

The Price of Doing Business

Thieves' World, #7

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JUBAL WAS MORE powerful than he appeared. Not that his form conveyed any softness or weakness. If anything, his shiny ebony skin stretched tight over lithe, firm muscles gave an immediate impression of quick strength, while his scarred, severe facial features indicated a mind which would not hesitate to use that strength to his own advantage.

Rather, it was his wealth and the shrewd mind that had accumulated it which gave Jubal power above and beyond his iron muscles and razor-edged sword. His money, and the fierce entourage of sell-swords it had bought him made him a formidable force in the social order of Sanctuary.

Blood had been the price of his freedom; great quantities of blood shed by his opponents in the gladiator pits of Ranke. Blood, too, had given him his start at wealth: seizing a poorly guarded slave caravan for later sale at a sinful profit.

Where others might be content with modest gains, Jubal continued to amass his fortune with fanatic intensity. He had learned a dear lesson while glaring through hate-slitted eyes at the crowds who cheered his gory pit victories: swords and those who wielded them were bought and sold, and thus accounted as nothing in the minds of Society. Money and Power, not skill and courage, were what determined one's standing in the social order of men. It was fear which determined who spat and who wiped in his world.

So Jubal stalked the world of merchants as he had stalked the pits, ruthlessly pouncing on each opportunity and vulnerability as he had pitilessly cut down crippled opponents in the past. To enter into a deal with Jubal was to match wits with a mind trained to equate failure with death.

With this attitude, Jubal's concerns prospered and flourished in Sanctuary. With the first of his profits, he purchased one of the old mansions to the west of town. There he resided like a bloated spider in a web, waiting for signs of new opportunities. His fangs were his sell-swords, who swaggered through the streets of Sanctuary, their features disguised by blue hawk-masks. His web was a network of informants, paid to pass the word of any incident, any business deal, or any shift in local politics, which might be of interest to their generous master.

Currently the network was humming with word of the cataclysm in town. The Rankan prince and his new ideas were shaking the very roots of Sanctuary's economic and social structure.

Jubal sat at the centre of his web and listened.

AFTER A WHILE, the status reports all began to run together, forming one boring monotone.

Jubal slouched in his throne-like chair staring vacantly at one of the room's massive incense burners, bought in an unsuccessful attempt to counter the stench carried from Sanctuary by the easterly winds. Still the reports droned on. Things had been different when he was just beginning. Then he had been able to personally manage the various facets of his growing enterprises. Now, he had to listen while others... Something in the report caught his attention.

"Who did you kill?" he demanded.

"A blind," Saliman repeated, blinking at the interruption. "An informer who was not an informer. It was done to provide an example... as you ordered."

"Of course." Jubal waved. "Continue."

He relied heavily on informants from the town for the data necessary to conduct his affairs. It was known that if one sold false information to Jubal, one was apt to be found with a slit throat and a copper piece clenched between the teeth. This was known because it happened... frequently. What was not widely known was that if Jubal felt his informants needed an example to remind them of the penalty for selling fabrications, he would order his men to kill someone at random and leave the body with the marks of a false informer. His actual informers were not targets for these examples—good informants were hard to find. Instead, someone

would be chosen who had never dealt with Jubal. As his informants did not know each other's identities, the example would work.

"...was found this morning." Saliman plodded on in his tireless recitation voice. "The coin was stolen by the person discovering the body, so there will be no investigation. The thief will talk, though, so word will spread."

"Yes, yes." Jubal grimaced impatiently. "Go on with another item."

"There is some consternation along the Avenue of Temples over the new shrines being erected to Savankala and Sabellia—"

"Does it affect our operations?" Jubal interrupted.

"No," Saliman admitted. "But I thought you should know."

"Now I know," Jubal countered. "Spare me the details. Next item."

"Two of our men were refused service at the Vulgar Unicorn last night."

"By who?" Jubal frowned.

"One-Thumb. He oversees the place evenings from—"

"I know who One-Thumb is!" Jubal snapped. "I also know he's never refused service to any of my men as long as they had gold and their manners were good. If he moved against two of mine, it was because of their own actions, not because he has ill feelings towards me. Next item."

