A Malazan Book of the Fallen
Collection 2
Steven Erikson
Memories of Ice
House of Chains
Steven Erikson is an archaeologist and anthropologist and a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. The first six novels in his Malazan Book of the Fallen sequence – Gardens of the Moon, Deadhouse Gates, Memories of Ice, House of Chains, Midnight Tides and The Bonehunters – have met with widespread international acclaim and established him as a major voice in the world of fantasy fiction. The thrilling seventh instalment in this remarkable story, Reaper’s Gale, is now available from Bantam Press. Steven Erikson lives in Canada.

www.rbooks.co.uk/stevenerikson
Acclaim for Steven Erikson's
The Malazan Book of the Fallen:

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'Epic in every sense of the word ... Erikson shows a masterful control of an immense plot ... the worlds of mortals and gods meet in what is a truly awe-inspiring clash' Enigma
By Steven Erikson

GARDENS OF THE MOON
DEADHOUSE GATES
MEMORIES OF ICE
HOUSE OF CHAINS
MIDNIGHT TIDES
THE BONEHUNTERS
REAPER'S GALE
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- DEADHOUSE GATES
*MIDNIGHT TIDES*
*THE BONEHUNTERS*
*NIGHT OF KNIVES*
To R. S. Lundin
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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE CARAVANSERAI

Gruntle, a caravan guard
Stonny Menackis, a caravan guard
Harllo, a caravan guard
Buke, a caravan guard
Bauchelain, an explorer
Korbal Broach, his silent partner
Emancipor Reese, a manservant
Keruli, a trader
Marble, a sorcerer

IN CAPUSTAN

Brukhalian, Mortal Sword of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)
Itkovian, Shield Anvil of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)
Karnadas, Destriant of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)
Recruit Velbara (the Grey Swords)
Master Sergeant Norul (the Grey Swords)
Farakalian (the Grey Swords)
Nakalian (the Grey Swords)
Torun (the Grey Swords)
Sidlis (the Grey Swords)
Nilbanas (the Grey Swords)
Jelarkan, prince and ruler of Capustan
Arard, prince and ruler in absentia of Coral
Rath’Fener (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Shadowthrone (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Queen of Dreams (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath’Hood (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath’D’rek (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath’Trake (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath’Burn (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath’Togg (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath’Fanderay (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath’Dessembrae (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath’Oponn (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath’Beru (Priest of the Mask Council)

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Whiskeyjack, second-in-command of renegade Malazan army
Twist, commander of the Black Moranth
Artanthos, standard-bearer of renegade Malazan army
Barack, a liaison officer
Hareb, a noble-born captain
Ganoes Paran, Captain, Bridgeburners
Antsy, sergeant, 7th Squad, Bridgeburners
Picker, corporal, 7th Squad, Bridgeburners
Detoran, soldier, 7th Squad
Spindle, mage and sapper, 7th Squad
Blend, soldier, 7th Squad
Mallet, healer, 9th Squad
Hedge, sapper, 9th Squad
Trotts, soldier, 9th Squad
Quick Ben, mage, 9th Squad
Aimless (Bridgeburner corporal)
Bucklund (Bridgeburner sergeant)
Runter (Bridgeburner sapper)
Mulch (Bridgeburner healer)
Bluepearl (Bridgeburner mage)
Shank (Bridgeburner mage)
Toes (Bridgeburner mage)

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Caladan Brood, warlord of liberation army on Genabackis
Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn
Kallor, the High King, Brood's second-in-command
The Mhybe, matron of the Rhivi Tribes
Silverfox, the Rhivi Reborn
Korlat, a Tiste Andii Soletaken
Orfantal, Korlat's brother
Hurlochel, an outrider in the liberation army
Crone, a Great Raven and companion to Anomander Rake

**THE BARCHAST**

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Hetan, his daughter
Cafal, his first son
Netok, his second son

**DARUJISTAN ENVOYS**

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Estraysian D’Arle, a councilman
Barak, an alchemist
Kruppe, a citizen
Murillio, a citizen

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Kron, ruler of the Kron T'lan Imass
Cannig Tol, clan chief
Bek Okhan, a Bonecaster
Pran Chole, a Bonecaster
Okral Lom, a Bonecaster
Bendal Home, a Bonecaster
Ay Estos, a Bonecaster
Olar Ethil, the First Bonecaster and First Soletaken
Tool, the Shorn, once First Sword
Kilava, a renegade Bonecaster
Lanas Tog, of Kerluhm T'lan Imass

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Draconus, an Elder God
Sister of Cold Nights, an Elder Goddess
Lady Envy, a resident of Morn
Gethol, a Herald
Treach, a First Hero (the Tiger of Summer)
Toc the Younger, Aral Fayle, a Malazan scout
Garath, a large dog
Baaljagg, a larger wolf
Mok, a Seguleh
Thurule, a Seguleh
Senu, a Seguleh
The Chained One, an unknown ascendant (also known as the Crippled God)
The Witch of Tennes
Munug, a Daru artisan
Talamandas, a Barghast sticksnare
Ormulogun, artist in Onearm's Host
Gumble, his critic
Haradas, a Trygalle Trade Guild caravan master
Azra Jael, a marine in Onearm's Host
Straw, a Mott Irregular
Sty, a Mott Irregular
Stump, a Mott Irregular
Job Bole, a Mott Irregular
Prologue

The ancient wars of the T’lan Imass and the Jaghut saw the world torn asunder. Vast armies contended on the ravaged lands, the dead piled high, their bone the bones of hills, their spilled blood the blood of seas. Sorceries raged until the sky itself was fire ...

Ancient Histories, Vol. I
Kinicik Karbar'n
Swallows darted through the clouds of midges dancing over the mudflats. The sky above the marsh remained grey, but it had lost its mercurial wintry gleam, and the warm wind sighing through the air above the ravaged land held the scent of healing.

What had once been the inland freshwater sea the Imass called Jaghra Til – born from the shattering of the Jaghut ice-fields – was now in its own death-throes. The pallid overcast was reflected in dwindling pools and stretches of knee-deep water for as far south as the eye could scan, but none the less, newly birthed land dominated the vista.

The breaking of the sorcery that had raised the glacial age returned to the region the old, natural seasons, but the memories of mountain-high ice lingered. The exposed bedrock to the north was gouged and scraped, its basins filled with boulders. The heavy silts that had been the floor of the inland sea still bubbled with escaping gases, as the land, freed of the enormous weight with the glaciers’ passing eight years past, continued its slow ascent.

Jaghra Til’s life had been short, yet the silts that had settled on its bottom were thick. And treacherous.

Pran Chole, Bonecaster of Cannig Tol’s clan among the Kron Imass, sat motionless atop a mostly buried boulder along an ancient beach ridge. The descent before him was snarled in low, wiry grasses and withered driftwood. Twelve paces beyond, the land dropped slightly, then stretched out into a broad basin of mud.

Three ranag had become trapped in a boggy sinkhole twenty paces into the basin. A bull male, his mate and their calf, ranged in a pathetic defensive circle. Mired and vulnerable, they must have seemed easy kills for the pack of ay that found them.

But the land was treacherous indeed. The large tundra wolves had succumbed to the same fate as the ranag.

Pran Chole counted six ay, including a yearling. Tracks indicated that another yearling had circled the sinkhole dozens of times before wandering westward, doomed no doubt to die in solitude.

How long ago had this drama occurred? There was no way to tell. The mud had hardened on ranag and ay alike, forming cloaks of clay latticed with cracks. Spots of bright green showed where windborne seeds had germinated, and the Bonecaster was reminded of his visions when spirit-walking – a host of mundane details twisted into something unreal. For the beasts, the struggle had become eternal, hunter and hunted locked together for all time.

Someone padded to his side, crouched down beside him.

Pran Chole's tawny eyes remained fixed on the frozen tableau. The rhythm of footsteps told the Bonecaster the identity of his companion, and now came the warm-blooded smells that were as much a signature as resting eyes upon the man's face.

Cannig Tol spoke. 'What lies beneath the clay, Bonecaster?'

'Only that which has shaped the clay itself, Clan Leader.'

'You see no omen in these beasts?'

Pran Chole smiled. 'Do you?'

Cannig Tol considered for a time, then said, 'Ranag are gone from these lands. So too the ay. We see before us an ancient battle. These statements have depth, for they stir my soul.'

'Mine as well,' the Bonecaster conceded.
'We hunted the ranag until they were no more, and this brought starvation to the ay, for we had also hunted the tenag until they were no more as well. The agkor who walk with the bhederin would not share with the ay, and now the tundra is empty. From this, I conclude that we were wasteful and thoughtless in our hunting.'

'Yet the need to feed our own young...'

'The need for more young was great.'

'It remains so, Clan Leader.'

Cannig Tol grunted. 'The Jaghut were powerful in these lands, Bonecaster. They did not flee – not at first. You know the cost in Imass blood.'

'And the land yields its bounty to answer that cost.'

'To serve our war.'

'Thus, the depths are stirred.'

The Clan Leader nodded and was silent.

Pran Chole waited. In their shared words they still tracked the skin of things. Revelation of the muscle and bone was yet to come. But Cannig Tol was no fool, and the wait was not long.

'We are as those beasts.'

The Bonecaster's eyes shifted to the south horizon, tightened.

Cannig Tol continued, 'We are the clay, and our endless war against the Jaghut is the struggling beast beneath. The surface is shaped by what lies beneath.' He gestured with one hand. 'And before us now, in these creatures slowly turning to stone, is the curse of eternity.'

There was still more. Pran Chole said nothing.

'Ranag and ay,' Cannig Tol resumed. 'Almost gone from the mortal realm. Hunter and hunted both.'

'To the very bones,' the Bonecaster whispered.

'Would that you had seen an omen,' the Clan Leader muttered, rising.

Pran Chole also straightened. 'Would that I had,' he agreed in a tone that only faintly echoed Cannig Tol's wry, sardonic utterance.

'Are we close, Bonecaster?'

Pran Chole glanced down at his shadow, studied the antlered silhouette, the figure hinted within furred cape, ragged hides and headdress. The sun's angle made him seem tall – almost as tall as a Jaghut. 'Tomorrow,' he said. 'They are weakening. A night of travel will weaken them yet more.'

'Good. Then the clan shall camp here tonight.'

The Bonecaster listened as Cannig Tol made his way back down to where the others waited. With darkness, Pran Chole would spiritwalk. Into the whispering earth, seeking those of his own kind. While their quarry was weakening, Cannig Tol's clan was yet weaker. Less than a dozen adults remained. When pursuing Jaghut, the distinction of hunter and hunted had little meaning.

He lifted his head and sniffed the crepuscular air. Another Bonecaster wandered this land. The taint was unmistakable. He wondered who it was, wondered why it travelled alone, bereft of clan and kin. And, knowing that even as he had sensed its presence so it in turn had sensed his, he wondered why it had not yet sought them out.
She pulled herself clear of the mud and dropped down onto the sandy bank, her breath coming in harsh, laboured gasps. Her son and daughter squirmed free of her leaden arms, crawled further onto the island's modest hump.

The Jaghut mother lowered her head until her brow rested against the cool, damp sand. Grit pressed into the skin of her forehead with raw insistence. The burns there were too recent to have healed, nor were they likely to – she was defeated, and death had only to await the arrival of her hunters.

They were mercifully competent, at least. These Imass cared nothing for torture. A swift killing blow. For her, then for her children. And with them – with this meagre, tattered family – the last of the Jaghut would vanish from this continent. Mercy arrived in many guises. Had they not joined in chaining Raest, they would all – Imass and Jaghut both – have found themselves kneeling before that Tyrant. A temporary truce of expedience. She'd known enough to flee once the chaining was done; she'd known, even then, that the Imass clan would resume the pursuit.

The mother felt no bitterness, but that made her no less desperate.

Sensing a new presence on the small island, her head snapped up. Her children had frozen in place, staring up in terror at the Imass woman who now stood before them. The mother's grey eyes narrowed. 'Clever, Bonecaster. My senses were tuned only to those behind us. Very well, be done with it.'

The young, black-haired woman smiled. 'No bargains, Jaghut? You always seek bargains to spare the lives of your children. Have you broken the kin-threads with these two, then? They seem young for that.'

'Bargains are pointless. Your kind never agree to them.'

'No, yet still your kind try.'

'I shall not. Kill us, then. Swiftly.'

The Imass was wearing the skin of a panther. Her eyes were as black and seemed to match its shimmer in the dying light. She looked well fed, her large, swollen breasts indicating she had recently birthed.

The Jaghut mother could not read the woman's expression, only that it lacked the typical grim certainty she usually associated with the strange, rounded faces of the Imass.

The Bonecaster spoke. 'I have enough Jaghut blood on my hands. I leave you to the Kron clan that will find you tomorrow.'

'To me,' the mother growled, 'it matters naught which of you kills us, only that you kill us.'

The woman's broad mouth quirked. 'I can see your point.'

Weariness threatened to overwhelm the Jaghut mother, but she managed to pull herself into a sitting position. 'What,' she asked between gasps, 'do you want?'

'To offer you a bargain.'

Breath catching, the Jaghut mother stared into the Bonecaster's dark eyes, and saw nothing of mockery. Her gaze then dropped, for the briefest of moments, on her son and daughter, then back up to hold steady on the woman's own.

The Imass slowly nodded.

The earth had cracked some time in the past, a wound of such depth as to birth a molten river wide enough to stretch from horizon to horizon. Vast and black, the river of stone and ash reached southwestward, down to the distant sea. Only the smallest of plants had managed to find purchase, and the Bonecaster's passage – a Jaghut child in the crook of each arm – raised sultry clouds of dust that hung motionless in her wake.

She judged the boy at perhaps five years of age; his sister perhaps four. Neither seemed entirely aware, and
clearly neither had understood their mother when she’d hugged them goodbye. The long flight down the L’amath and across the Jagra Til had driven them both into shock. No doubt witnessing the ghastly death of their father had not helped matters.

They clung to her with their small, grubby hands, grim reminders of the child she had but recently lost. Before long, both began suckling at her breasts, evincing desperate hunger. Some time later, the children slept.

The lava flow thinned as she approached the coast. A range of hills rose into distant mountains on her right. A level plain stretched directly before her, ending at a ridge half a league distant. Though she could not see it, she knew that just the other side of the ridge, the land slumped down to the sea. The plain itself was marked by regular humps, and the Bonecaster paused to study them. The mounds were arrayed in concentric circles, and at the centre was a larger dome – all covered in a mantle of lava and ash. The rotted tooth of a ruined tower rose from the plain’s edge, at the base of the first line of hills. Those hills, as she had noted the first time she had visited this place, were themselves far too evenly spaced to be natural.

The Bonecaster lifted her head. The mingled scents were unmistakable, one ancient and dead, the other ... less so. The boy stirred in her clasp, but remained asleep.

'Ah,' she murmured, 'you sense it as well.'

Skirting the plain, she walked towards the blackened tower.

The warren’s gate was just beyond the ragged edifice, suspended in the air at about six times her height. She saw it as a red welt, a thing damaged, but no longer bleeding. She could not recognize the warren – the old damage obscured the portal’s characteristics. Unease rippled faintly through her.

The Bonecaster set the children down by the tower, then sat on a block of tumbled masonry. Her gaze fell to the two young Jaghut, still curled in sleep, lying on their beds of ash. ‘What choice?’ she whispered. ‘It must be Omtose Phellack. It certainly isn’t Tellann. Starvald Demelain? Unlikely.’ Her eyes were pulled to the plain, narrowing on the mound rings. ‘Who dwelt here? Who else was in the habit of building in stone?’ She fell silent for a long moment, then swung her attention back to the ruin. ‘This tower is the final proof, for it is naught else but Jaghut, and such a structure would not be raised this close to an inimical warren. No, the gate is Omtose Phellack. It must be so.’

Still, there were additional risks. An adult Jaghut in the warren beyond, coming upon two children not of its own blood, might as easily kill them as adopt them. ‘Then their deaths stain another’s hands, a Jaghut’s.’ Scant comfort, that distinction. *It matters naught which of you kills us, only that you kill us.* The breath hissed between the woman’s teeth. ‘What choice?’ she asked again.

She would let them sleep a little longer. Then, she would send them through the gate. A word to the boy – *take care of your sister. The journey will not be long. And to them both – your mother waits beyond.* A lie, but they would need courage. *If she cannot find you, then one of her kin will. Go then, to safety, to salvation.*

After all, what could be worse than death?

She rose as they approached. Pran Chole tested the air, frowned. The Jaghut had not unveiled her warren. Even more disconcerting, where were her children?

‘She greets us with calm,’ Cannig Tol muttered.

‘She does,’ the Bonecaster agreed.

‘I’ve no trust in that – we should kill her immediately.’

‘She would speak with us,’ Pran Chole said.

‘A deadly risk, to appease her desire.’

‘I cannot disagree, Clan Leader. Yet ... what has she done with her children?’
'Can you not sense them?'

Pran Chole shook his head. 'Prepare your spearmen,' he said, stepping forward.

There was peace in her eyes, so clear an acceptance of her own imminent death that the Bonecaster was shaken. Pran Chole walked through shin-deep water, then stepped onto the island's sandy bank to stand face to face with the Jaghut. 'What have you done with them?' he demanded.

The mother smiled, lips peeling back to reveal her tusks. 'Gone.'

'Where?'

'Beyond your reach, Bonecaster.'

Pran Chole's frown deepened. 'These are our lands. There is no place here that is beyond our reach. Have you slain them with your own hands, then?'

The Jaghut cocked her head, studied the Imass. 'I had always believed you were united in your hatred for our kind. I had always believed that such concepts as com-passion and mercy were alien to your natures.'

The Bonecaster stared at the woman for a long moment, then his gaze dropped away, past her, and scanned the soft clay ground. 'An Imass has been here,' he said, 'A woman. The Bonecaster—the one I could not find in my spiritwalk. The one who chose not to be found. What has she done?'

'She has explored this land,' the Jaghut replied. 'She has found a gate far to the south. It is Omtose Phellack.'

'I am glad,' Pran Chole said, 'I am not a mother.' And you, woman, should be glad I am not cruel. He gestured. Heavy spears flashed past the Bonecaster. Six long, fluted heads of flint punched through the skin covering the Jaghut's chest. She staggered, then folded to the ground in a clatter of shafts.

Thus ended the thirty-third Jaghut War.

Pran Chole whirled. 'We've no time for a pyre. We must strike southward. Quickly.'

Cannig Tol stepped forward as his warriors went to retrieve their weapons. The Clan Leader's eyes narrowed on the Bonecaster. 'What distresses you?'

'A renegade Bonecaster has taken the children.'

'South?'

'To Morn.'

The Clan Leader's brows knitted.

'The renegade would save this woman's children. The renegade believes the Rent to be Omtose Phellack.'

Pran Chole watched the blood leave Cannig Tol's face. 'Go to Morn, Bonecaster,' the Clan Leader whispered. 'We are not cruel. Go now.'

Pran Chole bowed. The Tellann warren engulfed him.

The faintest release of her power sent the two Jaghut children upward, into the gate's maw. The girl cried out a moment before reaching it, a longing wail for her mother, who she imagined waited beyond. Then the two small figures vanished within.

The Bonecaster sighed and continued to stare upward, seeking any evidence that the passage had gone awry. It seemed, however, that no wounds had reopened, no gush of wild power bled from the portal. Did it look different? She could not be sure. This was new land for her; she had nothing of the bone-bred sensitivity that she had known all her life among the lands of the Tárad clan, in the heart of the First Empire.
The Tellann warren opened behind her. The woman spun round, moments from veering into her Soletaken form.

An arctic fox bounded into view, slowed upon seeing her, then sembled back into its Imass form. She saw before her a young man, wearing the skin of his totem animal across his shoulders, and a battered antler headdress. His expression was twisted with fear, his eyes not on her, but on the portal beyond.

The woman smiled. 'I greet you, fellow Bonecaster. Yes, I have sent them through. They are beyond the reach of your vengeance, and this pleases me.'

His tawny eyes fixed on her. 'Who are you? What clan?'

'I have left my clan, but I was once counted among the Logros. I am named Kilava.'

'You should have let me find you last night,' Pran Chole said. 'I would then have been able to convince you that a swift death was the greater mercy for those children than what you have done here, Kilava.'

'They are young enough to be adopted—'

'You have come to the place called Morn,' Pran Chole interjected, his voice cold. 'To the ruins of an ancient city—'

'Jaghut—'

'Not Jaghut! This tower, yes, but it was built long afterward, in the time between the city's destruction and the T'ol Ara'd – this flow of lava which but buried something already dead.' He raised a hand, pointed towards the suspended gate. 'It was this – this wounding – that destroyed the city, Kilava. The warren beyond – do you not understand? It is not Omote Phellack! Tell me this – how are such wounds sealed? You know the answer, Bonecaster!'

The woman slowly turned, studied the Rent. 'If a soul sealed that wound, then it should have been freed ... when the children arrived—'

'Freed,' Pran Chole hissed, 'in exchange!'

Trembling, Kilava faced him again. 'Then where is it? Why has it not appeared?'

Pran Chole turned to study the central mound on the plain. 'Oh,' he whispered, 'but it has.' He glanced back at his fellow Bonecaster. 'Tell me, will you in turn give up your life for those children? They are trapped now, in an eternal nightmare of pain. Does your compassion extend to sacrificing yourself in yet another exchange?' He studied her, then sighed. 'I thought not, so wipe away those tears, Kilava. Hypocrisy ill suits a Bonecaster.'

'What... the woman managed after a time, 'what has been freed?'

Pran Chole shook his head. He studied the central mound again. 'I am not sure, but we shall have to do something about it, sooner or later. I suspect we have plenty of time. The creature must now free itself of its tomb, and that has been thoroughly warded. More, there is the T'ol Ara'd's mantle of stone still clothing the barrow.' After a moment, he added. 'But time we shall have.'

'What do you mean?'

'The Gathering has been called. The Ritual of Tellann awaits us, Bonecaster.'

She spat. 'You are all insane. To choose immortality for the sake of a war – madness. I shall defy the call, Bonecaster.'

He nodded. 'Yet the Ritual shall be done. I have spirit-walked into the future, Kilava. I have seen my withered face of two hundred thousand and more years hence. We shall have our eternal war.'

Bitterness filled Kilava's voice. 'My brother will be pleased.'
'Who is your brother?'

'Onos T'oolan, the First Sword.'

Pran Chole turned at this. 'You are the Defier. You slaughtered your clan – your kin—'

'To break the link and thus achieve freedom, yes. Alas, my eldest brother's skills more than matched mine. Yet now we are both free, though what I celebrate, Onos T'oolan curses.' She wrapped her arms around herself, and Pran Chole saw upon her layers and layers of pain. Hers was a freedom he did not envy. She spoke again. 'This city, then. Who built it.'

'K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'I know the name, but little else of them.'

Pran Chole nodded. 'We shall, I expect, learn.'

II

Continents of Korelri and Jacuruku, in the Time of Dying 119,736 years before Burn's Sleep (three years after the Fall of the Crippled God)

The Fall had shattered a continent. Forests had burned, the firestorms lighting the horizons in every direction, bathing crimson the heaving ash-filled clouds blanketing the sky. The conflagration had seemed unending, world-devouring, weeks into months, and through it all could be heard the screams of a god.

Pain gave birth to rage. Rage, to poison, an infection sparing no-one.

Scattered survivors remained, reduced to savagery, wandering a landscape pocked with huge craters now filled with murky, lifeless water, the sky churning endlessly above them. Kinship had been dismembered, love had proved a burden too costly to carry. They ate what they could, often each other, and scanned the ravaged world around them with rapacious intent.

One figure walked this landscape alone. Wrapped in rotting rags, he was of average height, his features blunt and unprepossessing. There was a dark cast to his face, a heavy inflexibility in his eyes. He walked as if gathering suffering unto himself, unmindful of its vast weight; walked as if incapable of yielding, of denying the gifts of his own spirit.

In the distance, ragged bands eyed the figure as he strode, step by step, across what was left of the continent that would one day be called Korelri. Hunger might have driven them closer, but there were no fools left among the survivors of the Fall, and so they maintained a watchful distance, curiosity dulled by fear. For the man was an ancient god, and he walked among them.

Beyond the suffering he absorbed, K'rul would have willingly embraced their broken souls, yet he had fed – was feeding – on the blood spilled onto this land, and the truth was this: the power born of that would be needed.

In K'rul's wake, men and women killed men, killed women, killed children. Dark slaughter was the river the Elder God rode.

Elder Gods embodied a host of harsh unpleasantries.

The foreign god had been torn apart in his descent to earth. He had come down in pieces, in streaks of flame. His pain was fire, screams and thunder, a voice that had been heard by half the world. Pain, and outrage. And, K'rul reflected, grief. It would be a long time before the foreign god could begin to reclaim the remaining fragments of its life, and so begin to unveil its nature. K'rul feared that day's arrival. From such a shattering could only come madness.
The summoners were dead. Destroyed by what they had called down upon them. There was no point in hating them, no need to conjure up images of what they in truth deserved by way of punishment. They had, after all, been desperate. Desperate enough to part the fabric of chaos, to open a way into an alien, remote realm; to then lure a curious god of that realm closer, ever closer to the trap they had prepared. The summoners sought power.

All to destroy one man.

The Elder God had crossed the ruined continent, had looked upon the still-living flesh of the Fallen God, had seen the unearthly maggots that crawled forth from that rotting, endlessly pulsing meat and broken bone. Had seen what those maggots flowered into. Even now, as he reached the battered shoreline of Jacuruku, the ancient sister continent to Korelri, they wheeled above him on their broad, black wings. Sensing the power within him, they were hungry for its taste.

But a strong god could ignore the scavengers that trailed in his wake, and K'rul was a strong god. Temples had been raised in his name. Blood had for generations soaked countless altars in worship of him. The nascent cities were wreathed in the smoke of forges, pyres, the red glow of humanity's dawn. The First Empire had risen, on a continent half a world away from where K'rul now walked. An empire of humans, born from the legacy of the T'lan Imass, from whom it took its name.

But it had not been alone for long. Here, on Jacuruku, in the shadow of long-dead K'Chain Che'Malle ruins, another empire had emerged. Brutal, a devourer of souls, its ruler was a warrior without equal.

K'rul had come to destroy him, had come to snap the chains of twelve million slaves – even the Jaghut Tyrants had not commanded such heartless mastery over their subjects. No, it took a mortal human to achieve this level of tyranny over his kin.

Two other Elder Gods were converging on the Kallorian Empire. The decision had been made. The three – last of the Elder – would bring to a close the High King's despotic rule. K'rul could sense his companions. Both were close; both had been comrades once, but they all – K'rul included – had changed, had drifted far apart. This would mark the first conjoining in millennia.

He could sense a fourth presence as well, a savage, ancient beast following his spoor. A beast of the earth, of winter's frozen breath, a beast with white fur bloodied, wounded almost unto death by the Fall. A beast with but one surviving eye to look upon the destroyed land that had once been its home – long before the empire's rise. Trailng, but coming no closer. And, K'rul well knew, it would remain a distant observer of all that was about to occur. The Elder god could spare it no sorrow, yet was not indifferent to its pain.

_We each survive as we must, and when time comes to die, we find our places of solitude..._

The Kallorian Empire had spread to every shoreline of Jacuruku, yet K'rul saw no-one as he took his first steps inland. Lifeless wastes stretched on all sides. The air was grey with ash and dust, the skies overhead churning like lead in a smith's cauldron. The Elder God experienced the first breath of unease, sidling chill across his soul.

Above him the god-spawned scavengers cackled as they wheeled.

A familiar voice spoke in K'rul's mind. _Brother, I am upon the north shore._

'And I the west.'

_Are you troubled?_

'I am. All is ... dead.'

_Incinerated. The heat remains deep beneath the beds of ash. Ash ... and bone._

A third voice spoke. _Brothers, I am come from the south, where once dwelt the cities. All destroyed. The echoes of a continent's death-cry still linger. Are we deceived? Is this illusion?_
K'rul addressed the first Elder who had spoken in his mind. 'Draconus, I too feel that death-cry. Such pain ... indeed, more dreadful in its aspect than that of the Fallen One. If not a deception as our sister suggests, what has he done?'

_We have stepped onto this land, and so all share what you sense, K'rul_, Draconus replied. _I, too, am not certain of its truth. Sister, do you approach the High King's abode?_

The third voice replied, _I do, brother Draconus. Would you and brother K'rul join me now, that we may confront this mortal as one?_

'We shall.'

Warrens opened, one to the far north, the other directly before K'rul.

The two Elder Gods joined their sister upon a ragged hilltop where wind swirled through the ashes, spinning funereal wreaths skyward. Directly before them, on a heap of burnt bones, was a throne.

The man seated upon it was smiling. 'As you can see,' he rasped after a moment of scornful regard, 'I have ... prepared for your arrival. Oh yes, I knew you were coming. Draconus, of Tiam's kin. K'rul, Opener of the Paths.' His grey eyes swung to the third Elder. 'And you. My dear, I was under the impression that you had abandoned your ... old self. Walking among the mortals, playing the role of middling sorceress – such a deadly risk, though perhaps this is what entices you so to the mortal game. You've stood on fields of battles, woman. One stray arrow ...' He slowly shook his head.

'We have come,' K'rul said, 'to end your reign of terror.'

Kallor's brows rose. 'You would take from me all that I have worked so hard to achieve? Fifty years, dear rivals, to conquer an entire continent. Oh yes, perhaps Ardatha still held out – always late in sending me my rightful tribute – but I ignored such petty gestures. She has fled, did you know? The bitch. Do you imagine yourselves the first to challenge me? The Circle brought down a foreign god. Aye, the effort went... awry, thus sparing me the task of killing the fools with my own hand. And the Fallen One? Well, he'll not recover for some time, and even then, do you truly imagine he will accede to anyone's bidding? I would have—'

'Enough,' Draconus growled. 'Your prattling grows wearisome, Kallor.'

