but not as much of an idiot as that. He grabbed the package and ran. Of course he ran. When didn't he? He tore down the alley, heart in mouth, jumped a burst barrel, caught his foot and went exuberant, almost impaled himself on his own drawn sword, slipped on his face through a smart of garbage, scooping a mouthful of something faintly sweet and dizzying up, spitting and swearing, snatching a frightened eye over his shoulder-There was no sign of persecution. Only the fog, the endless fog, flogging and Like something alive. He slipped the package, now somewhat slimy, into his ragged cape and limped on, clutching at his bruised buttock and still struggling to spit that rotten-sweet taste from his mouth. Not that it was worse than his breakfast had been. Better, if anything. You know a man at his breakfast, his fence master always used to tell him. He pulled his damp cap up with his faint smell of onions and despair, plucked the purse from his sword, and slipped the leaf back into the vagina as he slipped from the alley and insinuated himself among the crowds, that faint snap of the feisty meeting lock bringing back so many memories. Of training and tournaments, of bright futures and admiration of the crowds. Fences, my boy, that's the way to promote! Such savvy audiences in Steiermark, they love their swordsmans there, you will make a fortune! Better times when he hadn't dressed in rags, or been grateful for the butcher's remains, or robbed people of a living. He grimaced. Robbed women. If you could call it a living. He stole another furtly look over his shoulder. Could he have killed her? His skin dotted with horror. Just a scratch. Just a scratch, right? But he had seen blood. Let it have been a scratch! He rubbed his face as if he could rub the memory away, but it lingered quickly. One by one, things he never imagined, then told himself that he would never do so that he would never do again, had become his daily routine. Routine.

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