Saliman hesitated to reorganize his thoughts, then continued.

"Increased pressure from the prince's Hell Hounds has closed the wharves to the smugglers. It is rumoured they will be forced to land their goods at the Swamp of Night Secrets as they did in the old days."

"An inconvenience which will doubtless drive their prices up," Jubal mused. "How well guarded are their landings?"

"It is not known."

"Look into it. If there's a chance we can intercept a few shipments in the Swamp, there'll be no reason to pay their inflated prices at the bazaar."

"But if the smugglers lose shipments, they will raise their prices all the more to recover the loss."

"Of course." Jubal smiled. "Which means when we sell the stolen goods, we will be able to charge higher prices and still undercut the smugglers."

"We shall investigate the possibility. But—"

"But what?" Jubal inquired, studying his lieutenant's face. "Out with it, man. Something's bothering you about my plan, and I want to know what it is."

"I fear we might encounter difficulty with the Hell Hounds," Saliman blurted. "If they have also heard rumours of the new landing sites, they might plan an ambush of their own. Taking a shipment away from smugglers is one thing, but trying to take confiscated evidence away from the Hell Hounds... I'm not sure the men are up to it."

"My men? Afraid of guardsmen?" Jubal's expression darkened. "I thought I was paying good gold to have the finest swords in Sanctuary at my disposal."

"The Hell Hounds are not ordinary guardsmen," Saliman protested. "Nor are they from Sanctuary. Before they arrived, I would have said ours were the finest swords. Now..."

"The Hell Hounds!" Jubal snarled. "It seems all anyone can talk about is the Hell Hounds."

“And you should listen.” Saliman bristled. “Forgive me, Jubal, but you yourself admit the men you hire are no newcomers to battle. When they speak of a new force at large in Sanctuary, you should listen instead of decrying their judgement or abilities.”

For a moment, a spark of anger flared in Jubal’s eyes. Then it died, and he leaned forward attentively in his chair.

“Very well, Saliman. I’m listening. Tell me about the Hell Hounds.”

“They... they are unlike the guardsmen we see in Sanctuary, or even the average soldier of the Rankan army.” Saliman explained, groping for words. “They were handpicked from the Royal Elite Guard especially for this assignment.”

“Five men to guard a royal prince.” Jubal murmured thoughtfully. “Yes, they would have to be good.”

“That’s right,” Saliman confirmed hurriedly. “With the entire Rankan army to choose from, these five were selected for their skill at arms and unswerving loyalty to the empire. Since their arrival in Sanctuary, every effort to bribe or assassinate them has ended in death for whoever attempted it.”

“You’re right.” Jubal nodded. “They could be a disruptive force. Still, they are only men, and all men have weaknesses.”

He lapsed into thoughtful silence for several moments.

“Withdraw a thousand gold pieces from the treasury,” he ordered at last. “Distribute it to the men to spread around town, particularly to those working in the governor’s palace. In exchange, I want information about the Hell Hounds, individually and collectively. Listen especially for word of dissent within their own ranks... anything that could be used to turn them against each other.”

“It shall be done.” Saliman responded, bowing slightly. “Do you also wish a magical investigation commissioned?”

Jubal hesitated. He had a warrior’s dread of magicians and avoided them whenever possible. Still, if the Hell Hounds constituted a large enough threat...

“Use the money for normal informants,” he decided. “If it becomes necessary to hire a magician, then I will personally—”

A sudden commotion at the chamber’s entry-way drew the attention of both men. Two blue-masked figures appeared, dragging a third between them. Despite their masks, Jubal recognized them as Mor-Am and Moria, a brother-and-sister team of sell-swords in his employment. Their apparent captive was an urchin, garbed in the dirty rags common to Sanctuary’s street children. He couldn’t have been more than ten years of age, but the sizzling vindictives he screeched as he struggled against his captors marked him as one knowledgeable beyond his years.

“We caught this gutter-rat on the grounds,” Mor-Am announced, ignoring the boy’s protests.