'Very well,' the High King sighed. He leaned forward. 'You've come to liberate my people from my tyrannical rule. Alas, I am not one to relinquish such things. Not to you, not to anyone.' He settled back, waved a languid hand. 'Thus, what you would refuse me, I now refuse you.'

Though the truth was before K'rul's eyes, he could not believe it. 'What have—'

_Are you blind?_ Kallor shrieked, clutching at the arms of his throne. 'It is gone! They are gone! Break the chains, will you? Go ahead – no, I surrender them! Here, all about you, is now free! Dust! Bones! All free!'

'You have in truth incinerated an entire continent?' the sister Elder whispered. 'Jacuruku—'

'Is no more, and never again shall be. What I have unleashed will never heal. Do you understand me? Never. And it is all your fault. Yours. Paved in bone and ash, this noble road you chose to walk. Your road.'

'We cannot allow this—'

'It has already happened, you foolish woman!'

K'rul spoke within the minds of his kin. _It must be done. I will fashion a ... a place for this. Within myself._

_A warren to hold all this?_ Draconus asked in horror. _My brother—_

_No, it must be done. join with me now, this shaping will not be easy—_

_It will break you, K'rul_, his sister said. _There must be another way._
None. To leave this continent as it is ... no, this world is young. To carry such a scar ... 

What of Kallor? Draconus enquired. What of this ... this creature?

We mark him, K'rul replied. We know his deepest desire, do we not?

And the span of his life?

Long, my friends.

Agreed.

K'rul blinked, fixed his dark, heavy eyes on the High King. 'For this crime, Kallor, we deliver appropriate punishment. Know this: you, Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, shall know mortal life unending. Mortal, in the ravages of age, in the pain of wounds and the anguish of despair. In dreams brought to ruin. In love withered. In the shadow of Death's spectre, ever a threat to end what you will not relinquish.' Draconus spoke, 'Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, you shall never ascend.'

Their sister said, 'Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, each time you rise, you shall then fall. All that you achieve shall turn to dust in your hands. As you have wilfully done here, so it shall be in turn visited upon all that you do.'

'Three voices curse you,' K'rul intoned. 'It is done.'

The man on the throne trembled. His lips drew back in a rictus snarl. 'I shall break you. Each of you. I swear this upon the bones of seven million sacrifices. K'rul, you shall fade from the world, you shall be forgotten. Draconus, what you create shall be turned upon you. And as for you, woman, unhuman hands shall tear your body into pieces, upon a field of battle, yet you shall know no respite – thus, my curse upon you, Sister of Cold Nights. Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, one voice, has spoken three curses. Thus.'

They left Kallor upon his throne, upon its heap of bones. They merged their power to draw chains around a continent of slaughter, then pulled it into a warren created for that sole purpose, leaving the land itself bared. To heal.

The effort left K'rul broken, bearing wounds he knew he would carry for all his existence. More, he could already feel the twilight of his worship, the blight of Kallor's curse. To his surprise, the loss pained him less than he would have imagined.

The three stood at the portal of the nascent, lifeless realm, and looked long upon their handiwork.

Then Draconus spoke, 'Since the time of All Darkness, I have been forging a sword.'

Both K'rul and the Sister of Cold Nights turned at this, for they had known nothing of it.

Draconus continued. 'The forging has taken ... a long time, but I am now nearing completion. The power invested within the sword possesses a ... a finality.'

'Then,' K'rul whispered after a moment's consideration, 'you must make alterations in the final shaping.'

'So it seems. I shall need to think long on this.'

After a long moment, K'rul and his brother turned to their sister.

She shrugged. 'I shall endeavour to guard myself. When my destruction comes, it will be through betrayal and naught else. There can be no precaution against such a thing, lest my life become its own nightmare of suspicion and mistrust. To this, I shall not surrender. Until that moment, I shall continue to play the mortal game.'

'Careful, then,' K'rul murmured, 'whom you choose to fight for.'
'Find a companion,' Draconus advised. 'A worthy one.'

'Wise words from you both. I thank you.'

There was nothing more to be said. The three had come together, with an intent they had now achieved. Perhaps not in the manner they would have wished, but it was done. And the price had been paid. Willingly. Three lives and one, each destroyed. For the one, the beginning of eternal hatred. For the three, a fair exchange.

Elder Gods, it has been said, embodied a host of unpleasantries.

In the distance, the beast watched the three figures part ways. Riven with pain, white fur stained and dripping blood, the gouged pit of its lost eye glittering wet, it held its hulking mass on trembling legs. It longed for death, but death would not come. It longed for vengeance, but those who had wounded it were dead. There but remained the man seated on the throne, who had laid waste to the beast's home.

Time enough would come for the settling of that score.

A final longing filled the creature's ravaged soul. Somewhere, amidst the conflagration of the Fall and the chaos that followed, it had lost its mate, and was now alone. Perhaps she still lived. Perhaps she wandered, wounded as he was, searching the broken wastes for sign of him.

Or perhaps she had fled, in pain and terror, to the warren that had given fire to her spirit.

Wherever she had gone – assuming she still lived – he would find her.

The three distant figures unveiled warrens, each vanishing into their Elder realms.

The beast elected to follow none of them. They were young entities as far as he and his mate were concerned, and the warren she might have fled to was, in comparison to those of the Elder Gods, ancient.

The path that awaited him was perilous, and he knew fear in his labouring heart.

The portal that opened before him revealed a grey-streaked, swirling storm of power. The beast hesitated, then strode into it.

And was gone.
BOOK ONE

THE SPARK AND THE ASHES
Five mages, an Adjunct, countless Imperial Demons, and the debacle that was Darujhistan, all served to publicly justify the outlawry proclaimed by the Empress on Dujek Onearm and his battered legions. That this freed Onearm and his Host to launch a new campaign, this time as an independent military force, to fashion his own unholy alliances which were destined to result in a continuation of the dreadful Sorcery Enfilade on Genabackis, is, one might argue, incidental. Granted, the countless victims of that devastating time might, should Hood grant them the privilege, voice an entirely different opinion. Perhaps the most poetic detail of what would come to be called the Pannion Wars was in fact a precursor to the entire campaign: the casual, indifferent destruction of a lone, stone bridge, by the Jaghut Tyrant on his ill-fated march to Darujhistan . . .

*Imperial Campaigns (The Pannion War)*
1194–1195, Volume N, Genabackis
Imrygyn Tallobant (b. 1151)
CHAPTER ONE

Memories are woven tapestries hiding hard walls—tell me, my friends, what hue your favoured thread, and I in turn, will tell the cast of your soul . . .

Life of Dreams
Ilbares the Hag

1164th Year of Burn’s Sleep (two months after the Darujhistan Fete)
4th Year of the Pannion Domin
Tellann Year of the Second Gathering

The bridge's Gadrobi limestone blocks lay scattered, scorched and broken in the bank's churned mud, as if a god's hand had swept down to shatter the stone span in a single, petty gesture of contempt. And that, Gruntle suspected, was but a half-step from the truth.

The news had trickled back into Darujhistan less than a week after the destruction, as the first eastward-bound caravans this side of the river reached the crossing, to find that where once stood a serviceable bridge was now nothing but rubble. Rumours whispered of an ancient demon, unleashed by agents of the Malazan Empire, striding down out of the Gadrobi Hills bent on the annihilation of Darujhistan itself.

Gruntle spat into the blackened grasses beside the carriage. He had his doubts about that tale. Granted, there'd been strange goings on the night of the city's Fete two months back – not that he'd been sober enough to notice much of anything – and sufficient witnesses to give credence to the sightings of dragons, demons and the terrifying descent of Moon's Spawn, but any conjuring with the power to lay waste to an entire countryside would have reached Darujhistan. And, since the city was not a smouldering heap – or no more than was usual after a city-wide celebration – clearly nothing did.

No, far more likely a god's hand, or possibly an earthquake – though the Gadrobi Hills were not known to be restless. Perhaps Burn had shifted uneasy in her eternal sleep.

In any case, the truth of things now stood before him. Or, rather, did not stand, but lay scattered to Hood's gate and beyond. And the fact remained, whatever games the gods played, it was hard-working dirt-poor bastards like him who suffered for it.

The old ford was back in use, thirty paces upriver from where the bridge had been built. It hadn't seen traffic in centuries, and with a week of unseasonal rains both banks had become a morass. Caravan trains crowded the crossing, the ones on what used to be ramps and the ones out in the swollen river hopelessly mired down; while dozens more waited on the trails, with the tempers of merchants, guards and beasts climbing by the hour.

Two days now, waiting to cross, and Gruntle was pleased with his meagre troop. Islands of calm, they were. Harllo had waded out to a remnant of the bridge's nearside pile, and now sat atop it, fishing pole in hand. Stonny Menackis had led a ragged band of fellow caravan guards to Storby's wagon, and Storby wasn't too displeased to be selling Gredfallan ale by the mug at exorbitant prices. That the ale casks were destined for a wayside inn outside Saltoan was just too bad for the expectant innkeeper. If things continued as they did, there'd be a market growing up here, then a Hood-damned town. Eventually, some officious planner in Darujhistan would conclude that it'd be a good thing to rebuild the bridge, and in ten or so years it would finally get done. Unless, of course, the town had become a going concern, in which case they'd send a tax collector.

Gruntle was equally pleased with his employer's equanimity at the delay. News was, the merchant Manqui on the other side of the river had burst a blood vessel in his head and promptly died, which was more typical of the breed. No, their master Keruli ran against the grain, enough to threaten Gruntle's cherished disgust for merchants in general. Then again, Keruli's list of peculiar traits had led the guard captain to suspect that the
man wasn't a merchant at all.

Not that it mattered. Coin was coin, and Keruli's rates were good. Better than average, in fact. The man might be Prince Arard in disguise, for all Gruntle cared.

'You there, sir!'

Gruntle pulled his gaze from Harllo's fruitless fishing. A grizzled old man stood beside the carriage, squinting up at him. 'Damned imperious of you, that tone,' the caravan captain growled, 'since by the rags you're wearing you're either the world's worst merchant or a poor man's servant.'

'Manservant, to be precise. My name is Emancipor Reese. As for my masters' being poor, to the contrary. We have, however, been on the road for a long time.'

'I'll accept that,' Gruntle said, 'since your accent is unrecognizable, and coming from me that's saying a lot. What do you want, Reese?'

The manservant scratched the silvery stubble on his lined jaw. 'Careful questioning among this mob had gleaned a consensus that, as far as caravan guards go, you're a man who's earned respect.'

'As far as caravan guards go, I might well have at that,' Gruntle said drily. 'Your point?'

'My masters wish to speak with you, sir. If you're not too busy – we have camped not far from here.'

Leaning back on the bench, Gruntle studied Reese for a moment, then grunted. 'I'd have to clear with my employer any meetings with other merchants.'

'By all means, sir. And you may assure him that my masters have no wish to entice you away or otherwise compromise your contract.'

'Is that a fact? All right, wait there.' Gruntle swung himself down from the buckboard on the side opposite Reese. He stepped up to the small, ornately framed door and knocked once. It opened softly and from the relative darkness within the carriage's confines loomed Keruli's round, expressionless face.

'Yes, Captain, by all means go. I admit as to some curiosity about this man's two masters. Be most studious in noting details of your impending encounter. And, if you can, determine what precisely they have been up to since yesterday.'

The captain grunted to disguise his surprise at Keruli's clearly unnatural depth of knowledge – the man had yet to leave the carriage – then said, 'As you wish, sir.'

'Oh, and retrieve Stonny on your way back. She has had far too much to drink and has become most argumentative.'

'Maybe I should collect her now, then. She's liable to poke someone full of holes with that rapier of hers. I know her moods.'

'Ah, well. Send Harllo, then.'

'Uh, he's liable to join in, sir.'

'Yet you speak highly of them.'

'I do,' Gruntle replied. 'Not to be too immodest, sir, the three of us working the same contract are as good as twice that number, when it comes to protecting a master and his merchandise. That's why we're so expensive.'

'Your rates were high? I see. Hmm. Inform your two companions, then, that an aversion to trouble will yield substantial bonuses to their pay.'

Gruntle managed to avoid gaping. 'Uh, that should solve the problem, sir.'
'Excellent. Inform Harllo thus, then, and send him on his way.'

'Yes, sir.'

The door swung shut.

As it turned out, Harllo was already returning to the carriage, fishing pole in one massive hand, a sad sandal-sole of a fish clutched in the other. The man's bright blue eyes danced with excitement.

'Look, you sour excuse for a man – I've caught supper!'

'Supper for a monastic rat, you mean. I could inhale that damned thing up one nostril.'

Harllo scowled. 'Fish soup. Flavour—'

'That's just great. I love mud-flavoured soup. Look, the thing's not even breathing – it was probably dead when you caught it.'

'I banged a rock between its eyes, Gruntle—'

'Must have been a small rock.'

'For that you don't get any—'

'For that I bless you. Now listen. Stonny's getting drunk—'

'Funny, I don't hear no brawl—'

'Bonuses from Keruli if there isn't one. Understood?'

Harllo glanced at the carriage door, then nodded. 'I'll let her know.'

'Better hurry.'

'Right.'

Gruntle watched him scurry off, still carrying his pole and prize. The man's arms were enormous, too long and too muscled for the rest of his scrawny frame. His weapon of choice was a two-handed sword, purchased from a weapon-smith in Deadman's Story. As far as those apish arms were concerned, it might be made of bamboo. Harllo's shock of pale blond hair rode his pate like a tangled bundle of fishing thread. Strangers laughed upon seeing him for the first time, but Harllo used the flat of a blade to stifle that response. Succinctly.

Sighing, Gruntle returned to where Emancipor Reese stood waiting. 'Lead on,' he said.

Reese's head bobbed. 'Excellent.'

The carriage was massive, a house perched on high, spoked wheels. Ornate carvings crowded the strangely arched frame, tiny painted figures capering and climbing with leering expressions. The driver's perch was canopied in sun-faded canvas. Four oxen lumbered freely in a makeshift corral ten paces downwind from the camp.

Privacy obviously mattered to the manservant's masters, since they'd parked well away from both the road and the other merchants, affording them a clear view of the hummocks rising on the south side of the road, and, beyond it, the broad sweep of the plain.

A mangy cat lying on the buckboard watched Reese and Gruntle approach.

'That your cat?' the captain asked.

Reese squinted at it, then sighed. 'Aye, sir. Her name's Squirrel.'
'Any alchemist or wax-witch could treat that mange.'

The manservant seemed uncomfortable. 'I'll be sure to look into it when we get to Saltoan,' he muttered. 'Ah,' he nodded towards the hills beyond the road, 'here comes Master Bauchelain.'

Gruntle turned and studied the tall, angular man who'd reached the road and now strode casually towards them. Expensive, ankle-length cloak of black leather, high riding boots of the same over grey leggings, and, beneath a loose silk shirt – also black – the glint of fine blackened chain armour.

'Black,' the captain said to Reese, 'was last year's shade in Darujhistan.'

'Black is Bauchelain's eternal shade, sir.'

The master's face was pale, shaped much like a triangle, an impression further accented by a neatly trimmed beard. His hair, slick with oil, was swept back from his high brow. His eyes were flat grey – as colourless as the rest of him – and upon meeting them Gruntle felt a surge of visceral alarm.

'Captain Gruntle,' Bauchelain spoke in a soft, cultured voice, 'your employer's prying is none too subtle. But while we are not ones to generally reward such curiosity regarding our activities, this time we shall make an exception. You shall accompany me.' He glanced at Reese. 'Your cat seems to be suffering palpitations. I suggest you comfort the creature.'

'At once, master.'

Gruntle rested his hands on the pommels of his cutlasses, eyes narrowed on Bauchelain. The carriage springs squeaked as the manservant clambered up to the buckboard.

'Well, Captain?'

Gruntle made no move.

Bauchelain raised one thin eyebrow. 'I assure you, your employer is eager that you comply with my request. If, however, you are afraid to do so, you might be able to convince him to hold your hand for the duration of this enterprise. Though I warn you, levering him into the open may prove something of a challenge, even for a man of your bulk.'

'Ever done any fishing?' Gruntle asked.

'Fishing?'

'The ones that rise to any old bait are young and they don't get any older. I've been working caravans for more than twenty years, sir. I ain't young. You want a rise, fish elsewhere.'

Bauchelain's smile was dry. 'You reassure me, Captain. Shall we proceed?'

'Lead on.'

They crossed the road. An old goat trail led them into the hills. The caravan camp this side of the river was quickly lost to sight. The scorched grass of the conflagration that had struck this land marred every slope and summit, although new green shoots had begun to appear.

'Fire,' Bauchelain noted as they walked on, 'is essential for the health of these prairie grasses. As is the passage of bhederin, the hooves in their hundreds of thousands compacting the thin soil. Alas, the presence of goats will spell the end of verdancy for these ancient hills. But I began with the subject of fire, did I not? Violence and destruction, both vital for life. Do you find that odd, Captain?'

'What I find odd, sir, is this feeling that I've left my wax-tablet behind.'

'You have had schooling, then. How interesting. You're a swordsman, are you not? What need you for letters and numbers?'
'And you're a man of letters and numbers – what need you for that well-worn broadsword at your hip and that fancy mail hauberker?'

'An unfortunate side effect of education among the masses is lack of respect.'

'Healthy scepticism, you mean.'

'Disdain for authority, actually. You may have noted, to answer your question, that we have but a single, rather elderly manservant. No hired guards. The need to protect oneself is vital in our profession—'

'And what profession is that?'

They'd descended onto a well-trodden path winding between the hills. Bauchelain paused, smiling as he regarded Gruntle. 'You entertain me, Captain. I understand now why you are well spoken of among the caravanserai, since you are unique among them in possessing a functioning brain. Come, we are almost there.'

They rounded a battered hillside and came to the edge of a fresh crater. The earth at its base was a swath of churned mud studded with broken blocks of stone. Gruntle judged the crater to be forty paces across and four or five arm-lengths in depth. A man sat nearby on the edge of the rim, also dressed in black leather, his bald pate the colour of bleached parchment. He rose silently, for all his considerable size, and turned to them with fluid grace.

'Korbal Broach, Captain. My ... partner. Korbal, we have here Gruntle, a name that is most certainly a slanting hint to his personality.'

If Bauchelain had triggered unease in the captain, then this man – his broad, round face, his eyes buried in puffed flesh and wide full-lipped mouth set slightly downturned at the corners, a face both childlike and ineffably monstrous – sent ripples of fear through Gruntle. Once again, the sensation was wholly instinctive, as if Bauchelain and his partner exuded an aura somehow tainted.

'No wonder the cat had palpitations,' the captain muttered under his breath. He pulled his gaze from Korbal Broach and studied the crater.

Bauchelain moved to stand beside him. 'Do you understand what you are seeing, Captain?'

'Aye, I'm no fool. It's a hole in the ground.'

'Amusing. A barrow once stood here. Within it was chained a Jaghut Tyrant.'

'Was.'

'Indeed. A distant empire meddled, or so I gather. And, in league with a T'lan Imass, they succeeded in freeing the creature.'

'You give credence to the tales, then,' Gruntle said. 'If such an event occurred, then what in Hood's name happened to it?'

'We wondered the same, Captain. We are strangers to this continent. Until recently, we'd never heard of the Malazan Empire, nor the wondrous city called Darujhistan. During our all too brief stay there, however, we heard stories of events just past. Demons, dragons, assassins. And the Azath house named Finnest, which cannot be entered yet, seems to be occupied none the less – we paid that a visit, of course. More, we'd heard tales of a floating fortress, called Moon's Spawn, that once hovered over the city—'

'Aye, I'd seen that with my own eyes. It left a day before I did.'

Bauchelain sighed. 'Alas, it appears we have come too late to witness for ourselves these dire wonders. A Tiste Andii lord rules Moon's Spawn, I gather.'

Gruntle shrugged. 'If you say so. Personally, I dislike gossip.'

Finally, the man's eyes hardened.
The captain smiled inwardly.

'Gossip. Indeed.'

'This is what you wanted to show me, then? This ... hole?'

Bauchelain raised an eyebrow. 'Not precisely. This *hole* is but the entrance. We intend to visit the Jaghut tomb that lies below it.'

'Oponn's blessing to you, then,' Gruntle said, turning away.

'I imagine,' the man said behind him, 'that your master would urge you to accompany us.'

'He can urge all he likes,' the captain replied. 'I wasn't contracted to sink in a pool of mud.'

'We've no intention of getting covered in mud.'

Gruntle glanced back at him, crooked a wry grin. 'A figure of speech, Bauchelain. Apologies if you misunderstood.' He swung round again and made his way towards the trail. Then he stopped. 'You wanted to see Moon's Spawn, sirs?' He pointed.

Like a towering black cloud, the basalt fortress stood just above the south horizon.

Boots crunched on the ragged gravel, and Gruntle found himself standing between the two men, both of whom studied the distant floating mountain.

'Scale,' Bauchelain muttered, 'is difficult to determine. How far away is it?'

'I'd guess a league, maybe more. Trust me, sirs, it's close enough for my tastes. I've walked its shadow in Darujhistan – hard not to for a while there – and believe me, it's not a comforting feeling.'

'I imagine not. What is it doing here?'

Gruntle shrugged. 'Seems to be heading southeast—'

'Hence the tilt.'

'No. It was damaged over Pale. By mages of the Malazan Empire.'

'Impressive effort, these mages.'

'They died for it. Most of them, anyway. So I heard. Besides, while they managed to damage Moon's Spawn, its lord remains hale. If you want to call kicking a hole in a fence before getting obliterated by the man who owns the house "impressive", go right ahead.'

Korbal Broach finally spoke, his voice reedy and high-pitched. 'Bauchelain, does he sense us?'

His companion frowned, eyes still on Moon's Spawn, then shook his head. 'I detect no such attention accorded us, friend. But that is a discussion that should await a more private moment.'

'Very well. You don't want me to kill this caravan guard, then?'

Gruntle stepped away in alarm, half drawing his cutlasses. 'You'll regret the attempt,' he growled.

'Be calmed, Captain.' Bauchelain smiled. 'My partner has simple notions—'

'Simple as an adder's, you mean.'

'Perhaps. None the less, I assure you, you are perfectly safe.'

Scowling, Gruntle backed away down the trail. 'Master Keruli,' he whispered, 'if you're watching all this – and I think you are – I trust my bonus will be appropriately generous. And, if my advice is worth anything, I
suggest we stride clear and wide of these two.'

Moments before he moved beyond sight of the crater, he saw Bauchelain and Korbal Broach turn their backs on him – and Moon's Spawn. They stared down into the hole for a brief span, then began the descent, disappearing from view.

Sighing, Gruntle swung about and made his way back to the camp, rolling his shoulders to release the tension that gripped him.

As he reached the road his gaze lifted once more, south-ward to find Moon's Spawn, hazy now with distance. 'You there, lord, I wish you had caught the scent of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, so you'd do to them what you did to the Jaghut Tyrant – assuming you had a hand in that. Preventative medicine, the cutters call it. I only pray we don't all one day come to regret your disinterest.'

Walking down the road, he glanced over to see Emancipor Reese, sitting atop the carriage, one hand stroking the ragged cat in his lap. Mange? Gruntle considered. Probably not.

The huge wolf circled the body, head low and turned inward to keep the unconscious mortal within sight of its lone eye.

The Warren of Chaos had few visitors. Among those few, mortal humans were rarest of all. The wolf had wandered this violent landscape for a time that was, to it, immeasurable. Alone and lost for so long, its mind had found new shapes born of solitude; the tracks of its thoughts twisted on seemingly random routes. Few would recognize awareness or intelligence in the feral gleam of its eye, yet they existed none the less.

The wolf circled, massive muscles rippling beneath the dull white fur. Head low and turned inward. Lone eye fixed on the prone human.

The fierce concentration was efficacious, holding the object of its attention in a state that was timeless – an accidental consequence of the powers the wolf had absorbed within this warren.

The wolf recalled little of the other worlds that existed beyond Chaos. It knew nothing of the mortals who worshipped it as they would a god. Yet a certain knowledge had come to it, an instinctive sensitivity that told it of ... possibilities. Of potentials. Of choices now available to the wolf, with the discovery of this frail mortal.

Even so, the creature hesitated.

There were risks. And the decision that now gnawed its way to the forefront had the wolf trembling.

Its circling spiralled inward, closer, ever closer to the unconscious figure. Lone eye fixing finally on the man's face.

The gift, the creature saw at last, was a true one. Nothing else could explain what it discovered in the mortal man's face. A mirrored spirit, in every detail. This was an opportunity that could not be refused.

Still the wolf hesitated.

Until an ancient memory rose before its mind's eye. An image, frozen, faded with the erosion of time.

Sufficient to close the spiral.

And then it was done.

His single functioning eye blinked open to a pale blue, cloudless sky. The scar tissue covering what was left of his other eye tingly with a maddening itch, as if insects crawled under the skin. He was wearing a helm, the visor raised. Beneath him, hard sharp rocks dug into his flesh.

He lay unmoving, trying to remember what had happened. The vision of a dark tear opening before him – he'd plunged into it, was flung into it. A horse vanishing beneath him, the thrum of his bowstring. A sense of
unease, which he'd shared with his companion. A friend who rode at his side. Captain Paran.

Toc the Younger groaned. Hairlock. That mad puppet. We were ambushed. The fragments coalesced, memory returning with a surge of fear. He rolled onto his side, every muscle protesting. Hood's breath, this isn't the Rhivi Plain.

A field of broken black glass stretched away on all sides. Grey dust hung in motionless clouds an arm's span above it. Off to his left, perhaps two hundred paces away, a low mound rose to break the flat monotony of the landscape.

His throat felt raw. His eye stung. The sun was blistering overhead. Coughing, Toc sat up, the obsidian crunching beneath him. He saw his recurved horn bow lying beside him and reached for it. The quiver had been strapped onto the saddle of his horse. Wherever he'd gone, his faithful Wickan mount had not followed. Apart from the knife at his hip and the momentarily useless bow in his hand, then, he possessed nothing. No water, no food. A closer examination of his bow deepened his scowl. The gut string had stretched.

**Badly. Meaning I've been... away... for some time. Away. Where?** Hairlock had thrown him into a warren. Somehow, time had been lost within it. He was not overly thirsty, nor particularly hungry. But, even if he had arrows, the bow's pull was gone. Worse, the string had dried, the wax absorbing obsidian dust. It wouldn't survive retightening. That suggested days, if not weeks, had passed, though his body told him otherwise.

He climbed to his feet. The chain armour beneath his tunic protested the movement, shedding glittering dust.

Am I within a warren? Or has it spat me back out? Either way, he needed to find an end to this lifeless plain of volcanic glass. Assuming one existed...

He began walking towards the mound. Though it wasn't especially high, he would take any vantage point that was available. As he approached, he saw others like it beyond, regularly spaced. Barrows. Great, I just love barrows.

And then a central one, larger than the rest.

Toc skirted the first mound, noting in passing that it had been holed, likely by looters. After a moment he paused, turned and walked closer. He squatted beside the excavated shaft, peered down into the slanting tunnel. As far as he could see – over a man's height in depth – the mantle of obsidian continued down. For the mounds to have showed at all, they must be huge, more like domes than beehive tombs. 'Whatever,' he muttered. 'I don't like it.'

He paused, considering, running through in his mind the events that had led him to this... unfortunate situation. The deathly rain of Moon's Spawn seemed to mark some kind of beginning. Fire and pain, the death of an eye, the kiss that left a savagely disfiguring scar on what had been a young, reputedly handsome face.

A ride north onto the plain to retrieve Adjunct Lorn, a skirmish with Ilgres Barghast. Back in Pale, still more trouble. Lorn had drawn his reins, reviving his old role as a Claw courier. Courier? Let's speak plain, Toc, especially to yourself. You were a spy. But you had been turned. You were a scout in Onearm's Host. That and nothing more, until the Adjunct showed up. There'd been trouble in Pale. Tattersail, then Captain Paran. Flight and pursuit. 'What a mess,' he muttered.

Hairlock's ambush had swatted him like a fly, into some kind of malign warren. Where I... lingered. I think. Hood take me, time's come to start thinking like a soldier again. Get your hearings. Do nothing precipitous. Think about survival, here in this strange, unwelcome place...

He resumed his trek to the central barrow. Though gently sloped, it was at least thrice the height of a man. His cough worsened as he scrambled up its side.

The effort was rewarded. On the summit, he found himself standing at the hub of a ring of lesser tombs. Directly ahead, three hundred paces beyond the ring's edge yet almost invisible through the haze, rose the bony shoulders of grey-cloaked hills. Closer and to his left were the ruins of a stone tower. The sky behind it glowed a sickly red colour.

Toc glanced up at the sun. When he'd awoken, it had been at little more than three-quarters of the wheel;
now it stood directly above him. He was able to orientate himself. The hill lay to the northwest, the tower a few points north of due west.

His gaze was pulled back to the reddish welt in the sky beyond the tower. Yes, it pulsed, as regular as a heart. He scratched at the scar tissue covering his left eye-socket, winced at the answering bloom of colours flooding his mind. That's sorcery over there. Gods, I'm acquiring a deep hatred of sorcery.

A moment later, more immediate details drew his attention. The north slope of the central barrow was marred by a deep pit, its edges ragged and glistening. A tumble of cut stone – still showing the stains of red paint – crowded the base. The crater, he slowly realized, was not the work of looters. Whatever had made it had pushed up from the tomb, violently. In this place, it seems that even the dead do not sleep eternal. A moment of nervousness shook him, then he shrugged it off with a soft curse. You've known worse, soldier. Remember that T'lan Imass who'd joined up with the Adjunct. Laconic desiccation on two legs, Beru fend us all. Hooded eye-sockets with not a glimmer or gleam of mercy. That thing had spitted a Barghast like a Rhivi a plains boar.