“Probably out to steal something,” his sister added.

“I wasn’t stealing!” the boy cried, wrenching himself free.

“A Sanctuary street-rat who doesn’t steal?” Jubal raised an eyebrow.

“Of course I steal!” the urchin spat. “Everyone does. But that’s not why I came here.”

“Then why did you come?” Mor-Am demanded, cuffing the boy and sending him sprawling. “To beg? To sell your body?”

“I have a message!” the boy bawled. “For Jubal!”

“Enough, Mor-Am,” Jubal ordered, suddenly interested. “Come here, boy.”

The urchin scrambled to his feet, pausing only to knuckle tears of anger from his eyes. He shot a glare of pure venom at Mor-Am and Moria, then approached Jubal.

“What is your name, boy?” Jubal prompted.

“I—am called Mungo,” the urchin stammered, suddenly shy. “Are you Jubal?”

“I am,” Jubal nodded. “Well, Mungo, where is this message you have for me?”

“It... it’s not written down,” Mungo explained, casting a hasty glance at Mor Am. “I was to tell you the message.”

“Very well, tell me,” Jubal urged, growing impatient. “And also tell me who is sending the message.”

“The message is from Hakiem,” the boy blurted. “He bids me tell you that he has important information for sale.”

“Hakiem?” Jubal frowned.

The old storyteller! He had often been of service to Jubal when people forgot that he could listen as well as talk.

“Yes, Hakiem. He sells stories in the bazaar...”

“I know, I know,” Jubal snapped. For some reason, today everyone thought he knew nothing of the people in town. “What information does he have for me, and why didn’t he come himself?”

“I don’t know what the information is. But it’s important. So important that Hakiem is in hiding, afraid for his life. He paid me to fetch you to him, for he feels the information will be especially valuable to you.”

“Fetch me to him?” Jubal rumbled, his temper rising.

“One moment, boy,” Saliman interceded, speaking for the first time since his report was interrupted. “You say Hakiem paid you? How much?”

“A silver coin,” the boy announced proudly.

“Show it to us!” Saliman ordered.

The boy’s hand disappeared within his rags. Then he hesitated.

“You won’t take it from me, will you?” he asked warily.

“Show the coin!” Jubal roared.

Cowed by the sudden outburst, Mungo extended his fist and opened it, revealing a silver coin nestled in his palm.

Jubal’s eyes sought Saliman, who raised his eyebrows in silent surprise and speculation. The fact the boy actually had a silver coin indicated many things.

First: Mungo was probably telling the truth. Street-rats rarely had more than a few coppers, so a silver coin would have had to come from an outside benefactor. If the boy had stolen it, he would himself be in hiding, gloating over his ill gotten wealth—not displaying it openly as he had just done.

Assuming the boy was telling the truth, then Hakiem’s information must indeed be valuable and the danger to him real. Hakiem was not the sort to give away silver coins unless he were confident of recouping the loss and making a healthy profit besides. Even then, he would save the expense and bring the information himself, were he not truly afraid for his life.

All this flashed through Jubal’s mind as he saw the coin, and Saliman’s reactions confirmed his thoughts.

“Very well. We shall see what information Hakiem has. Saliman, take Mor-Am and Moria and go with Mungo to find the storyteller. Bring him here and—”

“No!” the boy cried, interrupting. “Hakiem will only give the information to Jubal personally, and he is to come alone.”

“What?” Saliman exclaimed.

“This sounds like a trap!” Moria scowled.

Jubal waved them to silence as he stared down at the boy. It could be a trap. Then again, there could be another reason for Hakiem’s request. The information might involve someone in Jubal’s own force! An assassin... or worse, an informer! That could explain Hakiem’s reluctance to come to the mansion in person.

“I will go,” Jubal said, rising and sweeping the room with his eyes. “Alone, with Mungo. Saliman, I will require the use of your mask.”

“I want my knife back!” Mungo declared suddenly.

Jubal raised a questioning eyebrow at Mor-Am, who flushed and produced a short dagger from his belt.

“We took it from him when we caught him,” the sell-sword explained. “A safety precaution. We had no intent to steal it.”

“Give it back,” Jubal laughed. “I would not send my worst enemy into the streets of Sanctuary unarmed.”

“Jubal,” Saliman murmured as he surrendered his hawk-mask. “If this should be a trap...”

Jubal dropped a hand to his sword hilt.

“If it is a trap,” he smiled, “they’ll not find me easy prey. I survived five to-one odds and worse in the pits before I won my freedom.”

“But—”

“You are not to follow,” Jubal ordered sternly. “Nor allow any other to follow. Anyone who disobeys will answer to me.”

Saliman drew a breath to answer, then saw the look in Jubal’s eyes and nodded in silent acceptance.

Jubal studied his guide covertly as they left the mansion and headed towards the town. Though he had not shown it openly, he had been impressed with the boy’s spirit during their brief encounter. Alone and unarmed in the midst of hostile swords... men twice Mungo’s age had been known to tremble and grovel when visiting Jubal at his mansion.

In many ways, the boy reminded Jubal of himself as a youth. Fighting and rebellious, with no parents but his pride and stubbornness to guide him, he had been bought from the slave pens by a gladiator trainer with an eye for cold, spirited fighters. If he had instead been purchased by a gentle master... if someone interceded in the dubious path Fate had chosen for Mungo...

Jubal halted that line of thought with a grimace as he realized where it was leading. Adopt the boy into his household? Ridiculous! Saliman and the others would think he had gone soft in his old age. More important, his competitors would see it as a sign of weakness, an indication that Jubal could be reached by sentimentality... that he had a heart. He had risen above his own squalid beginnings; the boy would just have to do the same!

The sun was high and staggering in its heat as Jubal followed the boy's lead into town. Sweat trickled in annoying rivulets from beneath his blue hawk-mask, but he was loath to acknowledge his discomfort by wiping them away. The thought of removing the mask never entered his mind. The masks were necessary to disguise those in his employment who were wanted by the law; to complete the camouflage, all must wear them. To exempt himself from his own rule would be unthinkable.

In an effort to distract himself from his discomfort, Jubal began to peer cautiously at the people about him as they approached the bazaar. Since they had crossed the bridge and placed the hovels of the Downwinders behind them, there was a marked improvement in the quality of clothes and manners of the citizenry.

His eye fell on a magician, and he wondered about the star tattooed on the man's forehead. Then, too, he noted that the mage was engaged in a heated argument with a brightly garbed young bravo who displayed numerous knives, their hilts protruding from arm-sheath, sash, and boot top in ominous warning.

"That's Lythande," Mungo informed him, noting his interest. "He's a fraud. If you're looking for a magician, there are better to be had... cheaper."

"You're sure he's a fraud?" Jubal asked, amused at the boy's analysis.

"If he were a true magician, he wouldn't have to carry a sword," Mungo countered, pointing to the weapon slung at the magician's side.

"A point well taken," Jubal acknowledged. "And the man he's arguing with?"

"Shadowspawn," the boy announced loftily. "A thief. Used to work with Cudget Swearoath before the old fool got himself hung."

"A magician and a thief," Jubal murmured thoughtfully, glancing at the two again. "An interesting combination of talents."

"Unlikely!" Mungo scoffed. "Whatever Shadowspawn's last venture was, it was profitable. He's been spending freely and often, so it's unlikely he'll be looking for more work. My guess would be they're arguing over a woman. They each fancy themselves to be a gift from the gods to womankind."

"You seem to be well informed," Jubal commented, impressed anew with the boy's knowledge.

"One hears much in the streets." Mungo shrugged. "The lower one's standing is, the more important information is for survival... and few are lower than my friends and I."

Jubal pondered this as the boy led the way past Shambles Cross. Perhaps he had overlooked a valuable information source in the street children when he built his network of informers. They probably would not hear much, but there were so many of them. Together they might be enough to confirm or quash a rumour.

"Tell me, Mungo," he called to his guide. "You know I pay well for information, don't you?"