Eye still studying the crater in the mound's flank, his thoughts remained on Lorn and her undead companion. They'd sought to free such a restless creature, to loose a wild, vicious power upon the land. He wondered if they'd succeeded. The prisoner of the tomb he now stood upon had faced a dreadful task, without question – wards, solid walls, and armspan after armspan of compacted, crushed glass. Well, given the alternatives, I imagine I would have been as desperate and as determined. How long did it take? How malignly twisted the mind once freed?

He shivered, the motion triggering another harsh cough. There were mysteries in the world, few of them pleasant.

He skirted the pit on his descent and made his way towards the ruined tower. He thought it unlikely that the occupant of the tomb would have lingered long in the area. I would have wanted to get as far away from here and as fast as was humanly possible. There was no telling how much time had passed since the creature's escape, but Toc's gut told him it was years, if not decades. He felt strangely unafraid in any case, despite the inhospitable surroundings and all the secrets beneath the land's ravaged surface. Whatever threat this place had held seemed to be long gone.

Forty paces from the tower he almost stumbled over a corpse. A fine layer of dust had thoroughly disguised its presence, and that dust, now disturbed by Toc's efforts to step clear, rose in a cloud. Cursing, the Malazan spat grit from his mouth.

Through the swirling, glittering haze, he saw that the bones belonged to a human. Granted, a squat, heavy-boned one. Sinews had dried nut-brown, and the furs and skins partially clothing it had rotted to mere strips. A bone helm sat on the corpse's head, fashioned from the frontal cap of a horned beast. One horn had snapped off some time in the distant past. A dust-sheathed two-handed sword lay nearby. Speaking of Hood's skull...

Toc the Younger scowled down at the figure. 'What are you doing here?' he demanded.

'Waiting,' the T'lan Imass replied in a leather-rasp voice.

Toc searched his memory for the name of this undead warrior. 'Onos T'oolan,' he said, pleased with himself. 'Of the Tarad Clan—'

'I am now named Tool. Clanless. Free."

Free? Free to do precisely what, you sack of bones? Lie around in wastelands?

'What's happened to the Adjunct? Where are we?'

'Lost."

'Which question is that an answer to, Tool?"

'Both.'
Toc gritted his teeth, resisting the temptation to kick the T’lan Imass. ‘Can you be more specific?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Well?’

‘Adjunct Lorn died in Darujhistan two months ago. We are in the ancient place called Morn, two hundred leagues to the south. It is just past midday.’

‘Just past midday, you said. Thank you for the enlightenment.’ He found little pleasure in conversing with a creature that had existed for hundreds of thousands of years, and that discomfort unleashed his sarcasm – a precarious presumption indeed. Get back to seriousness, idiot. That flint sword ain’t just for show. ‘Did you two free the Jaghut Tyrant?’

‘Briefly. Imperial efforts to conquer Darujhistan failed.’

Scowling, Toc crossed his arms. ‘You said you were waiting. Waiting for what?’

‘She has been away for some time. Now she returns.’

‘Who?’

‘She who has taken occupation of the tower, soldier.’

‘Can you at least stand up when you’re talking to me. Before I give in to temptation.’

The T’lan Imass rose with an array of creaking complaints, dust cascading from its broad, bestial form. Something glittered for the briefest of moments in the depths of its eye-sockets as it stared at Toc, then Tool turned and retrieved the flint sword.

‘Gods, better I’d insisted he just stay lying down. Parched leather skin, taut muscle and heavy bone . . . all moving about like something alive. Oh, how the Emperor loved them. An army he never had to feed, he never had to transport, an army that could go anywhere and do damn near anything. And no desertions – except for the one standing in front of me right now.

How do you punish a T’lan Imass deserter anyway?

‘I need water,’ Toc said after a long moment in which they simply stared at each other. ‘And food. And I need to find some arrows. And bowstring.’ He unstrapped his helmet and pulled it clear. The leather cap beneath it was soaked through with sweat. ‘Can’t we wait in the tower? This heat is baking my brain.’

‘All right, so help me you will. Thank Hood for that.’ Tool turned to survey the obsidian plain. ‘I foresee no shortage of raw material.’

‘The coast lies a thousand paces to the southwest,’ Tool said. ‘Food is available there, and a certain seagrass that will suffice as bowstring until some gut can be found. I do not, alas, smell fresh water. Perhaps the tower’s occupant will be generous, though she is less likely to be so if she arrives to find you within it. Arrows can be made. There is a salt-marsh nearby, where we can find bone-reed. Snares for coast birds will offer us fletching. Arrowheads . . .’ Tool turned to survey the obsidian plain. ‘I foresee no shortage of raw material.’

‘All right, so help me you will. Thank Hood for that. Well, I hope you can still chip stone and weave seagrass, T’lan Imass, not to mention work bone-reed – whatever that is – into true shafts, because I certainly don’t know how. When I need arrows, I requisition them, and when they arrive they’re iron-headed and straight as a plumb-line.’

‘I have not lost the skills, soldier—’

‘Since the Adjunct never properly introduced us, I am named Toc the Younger, and I am not a soldier, but a scout—’

‘You were in the employ of the Claw.’

‘With none of the assassin training, nor the magery. Besides which, I have more or less renounced that role.”
All I seek to do now is to return to Onearm's Host.'

'A long journey.'

'So I gathered. The sooner I start the better, then. Tell me, how far does this glass wasteland stretch?'

'Seven leagues. Beyond it you will find the Lamatath Plain. When you have reached it, set a course north by northeast—'

'Where will that take me? Darujhistan? Has Dujek besieged the city?'

'No.' The T'lan Imass swung its head round. 'She comes.'

Toc followed Tool's gaze. Three figures had appeared from the south, approaching the edge of the ring of barrows. Of the three, only the one in the middle walked upright. She was tall, slim, wearing a flowing white telaba such as were worn by highborn women of Seven Cities. Her black hair was long and straight. Flanking her were two dogs, the one on her left as big as a hill-pony, shaggy, wolflike, the other short-haired, dun-coloured and heavily muscled.

Since Tool and Toc stood in the open, it was impossible that they had not been seen, yet the three displayed no perturbation or change of pace as they strode nearer. At a dozen paces the wolfish dog loped forward, tail wagging as it came up to the T'lan Imass.

Musing on the scene, Toc scratched his jaw. 'An old friend, Tool? Or does the beast want you to toss it one of your bones?'

The undead warrior regarded him in silence.

'Humour,' Toc said, shrugging. 'Or a poor imitation. I didn't think T'lan Imass could take offence.' Or, rather, I'm hoping that's the case. Gods, my big mouth ...

'I was considering,' Tool replied slowly. 'This beast is an ay, and thus has little interest in bones. Ay prefer flesh, still warm if possible.'

Toc grunted. 'I see.'

'Humour,' Tool said after a moment.

'Right.' Oh. Maybe this won't be so bad after all. Surprises never cease.

The T'lan Imass reached out to rest the tips of its bony fingers on the ay's broad head. The animal went perfectly still. 'An old friend? Yes, we adopted such animals into our tribes. It was that or see them starve. We were, you see, responsible for that starvation.'

'Responsible? As in overhunting? I'd have thought your kind was one with nature. All those spirits, all those rituals of propitiation—'

'Toc the Younger,' Tool interrupted, 'do you mock me, or your own ignorance? Not even the lichen of the tundra is at peace. All is struggle, all is war for dominance. Those who lose, vanish.'

'And we're no different, you're saying—'

'We are, soldier. We possess the privilege of choice. The gift of foresight. Though often we come too late in acknowledging those responsibilities...' The T'lan Imass's head tilted as he studied the ay before him, and, it seemed, his own skeletal hand where it rested upon the beast's head.

'Baaljagg awaits your command, dear undead warrior,' the woman said upon arriving, her voice a lilting melody. 'How sweet. Garath, go join your brother in greeting our desiccated guest.' She met Toe's gaze and smiled. 'Garath, of course, might decide your companion's worth burying — wouldn't that be fun?'

'Momentarily,' Toc agreed. 'You speak Daru, yet wear the telaba of Seven Cities . . .'
Her brows arched. 'Do I? Oh, such confusion! Mind you, sir, you speak Daru yet you are from that repressed woman's empire – what was her name again?'

'Empress Laseen. The Malazan empire.' And how did you know that? I'm not in uniform ...

She smiled. 'Indeed.'

'I am Toc the Younger, and the T'lan Imass is named Tool'

'How apt. My, it is hot out here, don't you think? Let us retire within the Jaghut tower. Garath, cease sniffing the T'lan Imass and awaken the servants.'

Toc watched the burly dog trot towards the tower. The entrance, the scout now saw, was in fact via a balcony, probably the first floor – yet another indication of the depth of the crushed glass. 'That place doesn't appear very habitable,' he observed.

'Appearances deceive,' she murmured, once again flashing him a heart-stuttering smile.

'Have you a name?' Toc asked her as they began walking.

'She is Lady Envy,' Tool said. 'Daughter of Draconus – he who forged the sword Dragnipur, and was slain by its present wielder, Anomander Rake, lord of Moon's Spawn, with that selfsame sword. Draconus had two daughters, it is believed, whom he named Envy and Spite—'

'Hood's breath, you can't be serious,' Toc muttered.

'The names no doubt amused him, as well,' the T'lan Imass continued.

'Really,' Lady Envy sighed, 'now you've gone and ruined all my fun. Have we met before?'

'No. None the less, you are known to me.'

'So it seems! It was, I admit, over-modest of me to assume that I would not be recognized. After all, I've crossed paths with the T'lan Imass more than once. At least twice, that is.'

Tool regarded her with his depthless gaze. 'Knowing who you are does not answer the mystery of your present residency here in Morn, should you look to pursue coyness, Lady. I would know what you seek in this place.'

'Whatever do you mean?' she asked mockingly.

As they approached the tower's entrance a leather-armoured masked figure appeared in the gaping doorway. Toc stopped in his tracks. 'That's a Seguleh!' He spun to Lady Envy. 'Your servant's a Seguleh!

'Is that what they're called?' Her brow wrinkled. 'A familiar name, though its context escapes me. Ah well. I have gleaned their personal names, but little else. They happened by and chanced to see me – this one, who is called Senu, and two others. They concluded that killing me would break the monotony of their journey.' She sighed. 'Alas, now they serve me.' She addressed the Seguleh. 'Senu, have your brothers fully awakened?'

The short, lithe man tilted his head, his dark eyes flat within the slits of his ornate mask.

'I've gathered,' Lady Envy said to Toc, 'that gesture indicates acquiescence. They are not a loquacious lot, I have found.'

Toc shook his head, his eyes on the twin broadswords slung under Senu's arms. 'Is he the only one of the three to acknowledge you directly, Lady?'

'Now that you mention it . . . Is that significant?'

'Means he's on the bottom rung in the hierarchy. The other two are above conversing with non-Seguleh.'

'How presumptuous of them!'
The scout grinned. 'I've never seen one before – but I've heard plenty. Their homeland is an island south of here, and they're said to be a private lot, disinclined to travel. But they are known of as far north as Nathilog.'

*And Hood take me, aren't they known.*

' Hmm, I did sense a certain arrogance that has proved entertaining. Lead us within, dear Senu.'

The Seguleh made no move. His eyes had found Tool and now held steady on the T'lan Imass.

Hackles rising, the ay stepped to one side to clear a space between the two figures.

'Senu?' Lady Envy enquired with honeyed politeness.

'I think,' Toc whispered, 'he's challenging Tool.'

'Ridiculous! Why would he do that?'

'For the Seguleh, rank is everything. If the hierarchy's in doubt, challenge it. They don't waste time.'

Lady Envy scowled at Senu. 'Behave yourself, young man!' She waved him into the room beyond.

Senu seemed to flinch at the gesture.

An itch spasmed across Toc's scar. He scratched it vigorously, breathing a soft curse.

The Seguleh backed into the small room, then hesitated a moment before turning and leading the others to the doorway opposite. A curved hallway brought them to a central chamber in which a tightly wound staircase rose from the centre. The walls were unadorned, roughly pitted pumice. Three limestone sarcophagi crowded the far end of the room, their lids leaning in a neatly arranged row against the wall behind them. The dog Lady Envy had sent in ahead sat nearby. Just within the entrance was a round wooden table, crowded with fresh fruit, meats, cheese and bread, as well as a beaded clay jug and a collection of cups.

Senu's two companions stood motionless over the table, as if standing guard and fully prepared to give their lives in its defence. Both were a match to their companion's height and build, and similarly armed; the difference between each was evident only in their masks. Where Senu's enamelled face-covering was crowded with dark-stained patterns, such decoration diminished successively in the other two examples. One was only slightly less marked than Senu's, but the third mask bore naught but twin slashes, one on each gleaming white cheek. The eyes that stared out from the slits of this mask were like chips of obsidian.

The twin-scarred Seguleh stiffened upon seeing the T'lan Imass, took one step forward.

'Oh really!' Lady Envy hissed. 'Challenges are forbidden! Any more of this nonsense and I shall lose my temper—'

All three Seguleh flinched back a step.

'There,' the woman said, 'that's much better.' She swung to Toc. 'Assuage your needs, young man. The jug contains Saltoan white wine, suitably chilled.'

Toc found himself unable to look away from the Seguleh wearing the twin-scarred mask.

'If a fixed stare represents a challenge,' Lady Envy said quietly, 'I suggest, for the sake of peace – not to mention your life – that you refrain from your present engagement, Toc the Younger.'

He grunted in sudden alarm, tore his gaze from the man. 'Good point, Lady. It's only that I've never heard of ... well, never mind. Doesn't matter.' He approached the table, reached for the jug.

Movement exploded behind him, followed by the sound of a body skidding across the room, striking the wall with a sickly thud. Toc spun round to see Tool, sword upraised, facing the two remaining Seguleh. Senu lay crumpled ten paces away, either unconscious or dead. His two swords were both halfway out of their sheaths.

Standing beside Tool, the ay named Baaljagg was staring at the body, tail wagging.
Lady Envy regarded the other Seguleh with eyes of ice. 'Given that my commands have proved insufficient, I now leave future encounters in the T'lan Imass's obviously capable hands.' She swung to Tool. 'Is Senu dead?'

'No. I used the flat of my blade, Lady, having no desire to slay one of your servants.'

'Considerate of you, given the circumstances.'

Toc closed one shaky hand on the jug's handle. 'Shall I pour one for you as well, Lady Envy?'

She glanced at him, raised one eyebrow, then smiled. 'A splendid idea, Toc the Younger. Clearly, it falls to you and me to establish civility.'

'What have you learned,' Tool said, addressing her, 'of the Rent?'

Cup in hand, she faced him. 'Ah, you cut to the quick in all matters, I see. It has been bridged. By a mortal soul. As I am sure you are aware. The focus of my studies, however, has been on the identity of the warren itself. It is unlike any other. The portal seems almost... mechanical.'

Rent? That would be the red welt in the air. Uh.

'You have examined the K'Chain Che'Malle tombs, Lady?'

She wrinkled her nose. 'Briefly. They are all empty, and have been for some time. Decades.'

Tool's head tilted with a soft creak. 'Only decades?'

'Unpleasant detail, indeed. I believe the Matron experienced considerable difficulty in extricating herself, then spent still further time in recovering from her ordeal, before releasing her children. She and her brood made further efforts in the buried city to the northwest, though incomplete, as if the results proved unsatisfactory. They then appear to have departed the area entirely.' She paused, then added, 'It may be relevant that the Matron was the original soul sealing the Rent. Another hapless creature resides there now, we must presume.'

The T'lan Imass nodded.

During the exchange Toc had been busy eating, and was on his second cup of the crisp, cold wine. Trying to make sense of the conversation thus far was giving him a headache – he'd mull on it later. 'I need to head north,' he said round a mouthful of grainy bread. 'Is there any chance, Lady, that you can furnish me with suitable supplies? I would be in your debt...' His words trailed away at seeing the avid flash in her eyes.

'Careful what you offer, young man—'

'No offence, but why do you call me 'young man'? You look not a day over twenty-five.'

'How flattering. Thus, despite Tool's success in identifying me – and I admit that I find the depth of his knowledge most disconcerting – the names the T'lan Imass revealed meant little to you.'

Toc shrugged. 'Anomander Rake I've heard, of course. I didn't know he took a sword from someone else – nor when that event occurred. It strikes me, however, that you may well be justified in feeling some animosity towards him, since he killed your father – what was his name? Draconus. The Malazan Empire shares that dislike. So, in sharing enemies—'

'We are perforce allies. A reasonable surmise. Unfortunately wrong. Regardless, I would be pleased to provide what food and drink you are able to carry, though I have nothing in the way of weapons, I'm afraid. In return, I may some day ask of you a favour – nothing grand, of course. Something small and relatively painless. Is this acceptable?'

Toc felt his appetite draining away. He glanced at Tool, got no help from the undead warrior's expressionless face. The Malazan scowled. 'You have me at a disadvantage, Lady Envy.'

She smiled.
And here I was hoping we’d get past the polite civility to something more . . . intimate. Here you go again, Toc, thinking with the wrong brain—

Her smile broadened.

Flushing, he reached for his cup. ‘Very well, I agree to your proposal.’

‘Your equanimity is a delight, Toc the Younger.’

He almost choked on his wine. *If I wasn’t a sword-kissed one-eyed bastard, I’d be tempted to call that a flirt.*

Tool spoke. ‘Lady Envy, if you seek further knowledge of this Rent, you will not find it here.’

Toc was pleased to see the mild shock on her face as she swung to the T’lan Imass. ‘Indeed? It appears I am not alone in enjoying a certain coyness. Can you explain?’

Anticipating the response to that, Toc the Younger grunted, then ducked as she flashed him a dark look.

‘Perhaps,’ Tool predictably replied.

*Hah, I knew it.*

An edge came into her tone. ‘Please do so, then.’

‘I follow an ancient trail, Lady Envy. Morn was but one stop on that trail. It now leads northward. You would find your answers among those I seek.’

‘You wish me to accompany you.’

‘I care not either way,’ Tool said in his uninflected rasp. ‘Should you choose to stay here, however, I must warn you. Meddling with the Rent has its risks – even for one such as you.’

She crossed her arms. ‘You think I lack suitable caution?’

‘Even now you have reached an impasse, and your frustration mounts. I add one more incentive, Lady Envy. Your old travelling companions are converging on the very same destination – the Pannion Domin. Both Anomander Rake and Caladan Brood prepare to wage war against the Domin. A grave decision – does that not make you curious?’

‘You are no simple T’lan Imass,’ she accused.

Tool made no reply to that.

‘He has you at a disadvantage, it seems,’ Toc said, barely restraining his amusement.

‘I find impertinence disgustingly unattractive,’ she snapped. ‘Whatever happened to your affable equanimity, Toc the Younger?’

He wondered at his sudden impulse to fling himself down at her feet, begging forgiveness. Shrugging the absurd notion off, he said, ‘Badly stung, I think.’

Her expression softened to something doe-like.

The irrational desire returned. Toc scratched his scar, looked away.

‘I did not intend to sting you—’

*Right, and the Queen of Dreams has chicken feet.*

‘—and I sincerely apologize.’ She faced Tool again. ‘Very well, we shall all of us undertake a journey. How exciting!’ She gestured to her Seguleh servants. ‘Begin preparations at once!’
Tool said to Toc, 'I shall collect materials for your bow and arrows now. We can complete them on the way.'

The scout nodded, then added, 'I wouldn't mind watching you make them, Tool. Could be useful knowledge ...'

The T'lan Imass seemed to consider, then tilted his head. 'We found it so.'

They all turned at a loud grunt from where Senu lay against the wall. He had regained consciousness, to find the ay standing over him, the beast licking with obvious pleasure the painted patterns on his mask.

'The medium,' Tool explained in his usual deadpan tone, 'appears to be a mixture of charcoal, saliva and human blood.'

'Now that,' Toc muttered, 'is what I call a rude awakening.'

Lady Envy brushed close to him as she moved towards the doorway, and cast him a glance as she passed. 'Oh, I am looking forward to this outing!'

The anything but casual contact slipped a nest of serpents into Toc's gut. Despite his thudding heart, the Malazan was not sure if he should be pleased, or terrified.
CHAPTER TWO

Onearm's Host bled from countless wounds. An endless campaign, successive defeats followed by even costlier victories. But of all the wounds borne by the army of Dujek Onearm, those to its soul were the gravest. . .

Silverfox
Outrider Hurlochel

Nestled amidst the rocks and tumbled boulders of the hillside, Corporal Picker watched the old man make his laborious way up the trail. His shadow slipped over Blend's position, yet the man who cast it knew nothing of the soldier's proximity. Blend rose in silence behind him, dust sloughing down, and made a series of hand gestures intended for Picker.

The old man continued on unawares. When he was but a half-dozen paces away, Picker straightened, the grey cloak left by the morning's dust-storm cascading away as she levelled her crossbow. 'Far enough, traveller,' she growled. His surprise sent the old man stumbling back a step. A stone turned underfoot and he pitched to the ground, crying out yet managing to twist to avoid landing atop the leather pack strapped to his back. He skidded another pace down the trail, and found himself almost at Blend's feet.

Picker smiled, stepped forward. 'That'll do,' she said. 'You don't look dangerous, old fella, but just in case, there's five other crossbows trained on you right now. So, how about you tell me what in Hood's name you're doing here?'

Sweat and dust stained the old man's threadbare tunic. His sunburned forehead was broad over a narrow set of features, vanishing into an almost chinless jaw. His snaggled, crooked teeth jutted out in all directions, making his smile an argumentative parody. He pulled his thin, leather-wrapped legs under himself and slowly levered upright. 'A thousand apologies,' he gasped, glancing over a shoulder at Blend. He flinched at what he saw in her eyes, swung hastily back to face Picker. 'I'd thought this trail untenanted – even by thieves. You see, my life's savings are invested in what I carry – I could not afford a guard, nor even a mule—'

'You're a trader, then,' Picker drawled. 'Bound where?'

'Pale. I am from Darujhistan—'

'That's obvious enough,' Picker snapped. 'Thing is, Pale is now in imperial hands... as are these hills.'

'I did not know – about these hills, that is. Of course I am aware that Pale has entered the Malazan embrace —'

Picker grinned at Blend. 'Hear that? An embrace. That's a good one, old man. A motherly hug, right? What's in the sack, then?'

'I am an artisan,' the old man said, ducking his head. 'Uh, a carver of small trinkets. Bone, ivory, jade, serpentine—'

'Anything invested – spells and the like?' the corporal asked. 'Anything blessed?'

'Only by my talents, to answer your first query. I am no mage, and I work alone. I was fortunate, however, in acquiring a priest's blessings on a set of three ivory torcs—'

'What god?'

'Treach, the Tiger of Summer.'

Picker sneered. 'That's not a god, you fool. Treach is a First Hero, a demigod, a Soletaken ascendant—'
'A new temple has been sanctified in his name,' the old man interrupted. 'On the Street of the Hairless Ape, in the Gadrobi Quarter – I myself was hired to punch the leather binding for the Book of Prayers and Rituals.'

Picker rolled her eyes and lowered the crossbow. 'All right, let's see these torcs, then.'

With an eager nod, the old man unslung his pack and set it down before him. He released the lone strap.

'Remember,' Picker grunted, 'if you pull out anything awry you'll get a dozen quarrels airing your skull.'

'This is a pack, not my breeches,' the trader murmured. 'Besides, I thought it was five.'

The corporal scowled.

'Our audience,' Blend said quietly, 'has grown.'

'That's right,' Picker added hastily. 'Two whole squads, hiding, watching your every move.'

With exaggerated caution, the old man drew forth a small packet of twine-wrapped doeskin. 'The ivory is said to be ancient,' he said in a reverent tone. 'From a furred, tusked monster that was once Treach's favoured prey. The beast's corpse was found in frozen mud in distant Elingarth—'

'Never mind all that,' Picker snapped. 'Let's see the damned things.'

The trader's white, wiry eyebrows rose in alarm. 'Damned! No! Not ever! You think I would sell cursed items?'

'Be quiet, it was just a damned expression. Hurry up, we haven't got all damned day.'

Blend made a sound, quickly silenced by a glare from her corporal.

The old man unwrapped the packet, revealing three upper-arm rings, each of one piece and undecorated, polished to a gleaming, pale lustre.

'Where's the blessing marks?'

'None. They were each in turn wrapped within a cloth woven from Treach's own moult-hair – for nine days and ten nights—'

Blend snorted.

'Moult-hair?' The corporal's face twisted. 'What a disgusting thought.'

'Spindle wouldn't think so,' Blend murmured.

'A set of three arm torcs,' Picker mused. 'Right arm, left arm ... then where? And watch your mouth – we're delicate flowers, Blend and me.'

'All for one arm. They are solid, yet they interlock – such was the instruction of the blessing.'

'Interlocking yet seamless – this I have to see.'

'I cannot, alas, demonstrate this sorcery, for it will occur but once, when the purchaser has threaded them onto his – or her – weapon arm.'

'Now that has swindle written all over it.'

'Well, we got him right here,' Blend said. 'Cheats only work if you can make a clean getaway.'

'Like in Pale's crowded markets. Well indeed,' Picker grinned down at the old man, 'we're not in a crowded market, are we? How much?'

The trader squirmed. 'You have selected my most valued work – I'd intended an auction for these—'
'How much, old man?'

'Three hundred g-gold councils.'

'Councils. That's Darujhistan's new coinage, isn't it?'

'Pale's adopted the Malazan jakata as standard weight,' Blend said. 'What's the exchange?'

'Damned if I know,' Picker muttered.

'If you please,' the trader ventured, 'the exchange in Darujhistan is two and one-third jakatas to one council. Broker's fees comprise at least one jakata. Thus, strictly speaking, one and a third.'

Blend shifted her weight, leaned forward for a closer look at the torcs. 'Three hundred councils would keep a family comfortable for a couple of years at least...'

'Such was my goal,' the old man said. 'Although, as I live alone and modestly, I anticipated four or more years, including materials for my craft. Anything less than three hundred councils and I would be ruined.'

'My heart weeps,' Picker said. She glanced over at Blend. 'Who'll miss it?'

The soldier shrugged.

'Rustle up three columns, then.'

'At once, Corporal.' Blend stepped past the old man, moved silently up the trail, then out of sight.

'I beg you,' the trader whined. 'Do not pay me in jakatas—'

'Calm down,' Picker said. 'Oponn's smiling on you today. Now, step away from the pack. I'm obliged to search it.'

Bowing, the old man backed up. 'The rest is of lesser value, I admit. Indeed, somewhat rushed—'

'I'm not looking to buy anything else,' Picker said, rummaging with one hand through the pack. 'This is official, now.'

'Ah, I see. Are some trade items now forbidden in Pale?'

'Counterfeit jakatas, for one. Local economy's taking a beating, and Darujhistan councils aren't much welcome, either. We've had quite a haul this past week.'

The trader's eyes widened. 'You will pay me in counterfeited coin?'

'Tempting, but no. Like I said, Oponn's winked your way.' Finished with her search, Picker stepped back, and pulled out a small wax tablet from her belt-pouch. 'I need to record your name, trader. It's mostly smugglers using these trails, trying to avoid the post at the plains track through the Divide – you're one of the few honest ones, it seems. Those clever smugglers end up paying for their cleverness tenfold on these here trails, when the truth is they'd have a better chance slipping through the chaos at the post.'

'I am named Munug.'

Picker glanced up. 'You poor bastard.'

Blend returned down the trail, three wrapped columns of coins cradled in her arms.

The trader shrugged sheepishly, his eyes on the wrapped coin stacks. 'Those are councils!'

'Aye,' Picker muttered. 'In hundred-columns – you'll probably throw your back lugging them to Pale, not to mention back again. In fact, you needn't bother making the trip at all, now, right?' She fixed him with her eyes as she put the tablet back into the pouch.
'You have a valid point,' Munug conceded, rewrapping the torcs and passing the packet to Blend. 'I shall journey to Pale none the less – to deal the rest of my work.' Eyes shifting nervously, he bared his crooked teeth in a weak smile. 'If Oponn's luck holds, I might well double my take.'

Picker studied the man a moment longer, then shook her head. 'Greed never pays, Munug. I'd lay a wager that in a month's time you'll come wending back down this trail with nothing but dust in your pockets. What say you? Ten councilis.'

'If I lose, you'd have me ten in debt to you.'

'Ah well, I'd consider a trinket or three instead – you've skilled hands, old man, no question of that.'

'Thank you, but I respectfully decline the wager.'

Picker shrugged. 'Too bad. You've another bell of daylight. There's a wayside camp up near the summit – if you're determined enough you might reach it before sunset.'

'I shall make the endeavour.' He slung his arms through the pack's straps, grunted upright, then, with a hesitant nod, moved past the corporal.

'Hold on there,' Picker commanded.

Munug's knees seemed to weaken and the old man almost collapsed. 'Y-yes?' he managed.

Picker took the torcs from Blend. 'I've got to put these on, first. Interlocking, you claimed. But seamless.'

'Oh! Yes, of course. By all means, proceed.'

The corporal rolled back the sleeve of her dusty shirt, revealing, in the heavy wool's underside, its burgundy dye.

Munug's gasp was audible.

Picker smiled. 'That's right, we're Bridgeburners. Amazing what dust disguises, hey?' She worked the ivory rings up her scarred, muscled arm. Between her biceps and shoulder there was a soft click. Frowning, Picker studied the three torcs, then hissed in surprise. 'I'll be damned.'

Munug's smile broadened for the briefest of moments, then he bowed slightly. 'May I now resume my journey?'

'Go on,' she replied, barely paying him any further attention, her eyes studying the gleaming torcs on her arm.

Blend stared after the man for a full minute, a faint frown wrinkling her dusty brow.

Munug found the side-cut in the path a short while later. Glancing back down the trail to confirm for at least the tenth time that he was not followed, he quickly slipped between the two tilting stones that framed the hidden entrance.

The gloomy passage ended after a half-dozen paces, opening out onto a track winding through a high-walled fissure. Shadows swallowed the trader as he scurried down it. Sunset was less than a hundred heartbeats away, he judged – the delay with the Bridgeburners could prove fatal, if he failed to make the appointment.

'After all,' he whispered, 'gods are not known for forgiving natures ...'

The coins were heavy. His heart thumped hard in his chest. He wasn't used to such strenuous efforts. He was an artisan, after all. Down on his luck of late, perhaps, weakened by the tumours between his legs, no doubt, but his talent and vision had if anything grown sharper for all the grief and pain he'd suffered. 'I have chosen you for those very flaws, Munug. That, and your skills, of course. Oh yes, I have great need of your skills ...'
A god’s blessing would surely take care of those tumours. And, if not, then three hundred councils would come close to paying for a Denul healer’s treatment back in Darujhistan. After all, it wasn’t wise to trust solely in a god’s payment for services. Munug’s tale to the Bridgeburners about an auction in Pale was true enough – it paid to fashion options, to map out fall-back plans – and while sculpting and carving were his lesser skills, he was not so modest as to deny the high quality of his work. Of course, they were as nothing compared to his painting. As nothing, nothing at all.

He hastened along the track, ignoring the preternatural mists that closed in around him. Ten paces later, as he passed through the warren’s gate, the clefts and crags of the East Tahlyn Hills disappeared entirely, the mists thinning to reveal a featureless, stony plain beneath a sickly sky. Further out on the plain sat a ragged hide tent, smoke hanging over it in a sea-blue haze. Munug hurried towards it.

Chest labouring, the artisan crouched down before the entrance and scratched on the flap covering it.

A ragged cough sounded from within, then a voice rasped, ‘Enter, mortal.’

Munug crawled in. Thick, acrid smoke assaulted his eyes, nostrils and throat, but after his first breath a cool numbness spread out from his lungs. Keeping his head lowered and eyes averted, Munug stopped just within the entrance, and waited.

‘You are late,’ the god said, wheezing with each breath.

‘Soldiers on the trail, master—’

‘Did they discover it?’

The artisan smiled down at the dirty rushes of the tent floor. ‘No. They searched my pack, as I knew they would, but not my person.’

The god coughed again, and Munug heard a scrape as the brazier was drawn across the floor. Seeds popped on its coals, and the smoke thickened. ‘Show me.’

The artisan reached into the folds of his threadbare tunic and drew forth a thick, book-sized package. He unwrapped it to reveal a stack of wooden cards. Head still lowered and working blind, Munug pushed the cards towards the god, splaying them out as he did so.

He heard the god’s breath catch, then a soft rustle. When it spoke again the voice was closer. ‘Flaws?’

‘Aye, master. One for each card, as you instructed.’

‘Ah, this pleases me. Mortal, your skill is unsurpassed. Truly, these are images of pain and imperfection. They are tortured, fraught with anguish. They assault the eye and bleed the heart. More, I see chronic loneliness in such faces as you have fashioned within the scenes.’ Dry amusement entered its tone. ‘You have painted your own soul, mortal.’

‘I have known little happiness, mast—’

The god hissed. ‘Nor should you expect it! Not in this life, not in the thousand others you are doomed to endure before you attain salvation – assuming you have suffered enough to have earned it!’

‘I beg that there be no release in my suffering, master,’ Munug mumbled.

‘Lies. You dream of comfort and contentment. You carry the gold that you believe will achieve it, and you mean to prostitute your talent to achieve yet more – do not deny this, mortal. I know your soul – I see its avidness and yearning here in these images. Fear not, such emotions amuse me, for they are the paths to despair.’

‘Yes, master.’

‘Now, Munug of Darujhistan, your payment...’
The old man screamed as fire blossomed within the tumours between his legs. Twisting with agony, he curled up tight on the filthy rushes.

The god laughed, the horrible sound breaking into lung-ravaging coughs that were long in passing.

The pain, Munug realized after a while, was fading.

'You are healed, mortal. You are granted more years of your miserable life. Alas, as perfection is anathema to me, so it must be among my cherished children.'

'M-master, I cannot feel my legs!'

'They are dead, I am afraid. Such was the price of curing. It seems, artisan, that you will have a long, wearying crawl to wherever it is you seek to go. Bear in mind, child, that the value lies in the journey, not in the goal achieved.' The god laughed again, triggering yet another fit of coughing.

Knowing he was dismissed, Munug pulled himself around, dragged the dead weight of his lower limbs through the tent entrance, then lay gasping. The pain he now felt came from his own soul. He pulled his pack up alongside him, rested his head on it. The columns of stacked coins were hard against his sweat-runnelled forehead. 'My rewards,' he whispered. 'Blessed is the touch of the Fallen One. Lead me, dear master, down the paths of despair, for I deserve this world's pain in unending bounty ...'

From the tent behind him, the Crippled God's laughter hacked the air. 'Cherish this moment, dear Munug! By your hand, the new game is begun. By your hand, the world shall tremble!'

Munug closed his eyes. 'My rewards ...'

Blend continued staring up the trail long after the trader had disappeared from view. 'He was not,' she muttered, 'as he seemed.'

'None of them are,' Picker agreed, tugging at the torcs on her arm. 'These things are damned tight.'

'Your arm will probably rot and fall off, Corporal.'

She looked up with wide eyes. 'You think they're cursed?'

Blend shrugged. 'If it was me I'd have Quick Ben take a good long peer at them, and sooner not later.'

'Togg's balls, if you'd a suspicion—'

'Didn't say I did, Corporal – it was you complaining they were tight. Can you get them off ?'

She scowled. 'No, damn you.'

'Oh.' Blend looked away.

Picker contemplated giving the woman a good, hard cuff, but it was a thought she entertained at least ten times a day since they'd paired up for this posting, and once again she resisted it. 'Three hundred councils to buy my arm falling off. Wonderful.'

'Think positive, Corporal. It'll give you something to talk about with Dujek.'

'I really do hate you, Blend.'

She offered Picker a bland smile. 'So, did you drop a pebble in that old man's pack, then?'

'Aye, he was fidgety enough to warrant it. He damn near fainted when I called him back, didn't he?'

Blend nodded.

'So,' Picker said, unrolling her sleeve, 'Quick Ben tracks him—'
'Unless he cleans out his pack—'

The corporal grunted. 'He cared less about what was in it than I did. No, whatever serious booty he carried was under his shirt, no doubt about it. Anyway, he'll be sure to put out the word when he gets to Pale – the traffic of smugglers through these hills will drop right off, mark my words and I'll lay coin on that wager – and I threw him the line about better chances at the Divide when you was off collecting the councils.'

Blend's smile broadened. '"Chaos at the crossroads", eh? The only chaos Paran's crew has over there is what to do with all the takings.'

'Let's fix some food – the Moranth will likely be as punctual as usual.'

The two Bridgeburners made their way back up the trail.

An hour after sunset the flight of Black Moranth arrived, descending on their quorls in a slithering flutter of wings to the circle of lanterns Picker and Blend had set out. One of them carried a passenger who clambered off as soon as his quorl's six legs alighted on the stony ground.

Picker grinned at the cursing man. 'Over here, Quick—'

He spun to face her. 'What in Hood's name have you been up to, Corporal?'

Her grin fell away. 'Not much, Wizard. Why?'

The thin, dusk-skinned man glanced over a shoulder at the Black Moranth, then hastened to the position where Picker and Blend waited. He lowered his voice. 'We need to keep things simple, damn it. Coming over the hills I almost fell out of that knobby saddle – there's warrens swirling around down here, power bleeding from everywhere—' He stopped, stepped closer, eyes glittering. 'From you, too, Picker ...'

'Cursed after all,' Blend muttered.

Picker glared at her companion and threw as much sarcasm into her tone as she could muster, 'Just like you suspected all along, right, Blend? You lying—'

'You've acquired the blessing of an ascendant!' Quick Ben accused in a hiss. 'You idiot! Which one, Picker?'

She struggled to swallow with a suddenly dry throat. 'Uh, Treach?'

'Oh, that's just great.'

The corporal scowled. 'What's wrong with Treach? Perfect for a soldier – the Tiger of Summer, the Lord of Battle—'

'Five centuries ago, maybe! Treach veered into his Soletaken form hundreds of years ago – the beast hasn't had a human thought since! It's not just mindless – it's insane, Picker!'

Blend snickered.

The wizard whirled on her. 'What are you laughing at?'

'Nothing. Sorry.'

Picker rolled up her sleeve to reveal the torcs. 'It's these, Quick Ben,' she explained hastily. 'Can you get them off me?'

He recoiled upon seeing the ivory bands, then shook his head. 'If it was a sane, reasonable ascendant, maybe some ... negotiation might be possible. In any case, never mind—'

'Never mind?' Picker reached out and gripped handfuls of raincape. She shook the wizard. 'Never mind? You snivelling worm—' She stopped suddenly, eyes widening.
Quick Ben regarded her with a raised eyebrow. 'What are you doing, Corporal?' he asked softly.

'Uh, sorry, Wizard.' She released him.

Sighing, Quick Ben adjusted his cape. 'Blend, lead the Moranth to the cache.'

'Sure,' she said, ambling towards the waiting warriors.

'Who made the delivery, Corporal?'

'The torcs?'

'Forget the torcs – you're stuck with them. The councils from Darujhistan. Who delivered them?'

'Odd thing, that,' Picker said, shrugging. 'A huge carriage showed up, as if from nowhere. One moment the trail's empty, the next there's six stamping horses and a carriage – Wizard, this trail up here can't manage a two-wheeled cart, much less a carriage. The guards were armed to the teeth, too, and jumpy – I suppose that makes sense, since they were carrying ten thousand councils.'

'Trygalle,' Quick Ben muttered. 'Those people make me nervous ...' After a moment he shook his head. 'Now, my last question. The last tracker you sent off- where is it?'

Picker frowned. 'Don't you know? They're your pebbles, Wizard!'

'Who did you give it to?'

'A carver of trinkets—'

'Trinkets like the one you're wearing on your arm, Corporal?'

'Well, yes, but that was his lone prize – I looked at all the rest and it was good but nothing special,'

Quick Ben glanced over to where the black-armoured Moranth were loading wrapped columns of coin onto their quorls under Blend's smirking gaze. 'Well, I don't think it's gone far. I guess I'll just have to go and find it. Shouldn't take long ...'

She watched him walk off a short distance, then sit cross-legged on the ground.

The night air was growing cold, a west wind arriving from the Tahlyn Mountains. The span of stars overhead had become sharp and crisp. Picker turned and watched the loading. 'Blend,' she called, 'make sure there's two spare saddles besides the wizard's.'

'Of course,' she replied.

The city of Pale wasn't much, but at least the nights were warm. Picker was getting too old to be camping out night after night, sleeping on cold, hard ground. The past week waiting for the delivery had settled a dull ache into her bones. At least, with Darujhistan's generous contribution, Dujek would be able to complete the army's resupply.

With Oponn's luck, they'd be on the march within a week. Off to another Hood-kissed war, as if we ain't weary enough. Fener's hoof, who or what is the Pannion Domin, anyway?

Since leaving Darujhistan eight weeks past, Quick Ben had been attached to Second-in-Command Whiskeyjack's staff, with the task of assisting in the consolidation of Dujek's rebel army. Bureaucracy and minor sorceries seemed strangely well suited to one another. The wizard had been busy weaving a network of communications through Pale and its outlying approaches. Tithes and tariffs, in answer to the army's financial needs, and the imposition of control, easing the transition from occupation to possession. At least for the moment. Onearm's Host and the Malazan Empire had parted ways, after all, yet the wizard had wondered, more than once, at the curiously imperial responsibilities he had been tasked to complete.
Outlaws, are we? Indeed, and Hood dreams of sheep gambolling in green pastures, too.

Dujek was ... waiting. Caladan Brood's army had taken its time coming south, and had only the day before reached the plain north of Pale – Tiste Andii at its heart with mercenaries and Ilgres Barghast on one flank and the Rhivi and their massive bhederin herds on the other.

But there would be no war. Not this time.

No, by the Abyss, we've all decided to fight a new enemy, assuming the parley goes smoothly – and given that Darujhistan's rulers are already negotiating with us, that seems likely. A new enemy. Some theocratic empire devouring city after city in a seemingly unstoppable wave of fanatic ferocity. The Pannion Domin – why do I have a bad feeling about this? Never mind, it's time to find my wayward tracker . . .

Eyes closing, Quick Ben loosed his soul's chains and slipped away from his body. For the moment, he could sense nothing of the innocuous waterworn pebble he'd dipped into his particular host of sorceries, so he had little choice but to fashion his search into an outward spiral, trusting in proximity to brush his senses sooner or later.

It meant proceeding blind, and if there was one thing the wizard hated—

Ah, found you!

Surprisingly close, as if he'd crossed some kind of hidden barrier. His vision showed him nothing but darkness – not a single star visible overhead – but beneath him the ground had levelled out. I'm into a warren, all right. What's alarming is, I don't quite recognize it. Familiar, but wrong.

He discerned a faint reddish glow ahead, rising from the ground. It coincided with the location of his tracker. The smell of sweet smoke was in the tepid air. Quick Ben's unease deepened, but he approached the glow none the less.

The red light bled from a ragged tent, he now saw. A hide flap covered the entrance, but it hung untied. The wizard sensed nothing of what lay within.

He reached the tent, crouched down, then hesitated. Curiosity is my greatest curse, but simple acknowledgement of a flaw does not correct it. Alas. He drew the flap aside and looked inside.

A blanket-wrapped figure sat huddled against the tent's far wall, less than three paces away, leaning over a brazier from which smoke rose in sinuous coils. Its breathing was loud, laboured. A hand that appeared to have had every one of its bones broken lifted into view and gestured. A voice rasped from beneath the hooded blanket. 'Enter, mage. I believe I have something of yours . . .'

Quick Ben accessed his warrens – he could only manage seven at any one time though he possessed more. Power rippled through him in waves. He did so with reluctance – to unveil simultaneously nearly all he possessed filled him with a delicious whisper of omnipotence. Yet he knew that sensation for the dangerous, potentially fatal illusion it was.

'You realize now,' the figure continued between wheezing gasps, 'that you must retrieve it. For one such as myself to hold such a link to your admirable powers, mortal—'

'Who are you?' the wizard asked.

'Broken. Shattered. Chained to this fevered corpse beneath us. I did not ask for such a fate. I was not always a thing of pain ...'

Quick Ben pressed a hand to the earth outside the tent, quested with his powers. After a long moment, his eyes widened, then slowly closed. 'You have infected her.'

'In this realm,' the figure said, 'I am as a cancer. And, with each passing of light, I grow yet more virulent. She cannot awaken, whilst I burgeon in her flesh.' He shifted slightly, and from beneath the folds of filthy blanket came the rustle of heavy chain. 'Your gods have bound me, mortal, and think the task complete.'
'You wish a service in exchange for my tracker,' Quick Ben said.

'Indeed. If I must suffer, then so too must the gods and their world—'

The wizard unleashed his host of warrens. Power ripped through the tent. The figure shrieked, jerking backward. The blanket burst into flame, as did the creature's long, tangled hair. Quick Ben darted into the tent behind the last wave of his sorcery. One hand flashed out, angled down at the wrist, palm up. His fingertips jabbed into the figure's eye-sockets, his palm slamming into its forehead, snapping the head back. Quick Ben's other hand reached out and unerringly scooped up the pebble as it rolled amidst the rushes.

The power of the warrens winked out. Even as the wizard pulled back, pivoted and dived for the entrance, the chained creature bellowed with rage. Quick Ben scrambled to his feet and ran.

The wave struck him from behind, sent him sprawling onto the hot, steaming ground. Screaming, the wizard writhed beneath the sorcerous onslaught. He tried to pull himself further away, but the power was too great. It began dragging him back. He clawed at the ground, stared at the furrows his fingers gouged in the earth, saw the dark blood welling from them.

Oh, Burn, forgive me.

The invisible, implacable grip pulled him closer to the tent entrance. Hunger and rage radiated from the figure within, as well as a certainty that such desires were moments from deliverance.

Quick Ben was helpless.

'You will know such pain!' the god roared.

Something reached up through the earth, then. A massive hand closed about the wizard, like a giant child snatching at a doll. Quick Ben screamed again as it pulled him down into the churning, steaming soil. His mouth filled with bitter earth.

A bellow of fury echoed dimly from above.

Jagged rocks ripped along the wizard's body as he was pulled further down through the flesh of the Sleeping Goddess. Starved of air, darkness slowly closed around his mind.

Then he was coughing, spitting up mouthfuls of gritty mud. Warm, sweet air filled his lungs. He clawed dirt from his eyes, rolled onto his side. Echoing groans buffeted him, the flat, hard ground beneath him slowly buckling and shifting. Quick Ben rose to his hands and knees. Blood dripped from his soul's torn flesh – his clothes were naught but strips – but he was alive. He looked up.

And almost cried out.

A vaguely human-shaped figure towered over him, easily fifteen times the wizard's own height, its bulk nearly reaching the cavern's domed ceiling. Dark flesh of clay studded with rough diamonds gleamed and glittered as the apparition shifted slightly. It seemed to be ignoring Quick Ben – though the wizard knew that it had been this beast that had saved him from the Crippled God. Its arms were raised to the ceiling directly above it, hands disappearing into the murky, red-stained roof. Vast arcs of dull white gleamed in that ceiling, evenly spaced like an endless succession of ribs. The hands appeared to be gripping or possibly were fused to two such ribs.

Just visible beyond the creature, perhaps a thousand paces down the cavern's length, squatted another such apparition, its arms upraised as well.

Twisting, Quick Ben's gaze travelled the opposite length of the cavern. More servants – the wizard saw four, possibly five of them – each one reaching up to the ceiling. The cavern was in fact a vast tunnel, curving in the distance.

I am indeed within Burn, the Sleeping Goddess. A living warren. Flesh, and bone. And these . . . servants ...
'You have my gratitude!' he called up to the creature looming above him.

A flattened, misshapen head tilted down. Diamond eyes stared like descending stars. 'Help us.'

The voice was childlike, filled with despair.

Quick Ben gaped. Help?

'She weakens,' the creature moaned. 'Mother weakens. We die. Help us.'

'How?'

'Help us, please.'

'I-I don't know how.'

'Help.'

Quick Ben staggered upright. The clay flesh, he now saw, was melting, running in wet streams down the giant's thick arms. Chunks of diamond fell away. The Crippled God's killing them, poisoning Burn's flesh. The wizard's thoughts raced. 'Servant, child of Burn! How much time? Until it is too late?'

'Not long,' the creature replied. 'It nears. The moment nears.'

Panic gripped Quick Ben. 'How close? Can you be more specific? I need to know what I can work with, friend. Please try!'

'Very soon. Tens. Tens of years, no more. The moment nears. Help us.'

The wizard sighed. For such powers, it seemed, centuries were as but days. Even so, the enormity of the servant's plea threatened to overwhelm him. As did the threat. What would happen if Burn dies? Beru fend, I don't think I want to find out. All right, then, it's my war, now. He glanced down at the mud-strewn ground around him, questing with his senses. He quickly found the tracker. 'Servant! I will leave something here, so that I may find you again. I will find help – I promise – and I will come back to you—'

'Not me,' the giant said. 'I die. Another will come. Perhaps.' The creature's arms had thinned, were now almost devoid of their diamond armour. 'I die now.' It began to sag. The red stain in the ceiling had spread to the ribs it held, and cracks had begun to show.

'I will find an answer,' Quick Ben whispered. 'I swear it.' He gestured and a warren opened. Without a last glance – lest the vision break his heart – he stepped within, and was gone.

A hand shook his shoulder incessantly. Quick Ben opened his eyes.

'Damn you, mage,' Picker hissed. 'It's almost dawn – we have to fly.'

Groaning, the wizard unfolded his legs, wincing with every move, then let the corporal help him upright.

'Did you get it back?' she demanded as she half carried him to the waiting quorl.

'Get what back?'

'That pebble.'

'No. We're in trouble, Picker—'

'We're always in trouble—'

'No, I mean all of us.' He dug in his heels, stared at her. 'All of us.'

Whatever she saw in his expression left her shaken. 'All right. But right now we've got to get moving.'
'Aye. You'd better strap me in – I won't be able to stay awake.'

They came to the quorl. The Moranth seated in the forward chitinous saddle swung its helmed head to regard them in silence.

'Queen of Dreams,' Picker muttered as she wrapped the leather harness around Quick Ben's limbs. 'I ain't never seen you this scared, Wizard. You got me ready to piss ice-cubes.'

They were the last words of the night that Quick Ben remembered, but remember them he did.

Ganoes Paran was plagued by images of drowning, but not in water. Drowning in darkness. Disorientated, thrashing in panic in an unknown and unknowable place. Whenever he closed his eyes, vertigo seized him, knots tightening in his gut, and it was as if he'd been stripped down to a child once again. Terrified, uncomprehending, his soul twisting with pain.

The captain left the barricade at the Divide, where the day's last traders were still struggling through the press of Malazan guards, soldiers and clerics. He'd done as Dujek had commanded, setting up his encampment across the throat of the pass. Taxation and wagon searches had yielded a substantial haul, although, as the news spread, the takings were diminishing. It was a fine balance, keeping the tax at a level that the merchants could stomach, and allowing enough contraband through lest the chokehold turn to strangulation and travel between Darujhistan and Pale dried up entirely. Paran was managing, but just barely. Yet it was the least of his difficulties.

Since the debacle at Darujhistan, the captain had been feeling adrift, tossed this way and that by the chaotic transformation of Dujek and his renegade army. The Malazans' anchor had been cut away. Support structures had collapsed. The burden upon the officer corps had grown overwhelming. Almost ten thousand soldiers had suddenly acquired an almost childlike need for reassurance.

And reassurance was something Paran was unable to give. If anything, the turmoil within him had deepened. Threads of bestial blood coursed his veins. Fragmented memories – few of them his own – and strange, unearthly visions plagued his nights. Daylight hours passed in a confused haze. Endless problems of materiel and logistics to deal with, the turgid needs of management pushed again and again through the rising flood of physical maladies now besetting him.

He'd been feeling ill for weeks, and Paran had his suspicions as to the source. *The blood of the Hound of Shadow. A creature that plunged into Dark's own realm . . . yet can I be sure of this? The emotions frothing this crest . . . more like a child's. A child's...*

He pushed the thought away once more, knowing full well it would soon return – even as the pain in his stomach flared once again – and, with another glance up to where Trotts held sentinel position, continued making his way up the hillside.

The pain of illness had changed him – he could see that within himself, conjured as an image, a scene both peculiar and poignant. He felt as if his own soul had been reduced into something piteous – a bedraggled, sweat-smeared rat, trapped within a rock-fall, twisting and squirming through cracks in a desperate search for a place where the pressure – the vast, shifting weight – relented. *A space in which to breathe. And the pain all around me, those sharp stones, are settling, still settling, the spaces between them vanishing . . . darkness rising like water ...*

Whatever triumphs had been achieved in Darujhistan now seemed trivial to Paran. Saving a city, saving the lives of Whiskeyjack and his squad, the shattering of Laseen's plans, they had one and all crumbled into ash in the captain's mind.

He was not as he had been, and this new shaping was not to his liking.

Pain darkened the world. Pain dislocated. Turned one's own flesh and bones into a stranger's house, from which no escape seemed possible.
Bestial blood . . . it whispers of freedom. Whispers of a way out – but not from the darkness. No. Into that darkness, where the Hounds went, deep into the heart of Anomander Rake’s cursed sword – the secret heart of Dragniipur.

He almost cursed aloud at that thought, as he worked his way along the hillside trail overlooking the Divide. Day's light was fading. The wind combing the grasses had begun to fall away, the rasping voice retreating to a murmur.

The blood's whisper was but one of many, each demanding his attention, each offering contradictory invitations – disparate paths of escape. But always escape. Flight. This cowering creature can think of nothing else . . . even as the burdens settle . . . and settle.

Dislocation. All I see around me . . . feels like someone else's memories. Grass woven on low hills, outcrops of bedrock studding the summits, and when the sun sets and the wind cools, the sweat on my face dries, and darkness comes – and I drink its air as if it was the sweetest water. Gods, what does that mean?

The confusion within him would not settle. I escaped the world of that sword, yet I feel its chains about me none the less, drawing ever tighter. And within that tension, there was an expectation. Of surrender, of yielding . . . an expectation to become ... what? Become what?

The Barghast sat amidst high, tawny grasses on a summit overlooking the Divide. The day's flow of traders had begun to ebb on both sides of the barricade, the clouds of dust fading over the rutted road. Others were setting up camps – the throat of the pass was turning into an unofficial wayside. If the situation remained as it was, the wayside would take root, become a hamlet, then a village.

But it won't happen. We're too restless for that. Dujek's mapped out our immediate future, shrouded in the dust of an army on the march. Even worse, there're creases in that map, and it's starting to look like the Bridgeburners are about to fall into one. A deep one.

Breathless and fighting yet more twinges, Captain Paran moved to crouch down beside the half-naked, tattooed warrior. 'You've been strutting like a bull bhederin since this morning, Trotts,' he said. 'What have you and Whiskeyjack brewed up, soldier?'

The Barghast's thin, wide mouth twisted into something like a smile, his dark eyes remaining fixed on the scene down in the valley. 'The cold darkness ends,' he growled.

'To Hood it does – the sun's moments from setting, you grease-smeared fool.'

'Cold and frozen,' Trotts continued. 'Blind to the world. I am the Tale, and the Tale has been unspoken for too long. But no longer. I am a sword about to leave its scabbard. I am iron, and in the day's light I shall blind you all. Hah.'

Paran spat into the grasses. 'Mallet mentioned your sudden ... loquaciousness. He also mentioned that it hasn't done anyone else any good, since with its arrival you've lost what little sense you showed before then.'

The Barghast thumped his chest, the sound reverberating like a drumbeat. 'I am the Tale, and soon it shall be told. You will see, Malazan. You all will.'

'The sun's withered your brain, Trotts. Well, we're heading back to Pale tonight – though I'd imagine Whiskeyjack's already told you that. Here comes Hedge to relieve you as lookout.' Paran straightened, disguising the wince that came with the movement. 'I'll just finish my rounds, then.'

He trudged off.

Damn you, Whiskeyjack, what have you and Dujek cooked up? The Pannion Domin . . . why are we sparing a mole's ass for some upstart zealots? These things burn out. Every time. They implode. The scroll scribblers take over – they always do – and start arguing obscure details of the faith. Sects form. Civil war erupts, and there it is, just one more dead flower trampled on history's endless road.

Aye, it's all so bright and flushed right now. Only, colours fade. They always do.
One day, the Malazan Empire will come face to face with its own mortality. One day, dusk will fall on the empire.

He bent over as yet another knot of burning pain seized his stomach. No, dunk not of the empire! Think not of Laseen's cull! Trust in Tavore, Ganoes Paran – your sister will salvage the House. Better than you might have managed. Far better. Trust in your sister... The pain eased slightly. Drawing a deep breath, the captain resumed making his way down to the crossing.

Drowning. By the Abyss, I am drowning.

Clambering like a rock ape, Hedge reached the summit. His bandy legs carried him to the Barghast's side. As he passed behind Trotts he reached out and gave the warrior's single knotted braid a sharp tug. 'Hah,' he said, moving to settle down beside the warrior, 'I love the way your eyes bug out when I do that.'

'You, sapper,' the Barghast said, 'are the scum beneath a pebble in a stream running through a field of sickly pigs.'

'Good one, though a tad longwinded. Got the captain's head spinning, have ya?'

Trotts said nothing, his gaze now on the distant Tahlyn Mountains.

Hedge pulled his scorched leather cap from his head, scratched vigorously through the few remaining wisps of hair on his pate, studied his companion for a long moment. 'Not bad,' he judged. 'Noble and mysterious. I'm impressed.'

'You should be. Such poses are not easy to hold, you know.'

'You're a natural. So why are you twisting Paran around?'

Trotts grinned, revealing a blue-stained row of filed teeth. 'It is fun. Besides, it's up to Whiskeyjack to explain things—'

'Only he ain't done any explaining yet. Dujek wants us back in Pale, gathering up what's left of the Bridgeburners. Paran should be happy he's getting a company to command again, instead of just a couple of beat-up squads. Did Whiskeyjack say anything about the upcoming parley with Brood?'

Trotts slowly nodded.

Hedge scowled. 'Well, what?'

'It is coming up.'

'Oh, thanks for that. By the way, you're officially relieved of this post, soldier. They're cooking up a bhederin carcass for you down there. I had the cook stuff it with dung since that's how you like it.'

Trotts rose. 'One day I may cook and eat you, sapper.'

'And choke to death on my lucky bone.'

The Barghast frowned. 'My offer was true, Hedge. To honour you, my friend.'

The sapper squinted up at Trotts, then grinned. 'Bastard! You almost had me there!'

Sniffing, Trotts turned away. "Almost", he said. Hah hah.'

Whiskeyjack was waiting when Paran returned to the trader post and its makeshift barricade. Once sergeant, now Dujek Onearm's second-in-command, the grizzled veteran had come in with the last flight of Moranth. He stood with his old squad's healer, Mallet, the two of them watching a score of soldiers from the 2nd Army loading the past week's toll onto the quorls. Paran approached, walking cautiously so as to hide the pain within
'How fares the leg, Commander?' he asked.

Whiskeyjack shrugged.

'We were just discussing that,' Mallet said, his round face flushed. 'It's healed badly. Needs serious attention —'

'Later,' the bearded commander growled. 'Captain Paran, have the squads assembled in two bells – have you decided what to do with what's left of the Ninth?'