"Everyone knows that." The urchin turned into the Maze and skipped lightly over a prone figure, not bothering to see if the man were asleep or dead.

"Then why is it that none of your friends come to me with their knowledge?"

Jubal stepped carefully over the obstacle and cast a wary glance about. Even in broad daylight, the Maze could be a dangerous place for a lone traveller.

“We street-rats are close,” Mungo explained over his shoulder. “Even closer than the bazaar people or the S’danzo. Shared secrets lose their value, so we keep them for ourselves.”

Jubal recognized the wisdom in the urchin’s policy, but it only heightened his resolve to recruit the children.

“Talk it over with your friends,” he urged. “A full stomach can... where are we going?”

They had left the dank Serpentine for an alley so narrow that Jubal had to edge sideways to follow.

“To meet Hakiem,” Mungo called, not slackening his pace.

“But where is he?” Jubal pressed. “I do not know this rat run.”

“If you knew it, it would not make a good hiding place.” The boy laughed. “It’s just a little further.”

As he spoke, they emerged from the crawl-space into a small courtyard.

“We’re here,” Mungo announced, coming to a halt in the centre of the yard.

“Where?” Jubal growled standing beside him. “There are no doors or windows in these walls. Unless he is hiding in one of those refuse heaps...”

He broke off his commentary as the details of their surroundings sank into his mind. No doors or windows! The only other way out of the courtyard was another crawl-space as small as that they had just traversed... except that it was blocked by a pile of wooden cartons. They were in a cul-de-sac!

A sudden crash sounded behind them, and Jubal spun to face it, his hand going reflexively to his sword. Several wooden boxes had fallen from the roof of one of the buildings, blocking the entrance.

“It’s a trap!” he hissed, backing towards a corner, his eyes scanning the rooftops.

There was a sudden impact on his back. He staggered slightly, then lashed backwards with his sword, swinging blind. His blade encountered naught but air, and he turned to face his attacker.

Mungo danced lightly just out of sword range, his eyes bright with triumph and glee.

“Mungo?” Jubal asked, knowing the answer.

He had been wounded often enough to recognize the growing numbness in his upper back. A rasp of pain as he shifted his stance told the rest of the story. The boy had planted his dagger in Jubal’s back, and there it remained. In his mind’s eye, Jubal could see it protruding from his shoulder at an unnatural angle.

“I told you we were close,” Mungo taunted. “Maybe the big folk are afraid of you, but we aren’t. You shouldn’t have ordered Gambi’s death.”

“Gambi?” Jubal frowned, weaving slightly. “Who is Gambi?”

For a moment, the boy froze in astonishment. Then his face contorted with rage and he spat.

“He was found this morning with his throat cut and a copper coin in his mouth. Your trademark! Don’t you even know who you kill?”

The blind! Jubal cursed himself for not listening closer to Saliman’s reports.

“Gambi never sold you any information,” Mungo shouted. “He hated you for what your men did to his mother. You had no right to kill him as a false informer.”

“And Hakiem?” Jubal asked, stalling for time.

“We guessed right about that, didn’t we—about Hakiem being one of your informers?” the boy crowed. “He’s on the big wharf sleeping off a drunk. We pooled our money for the silver coin that drew you out from behind your guards.”

For some reason, this last taunt stung Jubal more than had the dagger thrust. He drew himself erect, ignoring the warm liquid dripping down his back from the knife wound, and glared down at the boy.

“I need no guard against the likes of you!” he boomed. “You think you know killing? A street-rat who stabs overhand with a knife? The next time you try to kill a man—if there is another time—thrust underhand. Go between the ribs, not through them! And bring friends—one of you isn’t enough to kill a real man.”

“I brought friends!” Mungo laughed, pointing. “Do you think they’ll be enough?”

Jubal risked a glance over his shoulder. The gutter-rats of Sanctuary were descending on the courtyard. Scores of them! Scrabbling over the wooden cases or swarming down from the roofs like spiders. Children in rags—none of them even half Jubal’s height, but with knives, rocks, and sharp sticks.