'Aye, they'll join what's left of Sergeant Antsy's squad.'

Whiskeyjack frowned. 'Give me some names.'

'Antsy's got Corporal Picker, and ... let's see ... Spindle, Blend, Detoran. So, with Mallet here, and Hedge, Trotts and Quick Ben—'

'Quick Ben and Spindle are now cadre mages, Captain. But you'll have them with your company in any case. Otherwise, I'd guess Antsy will be happy enough—'

Mallet snorted. 'Happy? Antsy don't know the meaning of the word.'

Paran's eyes narrowed. 'I take it, then, that the Bridgeburners won't be marching with the rest of the Host.'

'No, you won't be – we'll go into that back at Pale, though.' Whiskeyjack's flat grey eyes studied the captain for a moment, then slid away. 'There's thirty-eight Bridgeburners left – not much of a company. If you prefer, Captain, you can decline the position. There's a few companies of elite marines short on officers, and they're used to noble-borns commanding them ...'

There was silence.

Paran turned away. Dusk was coming, the valley's shadow rising up the slopes of the surrounding hillsides, a spatter of dim stars emerging from the sky's dome. I might take a knife in the back, is what he's telling me. Bridgeburners have an abiding dislike for noble-born officers. A year ago he would have spoken those words out loud, in the belief that baring ugly truths was a good thing to do. The misguided notion that it was the soldier's way . . . when in fact it's the opposite that is a soldier's way. In a world full of pitfalls and sinkholes, you dance the edges. Only fools jump feet first, and fools don't live long besides. He'd felt knives enter his body once. Wounds that should have been fatal. The memory sheathed him in sweat. The threat was not something he could simply shrug off in a display of youthful, ignorant bravado. He knew that, and the two men facing him knew it as well. 'I still,' Paran said, eyes on the darkness devouring the south road, 'would consider it an honour to command the Bridgeburners, sir. Perhaps, in time, I might have the opportunity to prove myself worthy of such soldiers.'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'As you like, Captain. The offer remains open if you change your mind.'

Paran faced him.

The commander grinned. 'For a little while longer, anyway.'

A huge, dark-skinned figure emerged from the gloom, her weapons and armour softly clinking. Seeing both Whiskeyjack and Paran, the woman hesitated, then, fixing her gaze on the commander, she said, 'The watch is being turned over, sir. We're all coming in, as ordered.'

'Why are you telling me, soldier?' Whiskeyjack rumbled. 'You talk to your immediate superior.'

The woman scowled, pivoted to face Paran. 'The watch—'

'I heard, Detoran. Have the Bridgeburners get their gear and assemble in the compound.'
‘It’s still a bell and a half before we leave—’
‘I’m aware of that, soldier.’
‘Yes, sir. At once, sir.’
The woman ambled off.
Whiskeyjack sighed. ‘About that offer—’

‘My tutor was Napan,’ Paran said. ‘I’ve yet to meet a Napan who knows the meaning of respect, and Detoran’s no exception. I’m also aware,’ he continued, ‘that she’s no exception as far as Bridgeburners go, either.’

‘It seems your tutor taught you well,’ Whiskeyjack muttered.
Paran frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘His disrespect for authority’s rubbed off, Captain. You just interrupted your commander.’

‘Uh, my apologies. I keep forgetting you’re not a sergeant any more.’

‘So do I, which is why I need people like you to get it right.’ The veteran turned to Mallet. ‘Remember what I said, Healer.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Whiskeyjack glanced once more at Paran. ‘The hurry up and wait was a good touch, Captain. Soldiers love to stew.’

Paran watched the man head off towards the gatehouse, then said to Mallet, ‘Your private discussion with the commander, Healer. Anything I should know?’

Mallet’s blink was sleepy. ‘No, sir.’

‘Very well. You may rejoin your squad.’

‘Yes, sir.’

When he was alone, Paran sighed. Thirty-eight bitter, resentful veterans, already twice betrayed. I wasn’t part of the treachery at the siege of Pale, and Laseen’s proclamation of outlawry embraced me as much as it did them. Neither event can be laid at my feet, yet they’re doing it anyway.

He rubbed at his eyes. Sleep had become an ... unwelcome thing. Night after night, ever since their flight from Darujhistan ... pain – and dreams, no, nightmares. Gods below . . . He spent the dark hours twisted beneath his blankets, his blood racing through him, acids bubbling in his stomach, and when consciousness finally slipped from him, his sleep was fitful, racked with dreams of running. Running on all fours. Then drowning.

It’s the blood of the Hound, coursing undiminished within me. It must be.

He had tried to tell himself more than once that the Shadow Hound’s blood was also the source of his paranoia. The thought elicited a sour grin. Untrue. What I fear is all too real. Worse, this vast sense of loss . . . without the ability to trust – anyone. Without that, what do I see in the life awaiting me? Naught but solitude, and thus, nothing of value. And now, all these voices . . . whispering of escape. Escape.

He shook himself, spat to clear the sour phlegm in his throat. Think of that other thing, that other scene. Solitary. Baffling. Remember, Paran, the voice you heard. It was Tattersail’s – you did not doubt it then, why do so now? She lives. Somehow, some way, the sorceress lives . . .

Ahh, the pain! A child screaming in darkness, a Hound howling lost in sorrow. A soul nailed to the heart of a wound . . . and I think myself alone! Gods, I wish I were!
Whiskeyjack entered the gatehouse, closed the door behind him and strode over to the scribe’s table. He leaned against it, stretched out his aching leg. His sigh was like the easing of endless knots, and when it was done he was trembling.

After a moment the door opened.

Straightening, Whiskeyjack scowled at Mallet. ‘I thought your captain’d called for an assembly, Healer—’

‘Paran’s in worse shape than even you, sir.’

‘We’ve covered this. Guard the lad’s back – you having second thoughts, Mallet?’

‘You misunderstand. I just quested in his direction – my Denul warren recoiled, Commander.’

Whiskeyjack only now noted the pallid cast of the healer’s round face. ‘Recoiled?’

‘Aye. That’s never happened before. The captain’s sick.’

‘Tumours? Cancers? Be specific, damn it!’

‘Nothing like that, sir. Not yet, but they’ll come. He’s eaten a hole in his own gut. All that he’s holding in, I guess. But there’s more – we need Quick Ben. Paran’s got sorceries running through him like fireweed roots.’

‘Oponn—’

‘No, the Twin Jesters are long gone. Paran’s journey to Darujhistan – something happened to him on the way. No, not something. Lots of things. Anyway, he’s fighting those sorceries, and that’s what’s killing him. I could be wrong in that, sir. We need Quick Ben—’

‘I hear you. Get him on it when we get to Pale. But make sure he’s subtle. No point in adding to the captain’s unease.’

Mallet’s frown deepened. ‘Sir, it’s just... Is he in any shape to take command of the Bridgeburners?’

‘You’re asking me? If you want to talk to Dujek about your concerns, that’s your prerogative, Healer. If you think Paran’s unfit for duty – do you, Mallet?’

After a long moment, the man sighed. ‘Not yet, I suppose. He’s as stubborn as you are ... sir. Hood, you sure you two aren’t related?’

‘Damned sure,’ Whiskeyjack growled. ‘Your average camp dog has purer blood than what’s in my family line. Let it rest for now, then. Talk to Quick and Spindle. See what you can find out about those hidden sorceries – if gods are plucking Paran’s strings again, I want to know who, and then we can mull on why.’

Mallet’s eyes thinned as he studied the commander. ‘Sir, what are we heading into?’

‘I’m not sure, Healer,’ Whiskeyjack admitted with a grimace. Grunting, he shifted weight off his bad leg. ‘With Oponn’s luck I won’t have to pull a sword – commanders usually don’t, do they?’

‘If you gave me the time, sir—’

‘Later, Mallet. Right now I’ve got a parley to think about. Brood and his army’s arrived outside Pale.’

‘Aye.’

‘And your captain’s probably wondering where in Hood’s name you’ve disappeared to. Get out of here, Mallet. I’ll see you again after the parley.’

‘Yes, sir.’
CHAPTER THREE

Dujek Onearm and his army awaited the arrival of Caladan Brood and his allies: the fell Tiste Andii, Barghast clans from the far north, a half-score mercenary contingents, and the plains-dwelling Rhivi. There, on the still raw killing ground outside the city of Pale, the two forces would meet. Not to wage war, but to carve from bitter history, peace. Neither Dujek nor Brood, nor anyone else among their legendary company, could have anticipated the ensuing clash – not of swords, but of worlds ...

Confessions of Artanthos

Shallow ridges ribboned the hillsides a league north of Pale, barely healed scars of a time when the city's presumptions reached out to devour the steppe bordersing the Rhivi Plain. Since memories began the hills had been sacred to the Rhivi. Pale's farmers had paid for their temerity with blood.

Yet the land was slow to heal; few of the ancient menhirs, boulder rings and flat-stone crypts remained in place. The stones were now haphazardly piled into meaningless cairns alongside what used to be terraced fields of maize. All that was sacred in these hills was held so only within the minds of the Rhivi.

As in faith, so we are in truth. The Mhybe drew the antelope hide closer about her thin, bony shoulders. A new array of pains and aches mapped her frame this morning, evidence that the child had drawn more from her in the night just past. The old woman told herself she felt no resentment – such needs could not be circumvented, and there was little in the child that was natural in any case. Vast, cold-hearted spirits and the blind spells of sorcery had conspired to carve into being something new, unique.

And time was growing short, so very short.

The Mhybe's dark eyes glittered within their nests of wrinkles as she watched the child scampering over the weathered terraces. A mother's instincts ever abided. It was not right to curse them, to lash out at the bindings of love that came in the division of flesh. For all the flaws raging within her, and for all the twisted demands woven into her daughter, the Mhybe could not – would not – spin webs of hate.

None the less, the withering of her body weakened the gifts of the heart to which she so desperately clung. Less than a season past, the Mhybe had been a young woman, not yet wedded. She had been proud, unwilling to accept the half-braids of grass that numerous young, virile men had set down before the entrance to her tent – not yet ready to entwine her own braid and thus bind herself to marriage.

The Rhivi were a damaged people – how could one think of husband and family in this time of endless, devastating war? She was not as blind as her sister-kin; she did not embrace the supposed spirit-blessed duty to produce sons to feed into the ground before the Reaper's Plough. Her mother had been a reader of bones, gifted with the ability to hold the people's entire repository of memories – every lineage, reaching back to the Dying Spirit's Tear. And her father had held the Spear of War, first against the White Face Barghast, then against the Malazan Empire.

She missed them both, deeply, yet understood how their deaths, and her own defiance of accepting a man's touch, had together conspired to make her the ideal choice in the eyes of the host of spirits. An untethered vessel, a vessel in which to place two shattered souls – one beyond death and the other held back from death through ancient sorceries, two identities braided together – a vessel that would be used to feed the unnatural child thus created.

Among the Rhivi, who travelled with the herds and raised no walls of stone or brick, such a container, intended for a singular use after which it would be discarded, was called a mhybe, and so she had found herself a new name, and now every truth of her life was held within it.

Old without wisdom, weathered without the gift of years, yet I am expected to guide this child – this creature
– who gains a season with every one I lose, for whom weaning will mean my death. Look at her now, playing the games a child would play; she smiles all unknowing of the price her existence, her growth, demands of me.

The Mhybe heard footsteps behind her, and a moment later a tall, black-skinned woman arrived to stand beside the Rhivi. The newcomer's angled eyes held on the child playing on the hillside. The prairie wind sent strands of long black hair over her face. Fine, scaled armour glinted from beneath her black-dyed, rawhide shirt.

'Deceptive,' the Tiste Andii woman murmured, 'is she not?'

The Mhybe sighed, then nodded.

'Hardly a thing to generate fear,' the midnight-skinned woman continued, 'or be the focus of searing arguments ...'

'There have been more, then?'

'Aye. Kallor renews his assault.'

The Mhybe stiffened. She looked up at the Tiste Andii. 'And? Has there been a change, Korlat?'

'Brood remains steadfast,' Korlat replied after a moment. She shrugged. 'If he has doubts, he hides them well.'

'He has,' the Mhybe said. 'Yet his need for the Rhivi and our herds outweighs them still. This is calculation, not faith. Will such need remain, once an alliance with the one-armed Malazan is fashioned?'

'It is hoped,' Korlat ventured, 'that the Malazans will possess more knowledge of the child's origins—'

'Enough to alleviate the potential threat? You must make Brood understand, Korlat, that what the two souls once were is nothing to what they have become.' Her eyes on the playing child, the Mhybe continued, 'She was created within the influence of a T'lan Imass – its timeless warren became the binding threads, and were so woven by an Imass bonecaster – a bonecaster of flesh and blood, Korlat. This child belongs to the T'lan Imass. She may well be clothed in the flesh of a Rhivi, and she may well contain the souls of two Malazan mages, but she is now a Soletaken, and more – a Bonecaster. And even these truths but brush the edges of what she will become. Tell me, what need have the immortal T'lan Imass for a flesh and blood Bonecaster?'

Korlat's grimace was wry. 'I am not the person to ask.'

'Nor are the Malazans.'

'Are you certain of that? Did not the T'lan Imass march under Malazan banners?'

'Yet they do so no longer, Korlat. What hidden breach exists between them now? What secret motives might lie beneath all that the Malazans advise? We have no way of guessing, have we?'

'I imagine Caladan Brood is aware of such possibilities,' the Tiste Andii said drily. 'In any case, you may witness and partake in these matters, Mhybe. The Malazan contingent approaches, and the Warlord seeks your presence at the parley.'

The Mhybe turned about. Caladan Brood's encampment stretched out before her, precisely organized as usual. Mercenary elements to the west, the Tiste Andii holding the centre, and her own Rhivi camps and the bhederin herds to the east. The march had been a long one, from the Old King Plateau, through the cities of Cat and then Patch, and finally onto the south-wending old Rhivi Trail crossing the plain that was the Rhivi's traditional home. A home torn apart by years of war, of marching armies and the incendiaries of the Moranth falling from the sky . . . quorls whirling in black-specked silence, horror descending on our camps . . . our sacred herds.

Yet now, we are to clasp wrists with our enemy. With the Malazan invaders and the cold-blooded Moranth, we are to weave braids of marriage – our two armies – jaws locked on one another's throats for so long, but a
marriage not in the name of peace. No, these warriors now seek another enemy, a new enemy ...

Beyond Brood's army to the south rose the recently mended walls of Pale, the stains of violence a chilling reminder of Malazan sorceries. A knot of riders had just departed from the city's north gate, an unmarked grey banner announcing their outlawry for all to see as they slowly rode across the bare killing ground towards Brood's encampment.

The Mhybe's gaze narrowed suspiciously on that pennant. Old woman, your fears are a curse. Think not of mistrust, think not of the horrors visited upon us by these once-invaders. Dujek Onearm and his Host have been outlawed by the hated Empress. One campaign has ended. A new one begins. Spirits below, shall we ever see an end to war?

The child joined the two women. The Mhybe glanced down at her, saw within the steady, unwavering eyes of the girl a knowledge and wisdom that seemed born of millennia – and perhaps it was indeed so. Here we three stand, for all to see – a child of ten or eleven years, a woman of youthful visage with unhuman eyes, and a bent old woman – and it is, in every detail, an illusion, for what lies within us is reversed. I am the child. The Tiste Andii has known thousands of years of life, and the girl… hundreds of thousands.

Korlat had also looked down at the child. The Tiste Andii smiled. 'Did you enjoy your play, Silverfox?'

'For a time,' the girl replied in a voice surprisingly low. 'But I grew sad.'

Korlat's brows rose. 'And why is that?'

'There was once a sacred trust here – between these hills and spirits of the Rhivi. It is now broken. The spirits were naught but untethered vessels of loss and pain. The hills will not heal.'

The Mhybe felt her blood turn to ice. Increasingly, the child was revealing a sensitivity to rival the wisest shoulderwoman among the tribes. Yet there was a certain coolness to that sensitivity, as if a hidden intent lay behind every compassionate word. 'Can nothing be done, daughter?'

Silverfox shrugged. 'It is no longer necessary.'

Such as now. 'What do you mean?'

The round-faced girl smiled up at the Mhybe. 'If we are to witness the parley, Mother, we'd best hurry.'

The place of meeting was thirty paces beyond the outermost pickets, situated on a low rise. The recent barrows that had been raised to dispose of the dead after the fall of Pale were visible to the west. The Mhybe wondered if those countless victims now watched from afar the scene unfolding before her. Spirits are born of spilled blood, after all. And without propitiation, they often twist into inimical forces, plagued by nightmare visions and filled with spite. Is it only the Rhivi who know these truths?

From war to alliance – how would such ghosts look upon this?

'They feel betrayed,' Silverfox said beside her. 'I will answer them, Mother.' She reached out to take the Mhybe's hand as they walked. 'This is a time for memories. Ancient memories, and recent memories …'

'And you, daughter,' the Mhybe asked in a low, febrile tone, 'are you the bridge between the two?'

'You are wise, Mother, despite your own lack of faith in yourself. The hidden is slowly revealed. Look on these once-enemies. You fight in your mind, raising up all the differences between us, you struggle to hold on to your dislike, your hatred of them, for that is what is familiar. Memories are the foundations of such hatred. But, Mother, memories hold another truth, a secret one, and that is all that we have experienced, yes?'

The Mhybe nodded. 'So our elders tell us, daughter,' she said, biting back a faint irritation.

'Experiences. They are what we share. From opposite sides, perhaps, but they are the same. The same.'

'I know this, Silverfox. Blame is meaningless. We are all pulled, as tides are pulled by an unseen, implacable
The girl's hand tightened in the Mhybe's hand. 'Then ask Korlat, Mother, what her memories tell her.'

Glancing over at the Tiste Andii, the Rhivi woman raised her brows and said, 'You have been listening, yet saying nothing. What reply does my daughter expect from you?'

Korlat's smile was wistful. 'Experiences are the same. Between your two armies, indeed. But also ... across the breadth of time. Among all who possess memories, whether an individual or a people, life's lessons are ever the same lessons.' The Tiste Andii's now-violet eyes rested on Silverfox. 'Even among the T'lan Imass – is this what you are telling us, child?'

She shrugged. 'In all that is to come, think on forgiveness. Hold to it, but know too that it must not always be freely given.' Silverfox swung her sleepy gaze to Korlat and the dark eyes suddenly hardened. 'Sometimes forgiveness must be denied.'

Silence followed. *Dear spirits, guide us. This child frightens me. Indeed, I can understand Kallor . . . and that is more worrying than anything else.*

They came to a halt far to one side of the place of parley just beyond the pickets of Brood's encampment.

Moments later, the Malazans reached the rise. There were four of them. The Mhybe had no difficulty in recognizing Dujek, the now-renegade High Fist. The one-armed man was older than she had expected, however, and he sat in the saddle of his roan gelding as would a man pained with old aches and stiff bones. He was thin, of average height, wearing plain armour and an undecorated standard-issue shortsword strapped to his belt. His narrow, hatchet face was beardless, displaying a lifetime of battle scars. He wore no helmet, the only indication of rank being his long grey cape and its silver-wrought fastening.

At Dujek's left side rode another officer, grey-bearded and solidly built. A visored helm with a chain camail disguised much of his features, but the Mhybe sensed in him an immeasurable strength of will. He sat straight in his saddle, though she noted that his left leg was held awkwardly, the boot not in the stirrup. The chain of his calf-length hauberk was battered and ribboned with leather stitches. That he sat on Dujek's unprotected left side was not lost on the Mhybe.

To the renegade High Fist's right sat a young man, evidently an aide of some sort. He was nondescript, yet she saw that his eyes roved ceaselessly, taking in details of all that he saw. It was this man who held the outlawry pennon in one leather-gloved hand.

The fourth rider was a Black Moranth, entirely encased in chitinous armour, and that armour was badly damaged. The warrior had lost all four fingers of his right hand, yet he continued to wear what was left of its gauntlet. Countless sword-slashes marred the gleaming black armour.

Korlat grunted softly beside her. 'That's a hard-bitten lot, wouldn't you say?'

The Mhybe nodded. 'Who is that on Dujek Onearm's left?'

'Whiskeyjack, I would imagine,' the Tiste Andii replied with a wry smile. 'Cuts quite a figure, doesn't he?'

For a moment the Mhybe felt like the young woman that she was in truth. She wrinkled her nose. 'Rhivi aren't that hairy, thank the spirits.'

'Even so ...'

'Aye, even so.'

Silverfox spoke. 'I would like him for an uncle.'

The two women looked down at her in surprise.

'An uncle?' the Mhybe asked.
The girl nodded. 'You can trust him. While the one-armed old man is hiding something – well, no, they both are and it's the same secret, yet I trust the bearded one any-way. The Moranth – he laughs inside. Always laughs, and no-one knows this. Not a cruel laugh, but one filled with sorrow. And the one with the banner ...' Silverfox frowned. 'I am uncertain of him. I think I always have been ...'

The Mhybe met Korlat's eyes over the girl's head.

'I suggest,' the Tiste Andii said, 'we move closer.'

As they approached the rise two figures emerged from the picket line, followed by an outrider bearing a pennon-less standard, all on foot. Seeing them, the Mhybe wondered what the Malazans would make of the two warriors in the lead. There was Barghast blood in Caladan Brood, reflected in his tall, hulking form and his wide, flat face; and something else besides, something not quite human. The man was huge, well matched to the iron hammer strapped to his back. He and Dujek had been duelling on this continent for over twelve years, a clash of wills that had seen more than a score pitched battles and as many sieges. Both soldiers had faced dire odds more than once, yet had come through, bloodied but alive. They had long since taken the measure of the other on fields of battle, but now, finally, they were about to come face to face.

At Brood's side strode Kallor, tall, gaunt and grey. His full-length surcoat of chain glittered in the morning's diffuse light. A plain bastard sword hung from the iron rings of his harness, swinging in time with his heavy steps. If any player in this deadly game had remained a mystery to the Mhybe, it was the self-named High King. Indeed, all the Rhivi woman could be certain of was Kallor's hatred for Silverfox, a hatred bred of fear, and perhaps a knowledge that the man alone possessed – a knowledge he was unwilling to share with anyone. Kallor claimed to have lived through millennia, claimed to have once ruled an empire that he himself had finally destroyed, for reasons he would not reveal. Yet he was not an ascendant – his longevity probably came from alchemies, and was anything but perfect, for his face and body were as ravaged as those of a mortal man who was nearing a century of life.

Brood made use of Kallor's knowledge of tactics, what seemed an instinctive mastery of the sweep and shift of vast campaigns, but for the High King it was clear to all that such contests were but passing games, attended to with distraction and barely veiled disinterest. Kallor commanded no loyalty among the soldiers. Grudging respect was all the man achieved, and, the Mhybe suspected, all he ever had achieved, or ever would.

His expression now, as he and Brood reached the rise, revealed disdain and contempt as he regarded Dujek, Whiskeyjack, and the Moranth commander. It would be a struggle not to take offence, yet all three Malazans seemed to be ignoring the High King as they dismounted, their attention fixed unwaveringly on Caladan Brood.

Dujek Onearm stepped forward. 'Greetings, Warlord. Permit me to introduce my modest contingent. Second-in-command Whiskeyjack. Aranthos, my present standard-bearer. And the leader of the Black Moranth, whose title translates into something like Achievant, and whose name is entirely unpronounceable.' The renegade High Fist grinned over at the armoured figure. 'Since he shook hands with a Rhivi spirit up in Blackdog Forest, we've taken to calling him Twist.'

'Aranthos ...' Silverfox quietly murmured. 'He's not used that name in a long time. Nor is he as he appears.'

'If an illusion,' Korlat whispered, 'then it is masterful. I sense nothing untowards.'

The child nodded. 'The prairie air's ... rejuvenated him.'

'Who is he, daughter?' the Mhybe asked.

'A chimera, in truth.'

Following Dujek's words, Brood grunted and said, 'At my side is Kallor, my second-in-command. On behalf of the Tiste Andii is Korlat. Of the Rhivi, the Mhybe and her young charge. Bearing what's left of my standard is Outrider Hurlochel.'

Dujek was frowning. 'Where is the Crimson Guard?'

'Prince K'azz D'Avore and his forces are attending to internal matters, for the moment, High Fist. They will
not be joining our efforts against the Pannion Domin.'

'Too bad,' Dujek muttered.

Brood shrugged. 'Auxiliary units have been assembled to replace them. A Saltoan Horse Regiment, four clans of the Barghast, a mercenary company from One Eye Cat, and another from Mott—'

Whiskeyjack seemed to choke. He coughed, then shook his head. 'That wouldn't be the Mott Irregulars, Warlord, would it?'

Brood's smile revealed filed teeth. 'Aye, you've some experience with them, haven't you, Commander? When you soldiered among the Bridgeburners.'

'They were a handful,' Whiskeyjack agreed, 'though not just in a fight – they spent most of their time stealing our supplies then running away, as I recall.'

'A talent for logistics, we called it,' Kallor commented.

'I trust,' Brood said to Dujek, 'that the arrangements with Darujhistan's Council have proved satisfactory.'

'They have, Warlord. Their ... donations ... have allowed us to fulfil our resupply needs.'

'I believe a delegation is on its way from Darujhistan and should be here in a short while,' Brood added. 'Should you require additional assistance . . .'

'Generous of them,' the High Fist said, nodding.

'The command tent awaits us,' the warlord said. 'There are details that need to be discussed.'

'As you say,' Dujek agreed. 'Warlord, we have battled one another for a long time – I look forward to fighting side by side for a change. Let us hope the Pannion Domin proves a worthy foe.'

Brood grimaced. 'But not too worthy.'

'Granted,' Dujek said, grinning.

Still standing slightly apart with the Tiste Andii and the Mhybe, Silverfox smiled and spoke quietly. 'So we have it. They have locked gazes. Taken the measure of the other... and both are pleased.'

'A remarkable alliance, this,' Korlat muttered with a faint shake of her head. 'To so easily relinquish so much...'

'Pragmatic soldiers,' the Mhybe said, 'are the most frightening among the people whom I have known in my short life.'

Silverfox laughed low in her throat. 'And you doubt your own wisdom, Mother ...'

Caladan Brood's command tent was situated in the centre of the Tiste Andii encampment. Though she had visited it many times and had acquired some familiarity with the Tiste Andii, the Mhybe was once again struck by the sense of strangeness as she strode with the others into their midst. Antiquity and pathos were twin breaths filling the aisles and pathways between the high-peaked narrow tents. There was little in the way of conversation among the few tall, dark-clothed figures they passed, nor was any particular attention accorded Brood and his entourage – even Korlat, Anomander Rake's second-in-command, received but scant notice.

It was difficult for the Mhybe to understand – a people plagued by indifference, an apathy that made even the efforts of civil discourse too much to contemplate. There were secret tragedies in the long, tortured past of the Tiste Andii. Wounds that would never heal. Even suffering, the Rhivi had come to realize, was capable of becoming a way of life. To then extend such an existence from decades into centuries, then into millennia, still brought home to the Mhybe a dull shock of horror.
These narrow, arcane tents might be home to ghosts, a restless, roving necropolis haunted with lost spirits. The strangely stained, ragged ribbons tied to the iron tent poles added a votive touch to the scene, as did the gaunt, spectral figures of the Tiste Andii themselves. They seemed to be waiting, an eternal expectation that never failed to send shivers through the Mhybe. And worse, she knew their capabilities — she had seen them draw blades in anger, then wield them with appalling efficiency. And she had seen their sorcery.

Among humans, cold indifference was often manifested in acts of brutal cruelty, was often the true visage of evil — if such a thing existed — but the Tiste Andii had yet to reveal such wanton acts. They fought at Brood's command, for a cause not their own, and those few of them who were killed on such occasions were simply left on the ground. It had fallen to the Rhivi to retrieve those bodies, to treat them in the Rhivi way and to mourn their passing. The Tiste Andii looked upon such efforts without expression, as if bemused by the attention accorded to a mere corpse.

The command tent waited directly ahead, octagonal and wood-framed, the canvas a much-mended sun-faded orange that had once been red. It had once belonged to the Crimson Guard, and had been left on a rubbish heap before Outrider Hurlochel had come to rescue it for the warlord. As with the standard, Brood wasn't much for proud accoutrements.

The large flap at the entrance had been tied back. Atop the front support pole sat a Great Raven, head cocked towards the group, beak open as if in silent laughter. The Mhybe's thin lips quirked into a half-smile upon seeing Crone. Anomander Rake's favoured servant had taken to hounding Caladan Brood, offering incessant advice like a conscience twisted awry. The Great Raven had tested the warlord's patience more than once — yet Brood tolerates her in the same way he tolerates Anomander Rake himself. Uneasy allies . . . the tales all agree that Brood and Rake have worked side by side for a log, long time, yet is there trust between them? That particular relationship is a hard one to understand, with layers upon layers of complexity and ambiguity, all the more confusing for Crone's dubious role in providing the bridge between the two warriors.

'Dujek Onearm!' Crone screamed, the outburst followed by a mad cackle. 'Whiskeyjack! I bring you greetings from one Baruk, an alchemist in Darujhistan. And, from my master, Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn, Knight of High House Darkness, son of Mother Dark herself, I convey to you his ... no, not greeting as such... not greeting... but amusement. Yes, amusement!'

Dujek frowned. 'And what so amuses your master, bird?'

'Bird?' the Great Raven shrieked. 'I am Crone, the unchallenged matriarch of Moon's Spawn's cacophonous, vast murder of kin!'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'Matriarch to the Great Ravens? You speak for them all, do you? I'd accept that — Hood knows you're loud enough.'

'Upstart! Dujek Onearm, my master's amusement is beyond explanation—'

'Meaning you don't know,' the renegade High Fist interjected.