Another man might have broken before those hate-filled eyes. He might have tried to beg or bribe his way out of the trap, claiming ignorance of Gambi’s murder. But this was Jubal, and his eyes were as cold as his sword as he faced his tormentors.

“You claim you’re doing this to avenge one death,” he sneered. “How many will die trying to pull me down?”

“You feel free to kill us one at a time, for no reason,” Mungo retorted, circling wide to join the pack. “If some of us die killing you, then at least the rest will be safe.”

“Only if you kill me,” Jubal corrected. Without taking his eyes from the pack, he reached his left hand over his right shoulder, found the knife hilt, and wrenched it free. “And for that, you’ll need your knife back!”

Mungo saw the knife coming as Jubal whipped his left hand down and across his body, but he froze for a split second. In that split second, the knife took him full in the throat. The world blurred and he went down, not feeling the fall.

The pack surged forward, and Jubal went to meet them, his sword flashing in the sun as he desperately tried to win his way to the exit.

A few fell before his first rush—he didn’t know how many—but the rest scattered and closed about him from all sides. Sticks jabbed at his face faster than he could parry them, and he felt the touch of knives as small forms darted from behind him to slash and duck away.

Realization came to him that the harassment would bring him down before he could clear the wooden cases; abandoning his charge, he paused, whirling and cutting, trying to clear a space around him. The urchins were sharp-toothed, elusive phantoms, disappearing from in front of him to worry him from behind. It flashed through his mind that he was going to die! The survivor of countless gladiator duels was going to meet his end at the hands of angry children!

The thought drove him to desperate action. With one last powerful cut, he broke off his efforts at defence and tried to sprint for the wall to get something solid at his back. A small girl grabbed his ankle and clung with all her strength. He stumbled, nearly falling, and cut downwards viciously without looking. His leg

came free, but another urchin leapt on to his back, hammering at his head with a rock.

Jubal lurched sideways, scraping the child off along the wall, then turned to face the pack. A stick pierced his mask, opening a gash in his forehead which began to drip blood in his eyes. Temporarily blinded, he laid about him wildly with his sword, sometimes striking something solid, sometimes encountering air. A rock caromed off his head, but he was past feeling and continued his sightless, mindless slashing.

Slowly it crept into his fogged brain that there was a new note in the children's screams. At the same time, he realized that his sword had not struck a target for ten or fifteen swings now. Shaking his head to clear it, he focused anew on the scene before him.

The courtyard was littered with small bodies, their blood a bright contrast to their drab rags. The rest of the pack was in full flight, pursued over the rubble piles by...

Jubal sagged against the wall, fighting for breath and numb from wounds too numerous to count. He watched as his rescuer strode to his side, sheathing a sword wet with fresh blood.

"Your... your name?" he gasped.

"Zalbar," the uniformed figure panted in return. "Bodyguard to His Royal Highness, Prince Kadakithis. Your wounds... are they...?"

"I've survived worse." Jubal shrugged, wincing at the pain the movement caused.

"Very well." the man nodded. "Then I shall be on my way."

"A moment," Jubal asked, holding up a restraining hand. "You have saved my life... a life I value quite highly. I owe you thanks and more, for you can't spend words. Name your reward."

"That is not necessary," Zalbar sniffed. "It is my duty."

"Duty or not," Jubal argued, "I know no other guardsman who would enter the Maze, much less risk his life to save... Did you say a royal bodyguard: Are you..."

"A Hell Hound," Zalbar finished with a grim smile. "Yes, I am. And I promise you, the day is not far off when we will not be the only guardsmen in the Maze."

He turned to go, but Jubal stopped him again, removing the hawk-mask to mop the blood from his eyes.

"Wait!" he ordered. "I have a proposal for you. I have need of men such as you. Whatever pay you receive from the Empire, I'll double it... as well as adding a bonus for your work today. What say you?"

There was no answer. Jubal squinted to get the Hell Hound's face in focus, and found the man was staring at him in frozen recognition.

"You are Jubal!" Zalbar said in a tone that was more statement than question.