'Outrageous audacity — show respect, mortal, else I choose your carcass to feed on when the day comes!'

'You'd likely break your beak on my hide, Crone, but you're welcome to it when that moment arrives.'

Brood growled, 'Do you still have that beak-strap, Hurlochel?'

'I do, sir.'

The Great Raven hissed, ducking her head and half raising her vast wings. 'Don't you dare, ox! Repeat that affront at your peril!'

'Then hold your tongue.' Brood faced the others and waved them to the entrance. Crone, perched over everyone, bobbed her head as each soldier strode beneath her. When it was the Mhybe's turn the Great Raven chuckled. 'The child in your hand is about to surprise us all, old woman.'

The Rhivi paused. 'What do you sense, old crow?'
Crone laughed in silence before replying, 'Immanence, dearest clay pot, and naught else. Greetings, child Silverfox.'

The girl studied the Great Raven for a moment, then said, 'Hello, Crone. I had not before realized that your kind were born in the rotting flesh of a—'

'Silence!' Crone shrieked. 'Such knowledge should never be spoken! You must learn to remain silent, child – for your own safety—'

'For yours, you mean,' Silverfox said, smiling.

'In this instance, aye, I'll not deny it. Yet listen to this wise old creature before stepping into this tent, child. There are those waiting within who will view the extent of your awareness – should you be foolish enough to reveal it – as the deadliest threat. Revelations could mean your death. And know this: you are not yet able to protect yourself. Nor can the Mhybe, whom I cherish and love, hope to defend you – hers is not a violent power. You will both need protectors, do you understand?'

Her smile unperturbed, Silverfox nodded.

The Mhybe's hand tightened instinctively around her daughter's, even as a tumult of emotions assailed her. She was not blind to the threats to Silverfox and herself, nor was she unaware of the powers burgeoning within the child. But I sense no power within me, violent or otherwise. Though spoken with affection, Crone named me 'clay pot' in truth, and all that it once protected is no longer within me, but standing here, exposed and vulnerable, at my side. She glanced up at the Great Raven one last time as Silverfox led her inside. She met Crone's black, glittering eyes. Love and cherish me, do you, crow? Bless you for that.

The command tent's central chamber was dominated by a large map table of rough-hewn wood, warped and misshapen as if cobbled together by a drunken carpenter. As the Mhybe and Silverfox entered, the veteran Whiskeyjack – helmet unstrapped and under one arm – was laughing, his eyes fixed upon the table.

'You bastard, Warlord,' he said, shaking his head.

Brood was frowning at the object of Whiskeyjack's attention. 'Aye, I'll grant you it's not pretty—'

'That's because Fiddler and Hedge made the damned thing,' the Malazan said. 'In Mott Wood—'

'Who are Fiddler and Hedge?'

'My two sappers, when I was commanding the Ninth Squad. They'd organized one of their notorious card games, using the Deck of Dragons, and needed a surface on which to play it. A hundred fellow Bridgeburners had gathered for the game, despite the fact that we were under constant attack, not to mention bogged down in the middle of a swamp. The game was interrupted by a pitched battle – we were overrun, then driven back, then we retook the position, all of which consumed maybe a bell – and lo, someone had walked off with a two hundred pound table in the meantime! You should have heard the sappers cursing...'

Caladan Brood crossed his arms, still frowning at the table. After a few moments he grunted. 'A donation from the Mott Irregulars. It has served me well – my, uh, compliments to your sappers. I can have it returned—'

'No need, Warlord ...' It seemed the Malazan was about to say something more, something important, but then he simply shook his head.

A soft gasp from Silverfox startled the Mhybe. She looked down, brows raised questioningly, but the girl's attention was swinging from the table to Whiskeyjack, then back again, a small smile on her lips. 'Uncle Whiskeyjack,' she said suddenly.

All eyes turned to Silverfox, who blithely continued, 'Those sappers and their games – they cheat, don't they?'

The bearded Malazan scowled. 'Not an accusation I'd recommend you repeat, especially if there's any Bridgeburners around, lass. A lot of coin's gone one way and one way only in those games. Did Fid and Hedge
cheat? They made their rules so complicated no-one could tell one way or the other. So, to answer you, I don't know.' His scowl was deepening as he studied Silverfox, as if the man was growing troubled by something.

_Something . . . like a sense of familiarity_ ... Realization dawned within the Mhybe. _Of course, he knows nothing about her – about what she is, what she was. It's their first meeting, as far as he's concerned, yet she called him uncle, and more, there's that voice – throaty, knowing ... He knows not the child, but the woman she once was._

Everyone waited for Silverfox to say more, to offer explanation. Instead she simply walked up to the table and slowly ran her hand across its battered surface. A fleeting smile crossed her features. Then she pulled close one of the mismatched chairs and sat down.

Brood sighed, gestured to Hurlochel. 'Find us that map of the Pannion Domin territories.'

With the large map laid out, the others slowly gathered round the table. After a moment, Dujek grunted. 'None of our own maps are this detailed,' he said. 'You've noted the locations of various Pannion armies – how recent is this?'

'Three days,' Brood said. 'Crone's cousins are there, tracking movements. The notes referring to the Pannions' means of organization and past tactics have been culled from various sources. As you can see, they're poised to take the city of Capustan. Maurik, Setta and Lest have all fallen within the past four months. The Pannion's forces are still on the south side of the Catlin River, but preparations for the crossing have begun—'

'The Capustan army won't contest that crossing?' Dujek asked. 'If not, then they're virtually inviting a siege. I take it no-one expects Capustan to put up much of a fight.'

'The situation in Capustan is a bit confused,' the warlord explained. 'The city's ruled by a prince and a coalition of High Priests, and the two factions are ever at odds with each other. Problems have been compounded by the prince's hiring a mercenary company to augment his own minimal forces—'

'What company?' Whiskeyjack asked.

'The Grey Swords. Have you heard of them, Commander?'

'No.'

'Nor have I,' Brood said. 'It's said they're up from Elingarth – a decent complement: over seven thousand. Whether they'll prove worthy of the usurious fees they've carved from the prince remains to be seen. Hood knows, their so-called standard contract is almost twice the coin of what the Crimson Guard demands.'

'Their commander read the situation,' Kallor commented, his tone suggesting vast weariness, if not outright boredom. 'Prince Jelarkan has more coin than soldiers, and the Pannions won't be bought off – it's a holy war as far as the Seer's concerned, after all. To worsen matters, the council of High Priests has the backing of each temple's private company of highly trained, well-equipped soldiers. That's almost three thousand of the city's most able fighters, whilst the prince himself has been left with dregs for his own Capanthall – which he's prevented from expanding beyond two thousand by law. For years the Mask Council – the coalition of temples – has been using the Capanthall as a recruiting ground for their own companies, bribing away the best—'

Clearly the Mhybe wasn't alone in suspecting that, given the opportunity, Kallor would have gone on all afternoon, for Whiskeyjack interrupted the man as he drew breath.

'So this Prince Jelarkan circumvented the law by hiring mercenaries.'

'Correct,' was Brood's swift reply. 'In any case, the Mask Council has managed to invoke yet another law, preventing the Grey Swords from active engagement beyond the city walls, so the crossing will not be contested—'

'Idiots,' Dujek growled. 'Given this is a holy war, you'd think the temples would do all they could to effect a united front against the Pannions.'
'I imagine they believe they are,' Kallor answered with a sneer that could have been meant for Dujek or the priests in Capustan, or both. 'While at the same time ensuring that the prince's power remains held in check.'

'It's more complicated than that,' Brood countered. 'The ruler of Maurik capitulated with little bloodshed by arresting all the priests in her city and handing them over to the Pannions' Tenescowri. In one move, she saved her city and its citizens, topped up her royal coffers with booty from the temples and got rid of an eternal thorn in her side. The Pannon Seer granted her a governorship which is better than being torn apart and devoured by the Tenescowri – which is what happened to the priests.'

The Mhybe hissed. 'Torn apart and devoured?'

'Aye,' the warlord said. 'The Tenescowri are the Seer's peasant army – they're fanatics that the Seer doesn't bother supplying. Indeed, he's given them his holy blessing to do whatever is necessary to feed and arm themselves. If certain other rumours are true, then cannibalism is the least of the horrors—'

'We've heard similar rumours,' Dujek muttered. 'So, Warlord, the question before us is, do we seek to save Capustan or let it fall? The Seer must know we're coming – his followers have spread the cult far beyond his borders, in Darujhistan, in Pale, in Saltoan – meaning he knows we will be crossing Catlin River somewhere, somewhen. If he takes Capustan, then the river's widest ford is in his hands. Which leaves us with naught but the old ford west of Saltoan where the stone bridge used to be. Granted, our engineers could float us a bridge there, provided we bring the wood with us. That's the overland option, in any case. We've two others, of course...'

Crone, perched on one end of the table, cackled. 'Listen to him!'

The Mhybe nodded, understanding the Great Raven and experiencing her own amused disbelief.

Dujek scowled down the length of the table at Crone. 'You have a problem, bird?'

'You are the warlord's match indeed! Word for word, you think aloud as he does! Oh, how can one not see the honed edge of poetry in your mutual war of the past twelve years?'

'Be quiet, Crone,' Brood commanded. 'Capustan will be besieged. The Pannions' forces are formidable – we've learned that Septarch Kulpath is commanding the expedition, and he's the ablest of all the Seer's septarchs. He has half the total number of Beklites with him – that's fifty thousand regular infantry – and a division of Urdomen besides the usual support attachments and auxiliary units. Capustan is a small city, but the prince has worked hard on the walls, and the city's layout itself is peculiarly suited to district by district defence. If the Grey Swords don't pull out with the first skirmish, Capustan might hold for a time. None the less...'

'My Black Moranth could land a few companies in the city,' Dujek said, glancing over at the silent Twist, 'but without an explicit invitation to do so, tension could prove problematic.'

Kallor snorted. 'Now that is an understatement. What city on Genabackis would welcome Malazan legions into their midst? More, you'd have to bring your own food – you can be sure of that, High Fist – not to mention face outright hostility if not actual betrayal from the Capan people.'

'It's clear,' Whiskeyjack ventured, 'that we need to establish preliminary contact with Capustan's prince.'

Silverfox giggled, startling everyone. 'All this orchestration, Uncle! You've already set in motion a plan to do so. You and the onearmed soldier have schemed this to the last detail. You plan on liberating Capustan, though of course not directly – you two never do anything directly, do you? You want to remain hidden behind the events, a classic Malazan tactic if ever there was one.'

Like the master gamblers they were, the two men showed no expression at her words.

Kallor's chuckle was a soft rattle of bones.

The Mhybe studied Whiskeyjack. The child's so very alarming, isn't she? By the spirits, she alarms even me, and I know so much more than you do, sir.
'Well,' Brood rumbled after a moment, 'I'm delighted to hear we're in agreement – Capustan mustn't fall if we can help it, and an indirect means of relief is probably the best option, all things considered. On the surface, we must be seen – the majority of your forces as well as mine, Onearm – to be marching overland, at a predictable pace. That will establish Septarch Kulpath's timetable for the siege, for both him and us. I take it we're also agreed that Capustan must not be our sole focus.'

Dujek slowly nodded. 'It may still fall, despite our efforts. If we're to defeat the Pannion Domin, we must strike for its heart.'

'Agreed. Tell me, Onearm, which city have you targeted for this first season of the campaign?'

'Coral,' Whiskeyjack replied immediately.

All eyes returned to the map. Brood was grinning. 'It seems we do indeed think alike. Once we reach the north border of the Domin, we drive like a spear southward, a swift succession of liberated cities... Setta, Lest, Maurik – won't the governess be pleased – then to Coral itself. We undo in a single season the Seer's gains over the past four years. I want that cult reeling, I want cracks sent right through the damned thing.'

'Aye, Warlord. So we march overland, yes? No boats – that would hasten Kulpath's hand, after all. There's one more issue to clarify, however,' Whiskeyjack continued, his grey eyes swinging to the one representative – apart from the Black Moranth commander – who'd yet to speak, 'and that is, what can we expect from Anomander Rake? Korlat? Will the Tiste Andii be with us?'

The woman simply smiled.

Brood cleared his throat. 'Like you,' he said, 'we have initiated some moves of our own. As we speak, Moon's Spawn travels towards the Domin. Before it reaches the Seer's territory, it will... disappear.'

Dujek raised his brows. 'An impressive feat.'

Crone cackled.

'We know little of the sorcery behind the Seer's power,' the warlord said, 'only that it exists. Like your Black Moranth, Moon's Spawn represents tactical opportunities we'd be fools not to exploit.' Brood's grin broadened. 'Like you, High Fist, we seek to avoid predictability.' He nodded towards Korlat. 'The Tiste Andii possess formidable sorceries—'

'Not enough,' Silverfox cut in.

The Tiste Andii woman frowned down at the girl. 'That is quite an assertion, child.'

Kallor hissed. 'Trust nothing of what she says. Indeed, as Brood well knows, I consider her presence at this meeting foolish – she is no ally of ours. She will betray us all, mark my words. Betrayal, it is her oldest friend. Hear me, all of you. This creature is an abomination.'

'Oh, Kallor,' Silverfox sighed, 'must you always go on like that?'

Dujek turned to Caladan Brood. 'Warlord, I admit to some confusion over the girl's presence – who in Hood's name is she? She seems in possession of preternatural knowledge. For what seems a ten-year-old child—'

'She is far more than that,' Kallor snapped, staring at Silverfox with hard, hate-filled eyes. 'Look at the hag beside her,' the High King growled. 'She's barely seen twenty summers, High Fist, and this child was torn from her womb not six months ago. The abomination feeds on the life force of her mother – no, not mother, the unfortunate vessel that once hosted the child – you all shivered at the cannibalism of the Tenescowri, what think you of a creature that so devours the life-soul of the one who birthed it? And there is more—' He stopped, visibly bit back what he was about to say, and sat back. 'She should be killed. Now. Before her power surpasses us all.'

There was silence within the tent.
Damn you, Kallor. Is this what you want to show our newfound allies? A camp divided. And . . . spirits below . . . damn you a second time, for she never knew. She never knew . . .

Trembling, the Mhybe looked down at Silverfox. The girl's eyes were wide, even now filling with tears as she stared up at her mother. 'Do I?' she whispered. 'Do I feed on you?'

The Mhybe closed her eyes, wishing she could hide the truth from Silverfox once again, and for ever more. Instead, she said, 'Not your choice, daughter – it is simply part of what you are, and I accept this' – and yet rage at the foul cruelty of it – 'as must you. There is an urgency within you, Silverfox, a force ancient and undeniable – you know it as well, feel it—'

'Ancient and undeniable?' Kallor rasped. 'You don't know the half of it, woman.' He jolted forward across the table and grasped Silverfox's tunic, pulled her close. Their faces inches apart, the High King bared his teeth. 'You're in there, aren't you? I know it. I feel it. Come out, bitch—'

'Release her,' Brood commanded in a low, soft voice.

The High King's sneer broadened. He relented his grip on the girl's tunic, slowly leaned back.

Heart pounding, the Mhybe raised a trembling hand to her face. Terror had ripped through her when Kallor had grasped her daughter, an icy flood that left her limbs without strength – vanquishing with ease her maternal instinct to defend – revealing to herself, and to everyone present, her own cowardice. She felt tears of shame well in her eyes, trickle down her lined cheeks.

'Touch her again,' the warlord continued, 'and I will beat you senseless, Kallor.'

'As you like,' the ancient warrior replied.

Armour rustled as Whiskeyjack turned to Caladan Brood. The commander's face was dark, his expression harsh. 'Had you not done so, Warlord, I would have voiced my own threat.' He fixed iron eyes on the High King. 'Harm a child? I would not beat you senseless, Kallor, I would rip your heart out.'

The High King grinned. 'Indeed. I shake with fear.'

'That will do,' Whiskeyjack murmured. His gauntleted left hand lashed out in a backhanded slap, striking Kallor's face. Blood sprayed across the table as the High King's head snapped back. The force of the blow staggered him. The handle of his bastard sword was suddenly in his hands, the sword hissing – then halting, half drawn.

Kallor could not move his arms further, for Caladan Brood now gripped both wrists. The High King strained, blood vessels swelling on his neck and temple, achieving nothing. Brood must have tightened his huge hands then, for he gasped, the sword's handle dropping from his grasp, the weapon thunking back into the scabbard. Brood stepped closer, but the Mhybe heard his soft words none the less. 'Accept what you have earned, Kallor. I have had quite enough of your contempt at this gathering. Any further test of my temper and it shall be my hammer striking your face. Understood?'

After a long moment, the High King grunted.

Brood released him.

Silence filled the tent, no-one moving, all eyes on Kallor's bleeding face.

Dujek withdrew a cloth from his belt – crusted with dried shaving soap – and tossed it at the High King. 'Keep it,' he growled.

The Mhybe moved up behind a pale, wide-eyed Silverfox, and laid her hands on her daughter's shoulders. 'No more,' she whispered. 'Please.'

Whiskeyjack faced Brood once again, ignoring Kallor as if the man had ceased to exist. 'Explain please, Warlord,' he said in a calm voice. 'What in Hood's name is this child?'
Shrugging her mother’s hands from her shoulders, Silverfox stood, poised as if about to flee. Then she shook her head, wiped her eyes and drew a shuddering breath. ‘No,’ she said, ‘let none answer but me.’ She looked up at her mother – the briefest meeting of gazes – then surveyed the others once more. ‘In all things,’ she whispered, ‘let none answer but me.’

The Mhybe reached out a hand, but could not touch. ‘You must accept it, daughter,’ she said, hearing the brittleness of her own conviction, and knowing – with a renewed surge of shame – that the others heard it as well. You must forgive ... forgive yourself. Oh, spirits below, I dare not speak such words – I have lost that right, I have surely lost it now ...

Silverfox turned to Whiskeyjack. ‘The truth, now, Uncle. I am born of two souls, one of whom you knew very well. The woman Tattersail. The other soul belonged to the discorporate, ravaged remnants of a High Mage named Nightchill – in truth, little more than her charred flesh and bones, though other fragments of her were preserved as a consequence of a sealing spell. Tattersail’s ... death ... occurred within the sphere of the Tellann warren – as projected by a T’lan Imass—’

The Mhybe alone saw the standard-bearer Artanthos flinch. “And what, sir, do you know of this?” the question flitted briefly through her mind – conjecture and consideration were tasks too demanding to exercise.

‘Within that influence, Uncle,’ Silverfox continued, ‘something happened. Something unexpected. A Bonecaster from the distant past appeared, as did an Elder God, and a mortal soul—’

Cloth held to his face, Kallor’s snort was muffled. ‘“Nightchill”,’ he murmured. ‘Such a lack of imagination ... Did K’rul even know? Ah, what irony . . .’

Silverfox resumed. ‘It was these three who gathered to help my mother, this Rhivi woman who found herself with an impossible child. I was born in two places at once – among the Rhivi in this world, and into the hands of the Bonecaster in the Tellann warren.’ She hesitated, shuddering as if suddenly spent. ‘My future,’ she whispered after a moment, her arms drawing around herself, ‘belongs to the T’lan Imass.’ She spun suddenly to Korlat. ‘They are gathering, and you will need their power in the war to come.’

‘Unholy conjoining,’ Kallor rasped, hand and cloth falling away, eyes narrowed, his face white as parchment behind the smeared blood. ‘As I had feared – oh, you fools. Every one of you. Fools—’

‘Gathering,’ the Tiste Andii repeated, also ignoring the High King. ‘Why? To what end, Silverfox?’

‘That is for me to decide, for I exist to command them. To command them all. My birth proclaimed the Gathering – a demand that every T’lan Imass on this world has heard. And now, those who are able, are coming. They are coming.’

In his mind, Whiskeyjack was reeling. Fissures in Brood’s contingent was alarming enough, but the child’s revelations ... his thoughts spun, spiralled down ... then arose in a new place. The command tent and its confines slipped away, and he found himself in a world of twisted schemes, dark betrayals and their fierce, unexpected consequences – a world he hated with a passion.

Memories rose like spectres. The Enfilade at Pale, the decimation of the Bridgeburners, the assault on Moon’s Spawn. A plague of suspicions, a maelstrom of desperate schemes...

‘A’Karonys, Bellurdan, Nightchill, Tattersail... The list of mages whose deaths could be laid at High Mage Tayschrenn’s sandalled feet was written in the blood of senseless paranoia. Whiskeyjack had not been sorry to see the High Mage take his leave, though the commander suspected he was not as far off as it seemed. Outlawry, Laseen’s proclamation cut us loose ... but it’s all a lie. Only he and Dujek knew the truth of that – the remainder of the Host believed they had indeed been outlawed by the Empress. Their loyalty was to Dujek Onearm, and, perhaps, to me as well. And Hood knows, we’ll test that loyalty before we’re done ...

Yet she knows. The girl knows. He had no doubt that she was Tattersail reborn – the sorceress was there, in the cast of the child’s features, in the way she stood and moved, in that sleepy, knowing gaze. The repercussions that tumbled from that truth overwhelmed Whiskeyjack – he needed time, time to think ...
Tattersail reborn . . . damn you to Hood, Tayschrenn – in' advertent or not – what have you done?

Whiskeyjack had not known Nightchill – they'd never spoken and the breadth of his knowledge was based solely on the tales he'd heard. Mate to the Thelomen, Bellurdan, and a practitioner of High Rashan sorcery, she had been among the Emperor's chosen. Ultimately betrayed, just as the Bridgeburners had been ...

There had been an edge to her, it was said, a hint of jagged bloodstained iron. And, he could see, what remained of that woman had cast a shadow over the child – the soft gleam in Tattersail's sleepy eyes had darkened, somehow, and seeing it frayed the commander's already rattled nerves.

Oh, Hood. One of those repercussions had just settled in his mind with a thunderous clang. Oh, the gods forgive us our foolish games ...

Back in Pale waited Ganoes Paran. Tattersail's lover. What will he make of Silverfox? From woman to a newborn babe in an instant, then from that newborn to a ten-year-old child in six months. And six months from now? A twenty-year-old woman? Paran ... lad ... is it grief that is burning holes in your gut? If so, then what will its answering do to you?

As he struggled to comprehend the young girl's words, and all that he saw in her face, his thoughts turned to the Mhybe standing beside Silverfox. Sorrow flooded him. The gods were cruel indeed. The old woman would likely be dead within the year, a brutal sacrifice to the child's needs. A malign, nightmarish twist to the role of motherhood.

The girl's final words jarred the commander yet again. 'They are coming.' The T'lan Imass – Hood's breath, as if matters weren't complicated enough. Where do I place my faith in all this? Kallor – a cold, uncanny bastard himself- calls her an abomination – he would kill her if he could. That much is plain. I'll not abide harming a child . . . but is she a child?

Yet . . . Hood's breath! She's Tattersail reborn, a woman of courage and integrity. And Nightchill, a High Mage who served the Emperor. And, now, strangest, most alarming fact of all, she is the new ruler of the T'lan Imass . . .

Whiskeyjack blinked, the tent and its occupants coming into focus once again. Silence writhing with tumultuous thoughts. His gaze swung back to Silverfox – saw the paleness of her young, round face, noted with a pang of empathy the tremble in the child's hands – then away again. The Tiste Andii, Korlat, was watching him. Their eyes locked. Such extraordinary beauty . . . while Dujek is dogface ugly, further proof I chose the wrong side all those years back. She's hardly interested in me that way, no, she's trying to say something else entirely . . . After a long moment, he nodded. Silverfox . . . she's still a child, aye. A clay tablet scarcely etched. Aye, Tiste Andii, I understand you.

Those who chose to stand close to Silverfox might well be able to influence what she was to become. Korlat sought a private conversation with him, and he'd just accepted the invitation. Whiskeyjack wished he had Quick Ben at his side right now – the Seven Cities mage was sharp when it came to situations like these. The commander already felt out of his depth.

Paran, you poor bastard. What do I tell you? Should I arrange a meeting between you and Silverfox? Will I be able to prevent one once you're told? Is it even any of my business?

Crone's beak gaped, but not in soundless laughter this time. Instead, unfamiliar terror raced through her. T'lan Imass! And K'rul, the Elder God! Holders of the truth of the Great Ravens, a truth no-one else knows – except for Silverfox, by the Abyss . . . Silverfox, who looked upon my soul and read all within it.

Careless, careless child! Would you force us to defend our-selves from you? From those whom you claim to command? We Great Ravens have never fought our own wars – would you see us unleashed by your unmindful revelations?

Should Rake learn . . . protestations of innocence will avail us naught. We were there at the Chaining, were we not? Yet . . . aye, we were there at Fall itself! The Great Ravens were born like maggots in the flesh of the Fallen One and that, oh, that will damn us! But wait! Have we not been honourable guardians of the Crippled
God's magic? And were we not the ones who delivered to one and all the news of the Pannion Domin, the threat it represents?

A magic we can unleash, if forced to. Ah, child, you threaten so much with your careless words . . .

Her black, glittering eyes sought out and fixed on Caladan Brood. Whatever thoughts the warlord possessed remained hidden behind the flat, bestial mask that was his face.

Rein in your panic, old hag. Return to the concerns before us. Think!

The Malazan Empire had made use of the T'lan Imass in the Emperor's time. The conquest of Seven Cities had been the result. Then, with Kellanved's death, the alliance had dissolved, and so Genabackis was spared the devastating implacability of tens of thousands of undead warriors who could travel as dust in the wind. This alone had allowed Caladan Brood to meet the Malazan threat on an equal footing ... ah, perhaps it only seemed that way. Has he ever truly unleashed the Tiste Andii? Has he ever let loose Anomander Rake? Has he ever shown his own true power? Brood's an ascendant – one forgets that, in careless times. His warren is Tennes – the power of the land itself, the earth that is home to the eternal sleeping goddess, Burn. Caladan Brood has the power – there in his arms and in that formidable hammer on his back – to shatter mountains. An exaggeration? A low flight over the broken peaks east of the Laederon Plateau is proof enough of his younger, more precipitous days. . . Grandmother Crone, you should know better! Power draws power. It has always been thus, and now have come the T'lan Imass, and once again the balance shifts.

My children spy upon the Pannion Domin – they can smell the power rising from those lands so thoroughly sanctified in blood, yet it remains faceless, as if hidden beneath layer after deceiving layer. What hides at the core of that empire of fanatics!

The horrific child knows – I'd swear on the god's bed of broken flesh to that, oh yes. And she will lead the T'lan Imass ... to that very heart.

Do you grasp this, Caladan Brood? I think you do. And, even as that hoary old tyrant Kallor utters his warnings with a bloodless will . . . even as you are rocked by the imminent arrival of undead allies, so you are jolted even more by the fact that they will be needed. Against what have we proclaimed war? What will be left of us when we are done?

And, by the Abyss, what secret truth about Silverfox does Kallor possess?

Defying her own overwhelming self-disgust, the Mhybe forced brutal clarity into her thoughts, listening to all that Silverfox said, to each word, to what lay between each word. She hugged herself beneath the barrage of her daughter's pronouncements. The laying bare of secrets assailed her every instinct – such exposure was fraught with risks. Yet she finally understood something of the position in which Silverfox had found herself – the confessions were a call for help.

She needs allies. She knows I am not enough – spirits below, she has been shown that here. More, she knows that these two camps – enemies for so long – need to be bridged. Born in one, she reaches out to the other. All that was Tattersail and Nightchill cries out to old comrades. Will they answer?

She could discern nothing of Whiskeyjack's emotions. His thoughts might well be echoing Kallor's position. An abomination. She saw him meet Korlat's eyes and wondered at what passed between them.

Think! It is the nature of everyone here to treat every situation tactically, to push away personal feelings, to gauge, to weigh and balance. Silverfox has stepped to the fore; she has claimed a position of power to rival Brood, Anomander Rake and Kallor. Does Dujek Onearm now wonder with whom he should be dealing? Does he realize that we were all united because of him – that, for twelve years, the clans of Barghast and Rhivi, the disparate companies from a score or more cities, the Tiste Andii, the presence of Rake, Brood and Kallor, not to mention the Crimson Guard – all of us, we stood shoulder to shoulder because of the Malazan Empire? Because of the High Fist himself.

But we have a new enemy now, and much of its nature remains unknown, and it has engendered a kind of
fragility among us – oh, what an understatement – that Dujek Onearm now sees.

Silverfox states that we shall have need of the T’lan Imass. Only the vicious old Emperor could have been comfortable with such creatures as allies – even Kallor recoils from what is being forced upon us. The fragile alliance now creaks and totters. You are too wise a man, High Fist, to not now possess grave doubts.

The one-armed old man was the first to speak after Silverfox's statement, and he addressed the child with slow, carefully measured words. 'The T’lan Imass with whom the Malazan Empire is familiar is the army commanded by Logros. By your words we must assume there are other armies, yet no knowledge of them has ever reached us. Why is that, child?'

'The last Gathering,' Silverfox replied, 'was hundreds of thousands of years ago, at which was invoked the Ritual of Tellann – the binding of the Tellann warren to each and every Imass. The ritual made them immortal, High Fist. The life force of an entire people was bound in the name of a holy war destined to last for millennia —'

'Against the Jaghut,' Kallor rasped. His narrow, withered face twisted into a sneer behind the already-drying blood. 'Apart from a handful of Tyrants, the Jaghut were pacifists. Their only crime was to exist—'

Silverfox rounded on the warrior. 'Do not hint at injustices, High King! I possess enough of Nightchill’s memories to recall the Imperial Warren – the place you once ruled, Kallor, before the Malazans made claim to it. You laid waste an entire realm – you stripped the life from it, left nothing but ash and charred bones. An entire realm!'

The tall warrior’s blood-smeared grin was ghastly. 'Ah, you are there, aren't you. But hiding, I think, twisting the truth into false memories. Hiding, you pathetic, cursed woman!' His smile hardened. 'Then you should know not to test my temper, Bonecaster. Tattersail. Nightchill . . . dear child . . .'

The Mhybe saw her daughter pale. Between these two . . . the feel of a long enmity – why had I not seen that before? There are old memories here, a link between them. Between my daughter and Kallor – no, between Kallor and one of the souls within her . . .

After a moment, Silverfox returned her attention to Dujek. 'To answer you, Logros and the clans under his command were entrusted with the task of defending the First Throne. The other armies departed to hunt down the last Jaghut strongholds – the Jaghut had raised barriers of ice. Omtose Phellack is a warren of ice, High Fist, a place deathly cold and almost lifeless. Jaghut sorceries threatened the world . . . sea levels dropped, whole species died out – every mountain range was a barrier. Ice flowed in white rivers down from the slopes. Ice formed a league deep in places. As mortals, the Imass were scattered, their unity lost. They could not cross such barriers. There was starvation—'

'The war against the Jaghut had begun long before then,' Kallor snapped. 'They sought to defend themselves, and who would not?'

Silverfox simply shrugged. 'As Tellann undead, our armies could cross such barriers. The efforts at eradication proved ... costly. You have heard no whispers of those armies because many have been decimated, whilst others perhaps continue the war in distant, inhospitable places.'

There was a pained expression on the High Fist’s face. 'The Logros themselves left the empire and disappeared into the Jhag Odhan for a time, and when they returned they were much diminished.'

She nodded.

'Have the Logros answered your call?'

Frowning, the girl said, 'I cannot be certain of that – of any of them. They have heard. All will come if they are able, and I sense the nearness of one army – at least I think I do."

There is so much you are not telling us, daughter. I can see it in your eyes. You fear your call for help will go unanswered if you reveal too much.
Dujek sighed and faced the warlord. 'Caladan Brood, shall we resume our discussion of strategy?'

The soldiers once again leaned over the map table, joined by a softly cackling Crone. After a moment, the Mhybe collected her daughter's hand and guided her towards the entrance. Korlat joined them as they made their way out. To the Mhybe's surprise, Whiskeyjack followed.

The cool afternoon breeze was welcome after the close confines of the command tent. Without a word, the small group walked a short distance to a clearing between the Tiste Andii and Barghast encampments. Once they halted, the commander fixed his grey eyes on Silverfox.

'I see much of Tattersail in you, lass – how much of her life, her memories, do you recall?'

'Faces,' she answered, with a tentative smile. 'And the feelings attached to them, Commander. You and I were allies for a time. We were, I think, friends ...'

His nod was grave. 'Aye, we were. Do you remember Quick Ben? The rest of my squad? What of Hairlock? Tayschren? Do you recall Captain Paran?'

'Quick Ben,' she whispered uncertainly. 'A mage? Seven Cities ... a man of secrets ... yes,' she smiled again, 'Quick Ben. Hairlock – not a friend, a threat – he caused me pain. . . .'

'He's dead, now.'

'I am relieved. Tayschren is a name I've heard recently – Laseen's favoured High Mage – we sparred, he and I, when I was Tattersail, and, indeed, when I was Nightchill. No sense of loyalty, no sense of trust – thoughts of him confuse me.'

'And the captain?'

Something in the commander's tone brought the Mhybe alert.

Silverfox glanced away from Whiskeyjack's eyes. 'I look forward to seeing him again.'

The commander cleared his throat. 'He's in Pale right now. While it's not my business, lass, you might want to consider the consequences of meeting him, of, uh, his finding out. . . .' His words trailed away in evident discomfort.

Spirits below! This Captain Paran was Tattersail's lover – I should have anticipated something like this. The souls of two grown women . . . 'Silverfox – daughter—'

'We have met him, Mother,' she said. 'When driving the bhederin north – do you recall? The soldier who defied our lances? I knew then – I knew him, who he was.' She faced the commander again. 'Paran knows. Send him word that I am here. Please.'

'Very well, lass.' Whiskeyjack raised his head and studied the Barghast encampment. 'The Bridgeburners will be ... visiting ... in any case. The captain now commands them. I am sure that Quick Ben and Mallet will be pleased to make your reacquaintance—'

'You wish them to examine me, you mean,' Silverfox said, 'to help you decide whether I am worthy of your support. Fear not, Commander, the prospect does not concern me – in many ways I remain a mystery to myself, as well, and so I am curious as to what they will discover.'

Whiskeyjack smiled wryly. 'You've the sorceress's blunt honesty, lass – if not her occasional tact.'

Korlat spoke. 'Commander Whiskeyjack, I believe we have things to discuss, you and I.'

'Aye,' he said.

The Tiste Andii turned to the Mhybe and Silverfox. 'We shall take our leave of you two, now.'

'Of course,' the old woman replied, struggling to master her emotions. The soldier who defied our lances – oh
yes, I recall, child. Old questions . . . finally answered . . . and a thousand more to plague this old woman...
'Come along, Silverfox, it's time to resume your schooling in the ways of the Rhivi.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Whiskeyjack watched the two Rhivi walk away. 'She revealed far too much,' he said after a moment. 'The parlery was working, drawing the bindings closer... then the child spoke...'

'Yes,' Korlat murmured. 'She is in possession of secret knowledge – the knowledge of the T'lan Imass. Memories spanning millennia on this world. So much that those people witnessed ... the Fall of the Crippled God, the arrival of the Tiste Andii, the last flight of the Dragons into Starvald Demelain... ' She fell silent, a veil descending over her eyes.

Whiskeyjack studied her, then said, 'I've never seen a Great Raven become so obviously ... flustered.'

Korlat smiled. 'Crone believes the secret of her kind's birth is not known to us. It is the shame of their origins, you see – or so they themselves view it. Rake is indifferent to its ... moral context, as we all are.'

'What is so shameful?'

'The Great Ravens are unnatural creatures. The bringing down of the alien being who would come to be called the Crippled God was a ... violent event. Parts of him were torn away, falling like balls of fire to shatter entire lands. Pieces of his flesh and bone lay rotting yet clinging to a kind of life in their massive craters. From that flesh the Great Ravens were born, carrying with them fragments of the Crippled God's power. You have seen Crone and her kin – they devour sorcery, it is their true sustenance. To attack a Great Raven with magic serves only to make the creature stronger, to bolster its immunity. Crone is the First Born. Rake believes the potential within her is . . . appalling, and so he keeps her and ilk close.'

She paused, then faced him. 'Commander Whiskeyjack, in Darujhistan, we clashed with a mage of yours...'

'Aye. Quick Ben. He'll be here shortly, and I will have his thoughts on all this.'

'The man you mentioned earlier to the child.' She nodded. 'I admit to a certain admiration for the wizard and so look forward to meeting him.' Their gazes locked. 'And I am pleased to have met you as well. Silverfox spoke true words when she said she trusted you. And I believe I do as well.'

He shifted uncomfortably. 'There has been scant contact between us that would earn such trust, Korlat. None the less, I will endeavour to earn it.'

'The child has Tattersail within her, a woman who knew you well. Though I never met the sorceress, I find that the woman she was – emerging further with each day in Silverfox – possessed admirable qualities.'

Whiskeyjack slowly nodded. 'She was ... a friend.'

'How much do you know of the events leading to this ... rebirth?'

'Not enough, I am afraid,' he replied. 'We learned of Tattersail's death from Paran, who came upon her ... remains. She died in the embrace of a Thelomen High Mage, Bellurdan, who had travelled out onto the plain with the corpse of his mate, Nightchill, presumably intending to bury the woman. Tattersail was already a fugitive, and it's likely Bellurdan was instructed to retrieve her. It is as Silverfox says, as far as I can tell.'

Korlat looked away and said nothing for a long time. When she finally did, her question, so simple and logical, left Whiskeyjack with a pounding heart: 'Commander, we sense Tattersail and Nightchill within the child – and she herself admits to these two – but now I wonder, where then is this Thelomen, Bellurdan?'

He could only draw a deep breath and shake his head. Gods, I don't know ...
CHAPTER FOUR

Mark these three, they are all that give shape, all that lie beneath the surface of the world, these three, they are the bones of history. Sister of Cold Nights! Betrayal greets your dawn! You chose to trust the knife, even as it found your heart. Draconus, Blood of Tiam! Darkness was made to embrace your soul, and these chains that now hold you, they are of your own fashioning. K'rul, yours was the path the Sleeping Goddess chose, a thousand and more years ago, and she sleeps still, even as you awaken – the time has come, Ancient One, to once more walk among the mortals, and make of your grief, the sweetest gift.

Anomandaris
Fisher Kel Tath

Covered from head to toe in mud, Harllo and Stonny Menakis emerged from behind the carriage as it rocked its way up the slope. Grinning at the sight, Gruntle leaned against the buckboard.

‘Serves us right to lay wagers with you,’ Harllo muttered. ‘You always win, you bastard.’

Stonny was looking down at her smeared clothing with dismay. ‘Callows leathers. They'll never recover.’ She fixed hard blue eyes on Gruntle. ‘Damn you – you're the biggest of us all. Should have been you pushing, not sitting up there, and never mind winning any bet.’

‘Hard lessons, that's me,’ the man said, his grin broadening. Stonny's fine green and black attire was covered in brown slime. Her thick black hair hung down over her face, dripping milky water. ‘Anyway, we're done for the day, so let's pull this thing off to the side – looks like you two could do with a swim.’

‘Hood take you,’ Harllo snapped, ‘what do you think we was doing?’

‘From the sounds, I'd say drowning. The clean water’s upstream, by the way’ Gruntle gathered the tresses again. The crossing had left the horses exhausted, reluctant to move, and it took some cajoling on the captain's part to get them moving again. He halted the carriage a short distance off to one side of the ford. Other merchants had camped nearby, some having just managed the crossing and others preparing to do so on their way to Darujhistan. In the past few days, the situation had, if anything, become even more chaotic. Whatever had remained of the ford's laid cobbles in the river bed had been pushed either askew or deeper into the mud.

It had taken four bells to manage the crossing, and for a time there Gruntle had wondered if they would ever succeed. He climbed down and turned his attention to the horses. Harllo and Stonny, now bickering with each other, set off upstream.

Gruntle threw an uneasy glance towards the massive carriage that had gone before them on the ford, now parked fifty paces away. It had been an unfair bet. The best kind. His two companions had been convinced that this day wouldn't see the crossing of their master Keruli's carriage. They'd been certain that the monstrous vehicle ahead of them would bog down, that it'd be days sitting there in midstream before other merchants got impatient enough to add the muscle of their own crews to moving it out of the way.

Gruntle had suspected otherwise. Bauchelain and Korbal Broach were not the kind of people to stomach inconvenience. They're damned sorcerers, anyway. Their servant, Emancipor Reese, had not even bothered to get down from the driver's bench, and simple twitches of the tresses had led the train of oxen onwards. The huge contrivance seemed to glide across the ford, not even jolting as the wheels moved over what Gruntle knew to be churned, uneven footing. Unfair bet, aye. At least I'm dry and clean.

There had been enough witnesses to the unnatural event to accord a certain privacy to the mages' present encampment, so it was with considerable curiosity that Gruntle watched a caravan guard stride towards it. He knew the man well. A Daru, Buke worked the smaller caravanserai, signing with merchants just scraping by. He preferred working alone, and Gruntle knew why.
Buke's master had tried the crossing earlier in the day. The dilapidated wagon had fallen to pieces in midstream, bits of wood and precious bundles of produce floating away as the master wallowed helplessly. Buke had managed to save the merchant, but with the loss of goods the contract had ceased to exist. After making arrangements for the master to accompany a train back to Darujhistan, Buke was, with scant gratitude for his efforts, cut loose by the merchant.

Gruntle had expected him to make his own way back to the city. Buke had a fine, healthy and well-equipped horse. A three days' journey at the most.

Yet here he was, his tall, lean figure fully attired in a guard's accoutrements, scale hauberk freshly oiled, crossbow strapped to back and longsword scabbarded at his hip, in quiet conversation with Emancipor Reese.

Though out of earshot, Gruntle could follow the course of the conversation by the shifting postures of the two men. After a brief exchange, he saw Buke's shoulders drop fractionally. The grey-bearded guard glanced away. Emancipor Reese shrugged and half turned in dismissal.

Both men then swung about to face the carriage, and a moment later Bauchelain emerged, drawing his black leather cape around his broad shoulders. Buke straightened under the sorcerer's attention, answered a few terse questions with equally terse replies, then gave a respectful nod. Bauchelain laid a hand on his servant's shoulder and the old man came close to buckling under that light touch.

Gruntle clucked softly in sympathy. Aye, that mage's touch could fill an average man's breeches, Queen knows . . . Beru fend, Buke's just been hired. Pray he doesn't come to regret it.

Tenement fires were deadly in Darujhistan, especially when gas was involved. The conflagration that had killed Buke's wife, mother and four children had been particularly ugly. That Buke himself had been lying drunk and dead to the world in an alley not a hundred paces from the house hadn't helped in the man's recovery. Like many of his fellow guards, Gruntle had assumed that Buke would turn to the bottle with serious intent after that. Instead, he'd done the opposite. Taking solitary contracts with poor, vulnerable merchants obviously offered to Buke a greater appeal than the wasting descent of a permanent drunk. Poor merchants were robbed far more often than rich ones. The man wants to die, all right. But swiftly, even honourably. He wants to go down fighting, as did his family, by all accounts. Alas, when sober – as he's been ever since that night – Buke fights extremely well, and the ghosts of at least a dozen highwaymen would bitterly attest to that.

The chill dread that seemed to infuse the air around Bauchelain and, especially, around Korbal Broach, would have deterred any sane guard. But a man eager to embrace death would see it differently, wouldn't he?

Ah, friend Buke, I hope you do not come to regret your choice. No doubt violence and horror swirls around your two new masters, but you're more likely to be a witness to it than a victim yourself. Haven't you been in suffering's embrace long enough?

Buke set off to collect his horse and gear. Gruntle had begun a cookfire by the time the old man returned. He watched Buke stow his equipment and exchange a few more words with Emancipor Reese, who had begun cooking a meal of their own, then the man glanced over and met Gruntle's gaze.

Buke strode over.

'A day of changes, friend Buke,' Gruntle said from where he squatted beside the hearth. 'I'm brewing some tea for Harllo and Stonny who should be back any moment – care to join us in a mug?'

'That is kind of you, Gruntle. I will accept your offer.' He approached the captain.

'Unfortunate, what happened to Murk's wagon.'

'I warned him against the attempt. Alas, he did not appreciate my advice.'

'Even after you pulled him from the river and pumped the water out of his lungs?'

Buke shrugged. 'Hood brushing his lips put him in bad mood, I would imagine.' He glanced over at his new masters' carriage, lines crinkling the corners of his sad eyes. 'You have had discourse with them, have you not?'
Gruntle spat into the fire. Aye. Better had you sought my advice before taking the contract.'

'I respect your advice and always have, Gruntle, but you would not have swayed me.'

'I know that, so I'll say no more of them.'

'The other one,' Buke said, accepting a tin mug from Gruntle and cradling it in both hands as he blew on the steaming liquid. 'I caught a glimpse of him earlier.'

'Korbal Broach.'

'As you say. He's the killer, you realize.'

'Between the two, I don't see much difference, to be honest.'

Buke was shaking his head. 'No, you misunderstand. In Darujhistan, recall? For two weeks running, horribly mangled bodies were found in the Gadorbi District, every night. Then the investigators called in a mage to help, and it was as if someone had kicked a hornet's nest — that mage discovered something, and that knowledge had him terrified. It was quiet, grant you, but I chanced on the details that followed. Vorcan's guild was enlisted. The Council itself set forth the contract to the assassins. Find the killer, they said, using every method at your disposal, legal or otherwise. Then the murders stopped—'

'I vaguely recall a fuss,' Gruntle said, frowning.

'You were in Quip's, weren't you? Blind for days on end.'

Gruntle winced. 'Had my eye on Lethro, you know — went out on a contract and came back to find—'

'She'd gone and married someone else,' Buke finished, nodding.

'Not just someone else.' Gruntle scowled. 'That bloated crook, Parsemo—'

'An old master of yours, I seem to recall. Anyway. Who was the killer and why did the killings stop? Vorcan's guild did not step forward to claim the Council's coin. The murders stopped because the murderer had left the city.' Buke nodded towards the massive carriage. 'He's the one. Korbal Broach. The man with the round face and fat lips.'

'What makes you so certain, Buke?' The air had gone cold. Gruntle poured himself a second cup.

The man shrugged, eyes on the fire. 'I just know. Who can abide the murder of innocents?'

_Hood's breath, Buke, I see both edges to that question well enough — do you? You mean to kill him, or at least die trying._ 'Listen to me, friend. We may be out of the city's jurisdiction, but if Darujhistan's mages were in truth so thoroughly alarmed — and given that Vorcan's guild might still have an interest — issues of jurisdiction are meaningless. We could send word back — assuming you're right and you've proof of your certainty, Buke — and in the meantime you just keep your eye on the man. Nothing else. He's a sorcerer — mark my words. You won't stand a chance. Leave the execution to the assassins and mages.'

Buke glanced up at the arrival of Harllo and Stonny Menackis. The two had come up quietly, each wrapped in blankets, with their clothing washed and bundled in their arms. Their troubled expressions told Gruntle they'd heard at the very least his last statement.

'Thought you'd be halfway back to Darujhistan,' Harllo said.

Buke studied the guard over the rim of the mug. 'You are so clean I barely recognize you, friend.'

'Ha ha.'

'I have found myself a new contract, to answer you, Harllo.'

'You idiot,' Stonny snapped. 'When are you going to get some sense back into your head, Buke? It's been
years and years since you last cracked a smile or let any light into your eyes. How many bear traps are you going to stick your head in, man?'

'Until one snaps,' Buke said, meeting Stonny's dark, angry eyes. He rose, tossing to one side the dregs from the mug. 'Thank you for the tea ... and advice, friend Gruntle.' With a nod to Harllo, then Stonny, he headed back to Bauchelain's carriage.

Gruntle stared up at Stonny. 'Impressive tact, my dear.'

She hissed. 'The man's a fool. He needs a woman's hand on his sword-grip, if you ask me. Needs it bad.'

Harllo grunted. 'You volunteering?'

Stonny Menackis shrugged. 'It's not his appearance that one balks at, it's his attitude. The very opposite of you, ape.'

'Sweet on my personality, are you?' Harllo grinned over at Gruntle. 'Hey, you could break my nose again — then we could straighten it and I'd be good as new. What say you, Stonny? Would the iron petals of your heart unfold for me?'

She sneered. 'Everyone knows that two-handed sword of yours is nothing but a pathetic attempt at compensation, Harllo.'

'He's a nice turn at the poetic, though,' Gruntle pointed out. 'Iron petals — you couldn't get more precise than that.'

'There's no such thing as iron petals,' Stonny snorted. 'You don't get iron flowers. And hearts aren't flowers, they're big red, messy things in your chest. What's poetic about not making sense? You're as big an idiot as Buke and Harllo, Gruntle. I'm surrounded by thick-skulled witless fools.'

'It's your lot in life, alas,' Gruntle said. 'Here, have some tea — you could do with ... the warmth.'

She accepted the mug, while Gruntle and Harllo avoided meeting each other's eyes.

After a few moments, Stonny cleared her throat. 'What was all that about leaving the execution to assassins, Gruntle? What kind of mess has Buke got himself into now?'

Oh, Mowri, she truly cares for the man.

He frowned into the fire and tossed in a few more lumps of dung before replying, 'He has some ... suspicions. We were, uh, speaking hypothetically—'

'Togg's tongue you were, ox-face. Out with it.'

'Buke chose to speak with me, not you, Stonny,' Gruntle growled, irritated. 'If you've questions, ask them of him and leave me out of it.'

'I will, damn you.'

'I doubt you'll get anywhere,' Harllo threw in, somewhat unwisely, 'even if you do bat your eyes and pout those rosy lips of yours—'

'Those are the last things you'll see when I push my knife through that tin tuber in your chest. Oh, and I'll blow a kiss, too.'

Harllo's bushy brows rose. 'Tin tuber! Stonny, my dear — did I hear you right?'

'Shut up, I'm not in the mood.'

'You're never in the mood, Stonny!'

She answered him with a contemptuous smile.

'Don't bother saying it, dear,' Gruntle sighed.
The shack leaned drunkenly against the city of Pale's inner wall, a confused collection of wooden planks, stretched hides and wicker, its yard a threshold of white dust, gourd husks, bits of broken crockery and wood shavings. Fragments of lacquered wooden cards hung from twine above the narrow door, slowly twisting in the humid heat.

Quick Ben paused, glanced up and down the littered alleyway, then stepped into the yard. A cackle sounded from within. The wizard rolled his eyes and, muttering under his breath, reached for the leather loop nailed to the door.

'Don't push!' a voice shrieked behind it. 'Pull, you snake of the desert!

Shrugging, Quick Ben tugged the door towards him.

'Only fools push!' hissed the old woman from her cross-legged perch on a reed mat just within. 'Scraps my knee! Bruises and worse plague me when fools come to visit. Ah, I sniffed Raraku, didn't I?'

The wizard peered into the shack's interior. 'Hood's breath, there's only room for you in there!' Vague objects cluttered the walls, dangled from the low ceiling. Shadows swallowed every corner, and the air still held the chill of the night just past.

'Just me!' the woman cackled. Her face was little more than skin over bones, her pate hairless and blotched with moles. 'Show what you have, many-headed snake, the breaking of curses is my gift!' She withdrew from the tattered folds of her robes a wooden card, held it up in trembling hands. 'Send your words into my warren and their shape shall be carved hereupon, burned true—'

'No curses, woman,' Quick Ben said, crouching down until his eyes were level with hers. 'Only questions.'

The card slipped beneath her robes. Scowling, the witch said, 'Answers cost plenty. Answers are worth more than the breaking of curses. Answers are not easily found—'

'All right all right, how much?'

'Colour the coin of your questions, twelve-souls.'

'Gold.'

'Then gold councils, one for each—'

'Provided you give worthy answer.'

'Agreed.'

'Burn's Sleep.'

'What of it?'

'Why?'

The old woman gaped toothlessly.

'Why does the goddess sleep, witch? Does anyone know? Do you?'

'You are a learned scoundrel—'

'All I've read has been speculation. No-one knows. Scholars don't have the answer, but this world's oldest witch of Tennes just might. Tell me, why does Burn sleep?'

'Some answers must be danced around. Give me another question, child of Raraku.'

Sighing, Quick Ben lowered his head, studied the ground for a moment, then said, 'It's said the earth shakes
and molten rock pours out like blood when Burn stirs towards wakefulness.'

'So it is said.'

'And that destruction would be visited upon all life were she to awaken.'

'So it is said.'

'Well?'

'Well nothing. The land shakes, mountains explode, hot rivers flow. These are natural things of a world whose soul is white hot. Bound to their own laws of cause and effect. The world is shaped like a beetle's ball of dung, and it travels through a chilling void around the sun. The surface floats in pieces, on a sea of molten rock. Sometimes the pieces grind together. Sometimes they pull apart. Pulled and pushed by tides as the seas are pulled and pushed.'

'And where is the goddess in such a scheme?'

'She was the egg within the dung. Hatched long ago. Her mind rides the hidden rivers beneath our feet. She is the pain of existence. The queen of the hive and we her workers and soldiers. And every now and then ... we swarm.'

'Into the warrens?'

The old woman shrugged. 'By whatever paths we find.'

'Burn is sick.'

'Aye.'

Quick Ben saw a sudden intensity light the witch's dark eyes. He thought for a long moment, then said, 'Why does Burn sleep?'

'It's not yet time for that. Ask another question.'

The wizard frowned, looked away. 'Workers and soldiers ... you make us sound like slaves.'

'She demands nothing, what you do you do for yourselves. You work to earn sustenance. You fight to protect it or to gain more. You work to confound rivals. You fight from fear and hatred and spite and honour and loyalty and whatever other causes you might fashion. Yet, all that you do serves her ... no matter what you do. Not simply benign, Adaephon Delat, but amoral. We can thrive, or we can destroy ourselves, it matters not to her – she will simply birth another brood and it begins again.'

'You speak of the world as a physical thing, subject to natural laws. Is that all it is?'

'No, in the end the minds and senses of all that is alive define what is real – real for us, that is.'

'That's a tautology.'

'So it is.'

'Is Burn the cause to our effect?'

'Ah, you wind sideways like the desert snake you are in truth! Ask your question!'

'Why does Burn sleep?'

'She sleeps ... to dream.'

Quick Ben said nothing for a long time. When he finally looked into the old woman's eyes he saw confirmation of his greatest fears. 'She is sick,' he said.
The witch nodded. 'Fevered.'

'And her dreams . . .'

'Delirium descends, lad. Dreams become nightmares.'

'I need to think of a way to excise that infection, because I don't think Burn's fever will be enough. If anything, that heat that's meant to cleanse is achieving the opposite effect.'

'Think on it, then, dearest worker.'

'I may need help.'

The witch held out a withered hand, palm up.

Quick Ben fished beneath his shirt and withdrew a waterworn pebble. He dropped it into her hand.

'When the time comes, Adaephon Delat, call upon me.'

'I shall. Thank you, mistress.' He set a small leather bag filled with gold councils on the ground between them. The witch cackled. Quick Ben backed away.

'Now shut that door – I prefer the cold!'

As the wizard strode down the alley, his thoughts wandered loose, darted and whipped on gusts – most of the currents false and without significance. One, however, snagged in his mind and stayed with him, at first meaningless, a curiosity and nothing more: she prefers the cold. Strange. Most old people like heat and plenty of it...

Captain Paran saw Quick Ben leaning against the pitted wall beside the headquarters entrance, arms wrapped tightly about himself and looking ill-tempered. The four soldiers stationed as guards were all gathered ten paces away from the mage, showing obvious unease.

Paran led his horse forward by the reins, handed them to a stabler who appeared from the compound gateway, then strode towards Quick Ben.

'You look miserable, mage – and that makes me nervous.'

The Seven Cities native scowled. 'You don't want to know, Captain. Trust me in this.'

'If it concerns the Bridgeburners, I'd better hear it, Quick Ben.'

'The Bridgeburners?' He barked a humourless laugh. 'This goes far beyond a handful of bellyaching soldiers, sir. At the moment, though, I haven't worked out any possible solutions. When I do, I'll lay it all out for you. In the meantime, you might want to requisition a fresh mount – we're to join Dujek and Whiskeyjack at Brood's camp. Immediately.'

'The whole company? I just got them settled!'

'No, sir. You, me, Mallet and Spindle. There've been some . . . unusual developments, I gather, but don't ask me what because I don't know.'

Paran grimaced.

'I've sent for the other two already, sir.'

'Very well. I'll go find myself another horse, then.' The captain swung about and headed towards the compound, trying to ignore the fiery pain in his stomach. Everything was taking too long – the army had been sitting here in Pale for months now, and the city didn't want it. With the outlawing, none of the expected imperial support had arrived, and without that administrative infrastructure, there had been no relief from the
tense, unpleasant role of occupiers.

The Malazan system of conquest followed a set of rules that was systematic and effective. The victorious army was never meant to remain in place beyond the peacekeeping transition and handover to a firmly entrenched and fully functioning civil government in the Malazan style. Civic control was not a burden the army had been trained for – it was best achieved through bureaucratic manipulation of the conquered city's economy. 'Hold those strings and the people will dance for you,' had been the core belief of the Emperor, and he'd proved the truth of it again and again – nor did the Empress venture any alterations to the method. Acquiring that control involved both the imposition of legal authority and a thorough infiltration of whatever black market happened to be operating at the time. 'Since you can never crush a black market the next best thing is to run it.' And that task belonged to the Claw.

But there are no Claw agents, are there? No scroll scribblers, either. We don't control the black market. We can't even manage the above-board economy, much less run a civil administration. Yet we continue to proceed as if imperial support is imminent, when it most decidedly is not. I don't understand this at all.

Without the Darujhistan gold, Dujek's army would be starving right now. Desertions would have begun, as soldier after soldier left with the hope of returning to the imperial embrace, or seeking to join mercenary companies or caravanserai. Onearm's army would vanish before his very eyes. Loyalty never survives a pinched stomach.

After some confusion, the stablers found Paran another mount. He wearily swung himself into the saddle and guided the animal out of the compound. The afternoon sun had begun to throw cooling shadows onto the city's bleached streets. Pale's denizens began emerging, though few lingered anywhere near the Malazan headquarters. The guards held a finely honed sense of suspicion for anyone who hovered overlong, and the assault-issue heavy crossbows cradled in their arms were kept locked back.

Blood had been spilled at the headquarters entrance, and within the building itself. A Hound of Shadow had attacked, not so long ago, leaving a score dead. Paran's memories of that event were still fragmentary. The beast had been driven off by Tattersail... and the captain himself. For the soldiers on guard at the headquarters, however, a peaceful posting had turned into a nightmare. They'd been caught woefully unprepared, a carelessness that would not be repeated. Such a Hound would still scythe through them almost effortlessly, but at least they would go down fighting, not staring slack-jawed.

Paran found Quick Ben, Mallet and Spindle awaiting him astride their own horses. Of the three, the captain knew Spindle the least. The short, bald man's skills ranged from sorcery to sapping, or so he'd been told. His eternally sour disposition did not invite conversation, nor did the foul-smelling thigh-length black and grey hairshirt he wore – woven from his dead mother's hair, if the rumour held any truth. As Paran pulled in alongside the man, he glanced at that shirt. Hood's breath, that could be an old woman's hair! The realization made him even more nauseous.

'Take point, Spindle.'

'Aye, Captain – we'll have a real crush to push through when we hit North Market Round.'

'So find us a way round the place.'

'Them alleys ain't safe, sir—'

'Access your warren, then, and let it bleed enough to make hairs stand on end. You can do that, can't you?'