"I am," Jubal nodded. "If you know that, you must also know that there is none in Sanctuary who pays higher than I for services rendered."

"I know your reputation," the Hell Hound acknowledged coldly. "Knowing what I do, I would not work for you at any price."

The rebuff was obvious, but Jubal chose to ignore it. Instead, he attempted to make light of the comment.

"But you already have," he pointed out. "You saved my life."

“I saved a citizen from a pack of street-rats,” Zalbar countered.

“As I said before, it’s my duty to my prince.”

“But—” Jubal began.

“Had I known your identity sooner,” the Hell Hound continued, “I might have been tempted to delay my rescue.”

This time, the slight could not be ignored. More puzzled than angry, Jubal studied his opponent.

“I sense you are trying to provoke a fight. Did you save me, then, to wreak some vengeance of your own?”

“In my position, I cannot and will not engage in petty brawls,” Zalbar growled. “I fight only to defend myself or the citizens of the empire.”

“And I will not knowingly raise a sword against one who has saved my life... save in self-defence,” Jubal retorted. “It would seem, then, that we will not fight each other. Still, it seems you hold some grudge against me. May I ask what it is?”

“It is the grudge I hold against any man who reaps the benefits of Rankan citizenship while accepting none of the responsibility,” the Hell Hound sneered. “Not only do you not serve the empire that shelters you, you undermine its strength by openly flaunting your disrespect for its laws in your business dealings.”

“What do you know of my business dealings that allows you to make such sweeping judgements?” Jubal challenged.

“I know you make your money in ways decent men would shun,” Zalbar retorted. “You deal in slaves and drugs and other high-profit, low-moral commodities... but most of all, you deal in death.”

“A professional soldier condemns me for dealing in death?” Jubal smiled.

The Hell Hound flushed red at the barb. “Yes. I also deal in death. But a soldier such as myself fights for the good of the empire, not for selfish gain. I lost a brother and several friends in the mountain campaigns fighting for the empire... for the freedoms you and your kind abuse.”

“Imagine that,” Jubal mused. “The whole Rankan army defending us against a few scattered mountain tribes. Why, if you and your friends hadn’t been there, the Highlanders certainly would have swept down out of the mountains they haven’t left for generations and murdered us all in our sleep. How silly of me to think it was the empire trying to extend its influence into one more place it wasn’t wanted. I should have realized it was only trying to defend itself from a ferocious attacker.”

Zalbar swayed forwards, his hand going to his sword hilt. Then he regained his composure and hardened his features.

“I am done talking to you. You can’t understand the minds of decent men, much less their words.”

He turned to go, but somehow Jubal was in his path—on his feet now, though he swayed from the effort. Though the soldier was taller by a head, Jubal’s anger increased his stature to where it was Zalbar who gave ground.

“If you’re done talking, Hell Hound, then it’s time I had my say,” he hissed. “It’s true I make money from distasteful merchandise. I wouldn’t be able to do that if your *decent men* weren’t willing to pay a hefty price for it. I don’t sell my goods at

sword point. They come to me—so many of them, I can't fill the demand through normal channels."

He turned to gesture at the corpse-littered courtyard.

"It's also true I deal in death," he snarled. "Your benevolent Rankan masters taught me the trade in the gladiator pits of the capital. I dealt in death then for the cheers of those same *decent men* you admire so.

"Those *decent men* allowed me no place in their *decent* society after I won my freedom, so I came to Sanctuary. Now I still deal in death, for that is the price of doing business here—a price I almost paid today."

For a fleeting moment, something akin to sympathy flashed in the Hell Hound's eyes as he shook his head.

"You're wrong, Jubal," he said quietly. "You've already paid the price for doing business in Sanctuary. It isn't your life, it's your soul... your humanity. You've exchanged it for gold, and in my opinion, it was a poor bargain."

Their eyes met, and it was Jubal who averted his gaze first, unsettled by the Hell Hound's words. Looking away, his glance fell on the body of Mungo—the boy he had admired and thought of bringing into his household—the boy whose life he had wanted to change. When he turned again, the Hell Hound was gone.