Spindle glanced at Quick Ben. 'Uh, sir, my warren . . . triggers things.'

'Serious things?'

'Well, not really—'

'Proceed, soldier.'

'Aye, Captain.'
Expressionless, Quick Ben took rear position, whilst an equally silent Mallet rode alongside Paran.

'Any idea what's going on at Brood's camp, Healer?' the captain asked.

'Not specifically, sir,' Mallet replied. 'Just... sensations.' He continued after an enquiring glance from Paran. 'A real brew of powers over there, sir. Not just Brood and the Tiste Andii – I'm familiar with those. And Kallor's, too, for that matter. No, there's something else. Another presence. Old, yet new. Hints of T'lan Imass, maybe ...'

'T'lan Imass?'

'Maybe – I'm just not sure, truth to tell, Captain. It's overpowering everyone else, though.'

Paran's head turned at that.

A cat yowled nearby, followed by a flash of grey as the creature darted along a garden wall then vanished from sight. More yowls sounded, this time from the other side of the narrow street.

A shiver danced up Paran's spine. He shook himself. 'The last thing we need is a new player. The situation's tense enough as it is—'

Two dogs locked in a vicious fight tumbled from an alley mouth just ahead. A panicked cat zigzagged around the snarling, snapping beasts. As one, the horses shied, ears flattening. In the drain gutter to their right the captain saw – with widening eyes – a score of rats scampering parallel to them.

'What in Hood's name—'

'Spindle!' Quick Ben called from behind them. The lead sorcerer twisted in his saddle, a miserable expression on his weathered face.

'Ease off some,' Quick Ben instructed, not unkindly.

Spindle nodded, turned back.

Paran waved buzzing flies from his face. 'Mallet, what warren does Spindle call upon?' he asked quietly.

'It's not his warren that's the problem, sir, it's how he channels it. This has been mild so far, all things considered.'

'Must be a nightmare for our cavalry—'

'We're foot soldiers, sir,' Mallet pointed out, with a dry grin. 'In any case, I've seen him break up an enemy charge all by himself. Needless to say, he's useful to have around ...'

Paran had never before seen a cat run head first into a wall. The dull thud was followed by a crazed scraping of claws as the animal bounced away in stunned surprise. Its antics were enough to attract the attention of the two dogs. A moment later they set off after the cat. All three vanished down another alley.

The captain's own nerves were jittering, adding to the discomfort in his belly. *I could call Quick Ben to point and have him take over, but his is a power that would get noticed – sensed from afar, in fact – and I'd rather not risk that. Nor, I suspect, would he.*

Each neighbourhood they passed through rose in cacophony – the spitting of cats, the howling and barking of dogs and the braying of mules. Rats raced round the group on all sides, as mindless as lemmings.

When Paran judged that they had circumvented the market round, he called forward to Spindle to yield his warren. The man did so with a sheepish nod.

A short while later they reached North Gate and rode out onto what had once been a killing field. Vestiges of that siege remained, if one looked carefully amidst the tawny grasses. Rotting pieces of clothing, the glint of rivets and the bleached white of splintered bones. Midsummer flowers cloaked the flanks of the recent barrows
two hundred paces to their left in swathes of brittle blue, the hue deepening as the sun sank lower behind the mounds.

Paran was glad for the relative quiet of the plain, despite the heavy, turgid air of restless death that he felt seeping into his marrow as they crossed the scarred killing field. *It seems I am ever riding through such places. Since that fated day in Itko Kan, with angry wasps stinging me for disturbing their blood-drenched feast, I have been stumbling along in Hood’s wake. I feel as if I’ve known naught but war and death all my life, though in truth it’s been but a scant few years. Queen of Dreams, it makes me feel old ...* He scowled. Self-pity could easily become a well-worn path in his thoughts, unless he remained mindful of its insipid allure.

*Habits inherited from my father and mother, alas. And what-ever portion sister Tavore received she must have somehow shunted onto me. Cold and canny as a child, even more so as an adult. If anyone can protect our House during Laseen’s latest purge of the nobility, it will be her. No doubt I’d recoil from using whatever tactics she’s chosen, but she’s not the type to accept defeat. Thus, better her than me. None the less, unease continued to gnaw Paran’s thoughts. Since the outlawing, they’d heard virtually nothing of events occurring elsewhere in the empire. Rumours of a pending rebellion in Seven Cities persisted, though that was a promise oft whispered but yet to be unleashed. Paran had his doubts.*

*No matter what, Tavore will take care of Felisin. That, at least, I can take comfort from ...*

Mallet interrupted his thoughts. *'I believe Brood’s command tent is in the Tiste Andii camp, Captain. Straight ahead.'*

*'Spindle agrees with you,' Paran observed. The mage was leading them unerringly to that strange – even from a distance – and eerie encampment. No-one was visible maintaining vigil at the pickets. In fact, the captain saw no-one at all.*

*'Looks like the parley went off as planned,' the healer commented. 'We haven't been cut down by a sleet of quarrels yet.'*

*'I too take that as promising,' Paran said.*

Spindle led them into a kind of main avenue between the tall, sombre tents of the Tiste Andii. Dusk had begun to fall; the tattered strips of cloth tied to the tent poles were losing their already-faded colours. A few shadowy, spectral figures appeared from the various side trackways, paying the group little heed.

*'A place to drag the spirit low,' Mallet muttered under his breath.*

The captain nodded. *Like travelling a dark dream ...*

*'That must be Brood's tent up ahead,' the healer continued.*

Two figures waited outside the utilitarian command tent, their attention on Paran and his soldiers. Even in the gloom the captain had no trouble identifying them.

The visitors drew their horses to a halt then dismounted and approached.

Whiskeyjack wasted little time. *'Captain, I need to speak with your soldiers. Commander Dujek wishes to do the same with you. Perhaps we can all gather afterwards, if you're so inclined.'*

The heightened propriety of Whiskeyjack’s words put Paran’s nerves on edge. He simply nodded in reply, then, as the bearded second-in-command marched off with Mallet, Quick Ben and Spindle following, the captain fixed his attention on Dujek.

The veteran studied Paran’s face for a moment, then sighed. *'We've received news from the empire, Captain.'*

*'How, sir?*

Dujek shrugged. *'Nothing direct, of course, but our sources are reliable. Laseen's cull of the nobility proved ... efficient.'* He hesitated, then said, *'The Empress has a new Adjunct. ...'*
Paran slowly nodded. There was nothing surprising in that. Lorn was dead. The position needed to be filled.

'Have you news of my family, sir?'

'Your sister Tavore salvaged what she could, lad. The Paran holdings in Unta, the outlying estates ... most of the trade agreements. Even so ... your father passed away, and, a short while later, your mother elected ... to join him on the other side of Hood's Gate. I am sorry, Ganoes ...'

Yes, she would do that, wouldn't she? Sorry? Aye, as am I. 'Thank you, sir. To be honest, I'm less shocked by that news than you might think.'

'There's more, I'm afraid. Your, uh, outlawry left your House exposed. I don't think your sister saw much in the way of options. The cull promised to be savage. Clearly, Tavore had been planning things for some time. She well knew what was coming. noble-born children were being . . . raped. Then murdered. The order to have every noble-born child under marrying age slain was never made official, perhaps indeed Laseen was unaware of what was going on—'

'I beg you sir, if Felisin is dead, tell me so and leave out the details.'

Dujek shook his head. 'No, she was spared that, Captain. That is what I am trying to tell you.'

'And what did Tavore sell to achieve that ... sir?'

'Even as the new Adjunct, Tavore's powers were limited. She could not be seen to reveal any particular . . . favouritism – or so I choose to read her intentions...'

Paran closed his eyes. Adjunct Tavore. Well, sister, you knew your own ambition. 'Felisin?'

'The Otataral Mines, Captain. Not a life sentence, you can be sure of that. Once the fires cool in Unta, she will no doubt be quietly retrieved—'

'Only if Tavore judges it to be without risk to her reputation—'

Dujek's eyes widened. 'Her rep—'

'I don't mean among the nobility – they can call her a monster all they want, as I'm sure they are doing right now – she does not care. Never did. I mean her professional reputation, Commander. In the eyes of the Empress and her court. For Tavore, nothing else will matter. Thus, she is well suited to be the new Adjunct.' Paran's voice was tone' less, the words measured and even. 'In any case, as you said, she was forced to make do with the situation, and as to that situation ... I am to blame for all that's happened, sir. The cull – the rapes, the murders, the deaths of my parents, and all that Felisin must now endure.'

'Captain—'

'It is all right, sir.' Paran smiled. 'The children of my parents are, one and all, capable of virtually anything. We can survive the consequences. Perhaps we lack normal conscience, perhaps we are monsters in truth. Thank you for the news, Commander. How went the parley?' Paran did all he could to ignore the quiet grief in Dujek's eyes.

'It went well, Captain,' the old man whispered. 'You will depart in two days, barring Quick Ben who will catch up later. No doubt your soldiers are ready for—'

'Yes, sir, they are.'

'Very good. That is all, Captain.'

'Sir.'

Like the laying of a silent shroud, darkness arrived. Paran stood atop the vast barrow, his face caressed by the mildest of winds. He had managed to leave the encampment without running into Whiskeyjack and the Bridgeburners. Night had a way of inviting solitude, and he felt welcome on this mass grave with all its echoing
memories of pain, anguish and despair. *Among the dead beneath me, how many adult voices cried out for their mothers?*

Death and dying makes us into children once again, in truth, one last time, there in our final wailing cries. More than one philosopher has claimed that we ever remain children, far beneath the indurated layers that make up the armour of adulthood.

Armour encumbers, restricts the body and soul within it. But it also protects. Blows are blunted. Feelings lose their edge, leaving us to suffer naught but a plague of bruises, and, after a time, bruises fade.

Tilting his head back triggered sharp protests from the muscles of his neck and shoulders. He stared skyward, blinking against the pain, the tautness of his flesh wrapped around bones like a prisoner's bindings.

*But there's no escape, is there? Memories and revelations settle in like poisons, never to be expunged.* He drew the cooling air deep into his lungs, as if seeking to capture in the breath of the stars their coldness of regard, their indifferent harshness. *There are no gifts in suffering. Witness the Tiste Andii.*

*Well, at least the stomach's gone quiet . . . building, I suspect, for another eye-watering bout . . .*

Bats flitted through the darkness overhead, wheeling and darting as they fed on the wing. The city of Pale flickered to the south, like a dying hearth. Far to the west rose the hulking peaks of the Moranth Mountains. Paran slowly realized that his folded arms now gripped his sides, struggling to hold all within. He was not a man of tears, nor did he rail at all about him. He'd been born to a carefully sculpted, cool detachment, an education his soldier's training only enhanced.

*If such things are qualities, then she has humbled me. Tavore, you are indeed the master of such schooling. Oh, dearest Felisin, what life have you now found for yourself? Not the protective embrace of the nobility, that's for certain.*

Boots sounded behind him.

Paran closed his eyes. *No more news, please. No more revelations.*

*'Captain.' Whiskeyjack settled a hand on Paran's shoulder.*

*'A quiet night,' the captain observed.*

*'We looked for you, Paran, after your words with Dujek. It was Silverfox who quested outward, found you.' The hand withdrew. Whiskeyjack stood alongside him, also studying the stars.

*'Who is Silverfox?*

*'I think,' the bearded veteran rumbled, 'that's for you to decide.'*

Frowning, Paran faced the commander. *'I've little patience for riddles at the moment, sir.'*

Whiskeyjack nodded, eyes still on the glittering sweep of the night sky. *'You will just have to suffer the indulgence, Captain. I can lead you forward a step at a time, or with a single shove from behind. There may be a time when you look back on this moment and come to appreciate which of the two I chose.'*

Paran bit back a retort, said nothing.

*'They await us at the base of the barrow,' Whiskeyjack continued. 'As private an occasion as I could manage. Just Mallet, Quick Ben, the Mhybe and Silverfox. Your squad members are here in case you have ... doubts. They've both exhausted their warrens this night – to assure the veracity of what has occurred—'*

*'What,' Paran snapped, 'are you trying to say, sir?'

Whiskeyjack met the captain's eyes. *'The Rhivi child, Silverfox. She is Tattersail reborn.'*

Paran slowly turned, gaze travelling down to the foot of the barrow, where four figures waited in the darkness. And there stood the Rhivi child, a sunrise aura about her person, a penumbra of power that stirred the wilder blood that coursed within him. *Yes. She is the one. Older now, revealing what she will become. Dammit,
woman, you never could keep things simple. All that was trapped within him seemed to wash through his limbs, leaving him weak and suddenly shivering. He stared down at Silverfox. 'She is a child.' But I knew that, didn't I? I've known that for a while, I just didn't want to think about it... And now, no choice.

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'She grows swiftly – there are eager, impatient forces within her, too powerful for a child's body to contain. You'll not have long—'

'Before propriety arrives,' Paran finished drily, not noticing Whiskeyjack's start. 'Fine for then, what of now? Who will naught but see me as a monster should we even so much as hold hands? What can I say to her? What can I possibly say? He spun to Whiskeyjack. 'This is impossible – she is a child!'

'And within her is Tattersail. And Nightchill—'

'Nightchill! Hood's breath! What has happened – how?'

'Questions not easily answered, lad. You'd do better to ask them of Mallet and Quick Ben – and of Silverfox herself.'

Paran involuntarily took a step back. 'Speak with her? No. I cannot—'

'She wishes it, Paran. She awaits you now.'

'No.' His eyes were once again pulled downslope. 'I see Tattersail, yes. But there's more – not just this Nightchill woman – she's a Soletaken, now, Whiskeyjack. The creature that gave her her Rhivi name – the power to change...'

The commander's eyes narrowed. 'How do you know, Captain?'

'I just know—'

'Not good enough. It wasn't easy for Quick Ben to glean that truth. Yet you know. How, Paran?'

The captain grimaced. 'I've felt Quick Ben's probings in my direction – when he thinks my attention is elsewhere. I've seen the wariness in his eyes. What has he found, Commander?'

'Oponn's abandoned you, but something else has taken its place. Something savage. His hackles rise whenever you're close—'

'Hackles.' Paran smiled. 'An apt choice of word. Anomander Rake killed two Hounds of Shadow – I was there. I saw it. I felt the stain of a dying Hound's blood – on my flesh, Whiskeyjack. Something of that blood now runs in my veins.'

The commander's voice was deadpan. 'What else?'

'There has to be something else, sir?'

'Yes. Quick Ben caught hints – there's much more than simply an ascendant's blood to what you've become.' Whiskeyjack hesitated, then said, 'Silverfox has fashioned for you a Rhivi name. Jen'isand Rul.'

'Jen'isand Rul.'

'It translates as "the Wanderer within the Sword". It means, she says, that you have done something no other creature has ever done – mortal or ascendant – and that something has set you apart. You have been marked, Ganoes Paran – yet no-one, not even Silverfox, knows what it portends. Tell me what happened.'

Paran shrugged. 'Rake used that black sword of his. When he killed the Hounds. I followed them... into that sword. The spirits of the Hounds were trapped, chained with all the... all the others. I think I freed them, sir. I can't be sure of that – all I know is that they ended up somewhere else. No longer chained.'

'And have they returned to this world?'
'I don't know. Jen'isand Rul... why should there be any significance to my having wandered within that sword?'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'You're asking the wrong man, Captain. I'm only repeating what Silverfox has said. One thing, though, that has just occurred to me.' He stepped closer. 'Not a word to the Tiste Andii – not Korlat, not Anomander Rake. The Son of Darkness is an unpredictable bastard, by all accounts. And if the legend of Dragnipur is true, the curse of that sword of his is that no-one escapes its nightmare prison – their souls are chained ... for ever. You've cheated that, and perhaps the Hounds have as well. You've set an alarming ... precedent.'

Paran smiled bitterly in the darkness. 'Cheated. Yes, I have cheated many things, even death.' But not pain. No, that escape still eludes me. 'You think Rake takes much comfort in the belief of his sword's ... finality.'

'Seems likely, Ganoes Paran, does it not?'

The captain sighed. 'Aye.'

'Now, let us go down to meet Silverfox.'

'No.'

'Damn you, Paran,' Whiskeyjack growled. 'This is about more than just you and her all starry-eyed. That child possesses power, and it's vast and ... and unknown. Kallor has murder in his eyes when he looks at her. Silverfox is in danger. The question is, do we protect her or stand aside? The High King calls her an abomination, Captain. Should Caladan Brood turn his back at the wrong moment—'

'He'll kill her? Why?'

'He fears, I gather, the power within her.'

'Hood's breath, she's just a—' He stopped, realizing the venality of the assertion. Just a child? Hardly. Protect her against Kallor, you said. That's a risky position to assume, Commander. Who stands with us?'

'Korlat, and by extension, all of the Tiste Andii.'

'Anomander Rake?'

'That we don't yet know. Korlat's mistrust of Kallor, coupled with a friendship with the Mhybe, has guided her to her decision. She says she will speak with her master when he arrives—'

'Arrives?'

'Aye. Tomorrow, possibly early, and if so you'd best avoid him, if at all possible.'

Paran nodded. One meeting was enough. 'And the warlord?'

'Undecided, we think. But Brood needs the Rhivi and their bhederin herds. For the moment, at least, he remains the girl's chief protector.'

'And what does Dujek think of all this?' the captain asked.

'He awaits your decision.'

'Mine? Beru fend, Commander – I'm no mage or priest. Nor can I glean the child's future.'

'Tattersail resides within Silverfox, Paran. She must be drawn forth ... to the fore.'

'Because Tattersail would never betray us. Yes, now I see.'

'You needn't sound so miserable about it, Paran.'

No? And if you stood in my place, Whiskeyjack? 'Very well, lead on.'
‘It seems,’ Whiskeyjack said, striding to the edge of the barrow's summit, ‘we will have to promote you to a rank equal to mine, Captain, if only to circumvent your confusion as to who commands who around here.’

Their arrival was a quiet, stealthy affair, leading their mounts into the encampment with the minimum of fuss. Few Tiste Andii remained outside their tents to take note. Sergeant Antsy led the main group of Bridgeburners towards the kraal to settle in the horses, whilst Corporal Picker, Detoran, Blend, Trotts and Hedge slipped away to find Brood's command tent. Spindle awaited them at its entrance.

Picker gave him a nod and the mage, wrapped in his foul-smelling hairshirt with its equally foul hood thrown over his head, turned to face the tied-down entrance flap. He made a series of hand gestures, paused, then spat at the canvas. There was no sound as the spit struck the flap. He swung a grin to Picker, then bowed before the entrance in invitation.

Hedge nudged the corporal and rolled his eyes.

There were two rooms within, she knew, and the warlord was sleeping in the back one. Hopefully. Picker looked around for Blend – damn, where is she? Here a moment ago—

Two fingers brushed her arm and she nearly leapt out of her leathers. Beside her, Blend smiled. Picker mouthed a silent stream of curses. Blend's smile broadened, then she stepped past, up to the tent entrance, where she crouched down to untie the fastenings.

Picker glanced over a shoulder. Detoran and Trotts stood side by side a few paces back, both hulking and monstrous.

At the corporal's side Hedge nudged her again, and she turned to see that Blend had drawn back the flap.

All right, Jet's get this done.

Blend led the way, followed by Spindle, then Hedge. Picker waved the Napan and the Barghast forward, then followed them into the tent's dark confines.

Even with Trotts at one end and Detoran at the other, with Spindle and Hedge at the sides, the table had them staggering before they'd gone three paces. Blend moved ahead of them to pull the flap back as far as she could. Within the sorcerous silence, the four soldiers managed to manoeuvre the massive table outside. Picker watched, glancing back at the divider every few moments – but the warlord made no appearance. So far so good.

The corporal and Blend added their muscles in carrying the table, and the six of them managed to take it fifty paces before exhaustion forced them to halt.

'Not much further,' Spindle whispered.

Detoran sniffed. 'They'll find it.'

'That's a wager I'll call you on,' Picker said. 'But first, let's get it there.'

'Can't you make this thing any lighter?' Hedge whined at Spindle. 'What kind of mage are you, anyway?'

Spindle scowled. 'A weak one, what of it? Look at you – you're not even sweating!'

'Quiet, you two,' Picker hissed. 'Come on, heave her up, now.'

'Speaking of heaving,' Hedge muttered as, amid a chorus of grunts, the table once again rose from the ground, 'when are you gonna wash that disgusting shirt of yours, Spindle?'

'Wash it? Mother never washed her hair when she was alive – why should I start now? It'll lose its lustre—'

'Lustre? Oh, you mean fifty years of sweat and rancid lard—'
'Wasn't rancid when she was alive, though, was it?'
'Thank Hood I don't know—'
'Will you two save your foul breath? Which way now, Spindle?'
'Right. Down that alley. Then left – the hide tent at the end—'
'Bet someone's living in it,' Detoran muttered.

'You're on with that one, too,' Picker said. 'It's the one the Rhivi use to lay out Tiste Andii corpses before cremation. Ain't been a killed Tiste since Darujhistan.'

'How'd you find it anyway?' Hedge asked.
'Spindle sniffed it out—'
'Surprised he can sniff anything—'

'All right, set her down. Blend – the flap.'

The table filled the entire room within, with only an arm's length of space around it on all sides. The low cots that had been used for the corpses went beneath, folded and stacked. A shuttered lantern was lit and hung from the centre-pole hook. Picker watched Hedge crouch down, his eyes inches from the table's scarred, pitted surface, and run his blunt, battered fingers lovingly along the wood's grain. 'Beautiful,' he whispered. He glanced up, met Picker's eyes. 'Call in the crew, Corporal, the game's about to start.'

Grinning, Picker nodded. 'Go get 'em, Blend.'

'Even cuts,' Hedge said, glaring at everyone. 'We're a squad now—'

'Meaning you let us in on the secret,' Spindle said, scowling. 'If we'd known you was cheating all that time—'

'Yeah, well, your fortunes are about to turn, ain't they? So quit the complaining.'

'Aren't you two a perfect match,' Picker observed. 'So tell us, Hedge, how does this work?'

'Oppositions, Corporal. Both Decks are the real thing, you see. Fiddler had the better sensitivity, but Spindle should be able to pull it off.' He faced the mage. 'You've done readings before, haven't you? You said—'

'Yeah yeah, squirt – no problem, I got the touch—'

'You'd better,' the sapper warned. He caressed the table-top again. 'Two layers, you see, with the fixed Deck in between 'em. Lay a card down and there's a tension formed, and it tells ya which one the face-down one is. Never fails. Dealer knows every hand he plays out. Fiddler—'

'Ain't here,' Trotts growled, his arms crossed. He bared his teeth at Spindle.

The mage sputtered. 'I can do it, you horse-brained savage! Watch me!'

'Shut up,' Picker snapped. 'They're coming.'

It was near dawn when the other squads began filing back out of the tent, laughing and back-slapping as they jingled bulging purses. When the last of them had left, voices trailing away, Picker slumped wearily down on the table. Spindle, sweat dripping from his gleaming hairshirt, groaned and dropped his head, thumping against the thick wood.

Stepping up behind him, Hedge raised a hand.

'At ease, soldier,' Picker warned. 'Obviously, the whole damn thing's been corrupted – probably never worked to start with—'
'It did! Me and Fid made damned sure—'

'But it was stolen before you could try it out for real, wasn't it?'

'That doesn't matter – I tell you—'

'Everybody shut up,' Spindle said, slowly raising his head, his narrow forehead wrinkled in a frown as he scanned the tabletop. 'Corrupted. You may have something there, Picker.' He sniffed the air as if seeking a scent, then crouched down. 'Yeah. Give me a hand, someone, with these here cots.'

No-one moved.

'Help him, Hedge,' Picker ordered.

'Help him crawl under the table? It's too late to hide—'

'That's an order, soldier.'

Grumbling, the sapper lowered himself down. Together, the two men dragged the cots clear. Then Spindle edged beneath the table. A faint glow of sorcerous light slowly blossomed, then the mage hissed. 'It's the underside all right!'

'Brilliant observation, Spindle. Bet there's legs, too.'

'No, you fool. There's an image painted onto the underside ... one big card, it looks like – only I don't recognize it.'

Scowling, Hedge joined the mage. 'What are you talking about? We didn't paint no image underneath – Hood's mouldering moccasins, what is that?'

'Red ochre, is my guess. Like something a Barghast would paint—'

'Or a Rhivi,' Hedge muttered. 'Who's that figure in the middle – the one with the dog-head on his chest?'

'How should I know? Anyway, I'd say the whole thing is pretty fresh. Recent, I mean.'

'Well, rub it off, dammit.'

Spindle crawled back out. 'Not a chance – the thing's webbed with wards, and a whole lot else besides.' He straightened, met Picker's eyes, then shrugged. 'It's a new card. Unaligned, without an aspect. I'd like to make a copy of it, Deck-sized, then try it out with a reading—'

'Whatever,' Picker said.

Hedge reappeared, suddenly energized. 'Good idea, Spin – you could charge for the readings, too. If this new Unaligned plays true, then you could work out the new tensions, the new relationships, and once you know them—'

Spindle grinned. 'We could run another game. Yeah—'

Detoran groaned. 'I have lost all my money.'

'We all have,' Picker snapped, glaring at the two sappers.

'It'll work next time,' Hedge said. 'You'll see.'

Spindle was nodding vigorously.

'Sorry if we seem to lack enthusiasm,' Blend drawled.

Picker swung to the Barghast. Trotts, take a look at that drawing.'
The warrior sniffed, then sank down to his hands and knees. Grunting, he made his way under the table. 'It's
gone dark,' he said.

Hedge turned to Spindle. 'Do that light trick again, you idiot.'

The mage sneered at the sapper, then gestured. The glow beneath the table returned.

Trotts was silent for a few moments, then he crawled back out and climbed upright.

'Well?' Picker asked.

The Barghast shook his head. 'Rhivi.'

'Rhivi don't play with Decks,' Spindle said.

Trotts bared his teeth. 'Neither do Barghast.'

'I need some wood,' Spindle said, scratching the stubble lining his narrow jaw. 'And a stylus,' he went on,
ignoring everyone else. 'And paints, and a brush...'

They watched as he wandered out of the tent. Picker sighed, glared one last time at Hedge. 'Hardly an
auspicious entry into the Seventh Squad, sapper. Antsy's heart damn near stopped when he lost his whole
column. Your sergeant is probably gutting black-livered wood pigeons and whispering your name right now –
who knows, your luck might change and a demon won't hear him.'

Hedge scowled. 'Ha ha.'

'I don't think she's kidding,' Detoran said.

'Fine,' Hedge snapped. 'I got a cusser waiting for it, and damned if I won't make sure I take you all with me.'

'Team spirit,' Trotts said, his smile broadening.

Picker grunted. 'All right, soldiers, let's get out of here.'

Paran and Silverfox stood apart from the others, watching the eastern sky grow light with streaks of copper and
bronze. The last of the stars were withdrawing overhead, a cold, indifferent scatter surrendering to the warmth
of a blue, cloudless day.

Through the awkwardness of the hours just past, stretching interminable as a succession of pain and
discomfort in Paran's mind, emotional exhaustion had arrived, and with it a febrile calm. He had fallen silent,
fearful of shattering that inner peace, knowing it to be nothing but an illusion, a pensively drawn breath within
a storm.

'Tattersail must be drawn forth.' He had indeed done that. The first meeting of their eyes had unlocked every
shared memory, and that unlocking was an explosive curse for Paran. A child. I face a child, and so recoil at
the thought of intimacy – even if it had once been with a grown woman. The woman is no more. This is a child.
But there was yet more to the anguish that boiled within the man. Another presence, entwined like wires of
black iron through all that was Tattersail. Nightchill, the sorceress, once lover to Bellurdan – where she had led,
the Thelomen had followed. Anything but an equal relationship, and now, with Nightchill, had come a bitter,
demanding presence. Bitter, indeed. With Tayschrenn . . . with the Empress and the Malazan Empire and Hood
knows what or who else. She knows she was betrayed at the Enfilade at Pale. Both her and, out there on the
plain, Bellurdan. Her mate.

Silverfox spoke. 'You need not fear the T'lan Imass.'

He blinked, shook himself. 'So you have explained. Since you command them. We are all wondering,
however, precisely what you plan with that undead army? What's the significance of this Gathering?'

She sighed. 'It is very simple, really. They gather for benediction. Mine.'
He faced her. 'Why?'

'I am a flesh and blood Bonecaster – the first such in hundreds of thousands of years.' Then her face hardened. 'But we shall need them first. In their fullest power. There are horrors awaiting us all... in the Pannion Domin.'

'The others must know of this, this benediction – what it means, Silverfox – and more of the threat that awaits us in the Pannion Domin. Brood, Kallor—'

She shook her head. 'My blessing is not their concern. Indeed, it is no-one's concern but mine. And the T'lan Imass themselves. As for the Pannion ... I myself must learn more before I dare speak. Paran, I have told you these things for what we were, and for what you – we – have become.'

*And what have we become? No, not a question for now. Jen'isand Rul.*

She frowned. 'That is a side of you that I do not understand. But there is more, Paran.' She hesitated, then said, 'Tell me, what do you know of the Deck of Dragons?'

'Almost nothing.' But he smiled, for he heard Tattersail now, more clearly than at any other time since they'd first met.

Silverfox drew a deep breath, held it a moment, then slowly released it, her veiled eyes once again on the rising sun. 'The Deck of Dragons. A kind of structure, imposed on power itself. Who created it? No-one knows. My belief – Tattersail's belief – is that each card is a gate into a warren, and there were once many more cards than there are now. There may have been other Decks – there may well be other Decks ...'

He studied her. 'You have another suspicion, don't you?'

'Yes. I said no-one knows who created the Deck of Dragons. Yet there is another entity equally mysterious, also a kind of structure, focused upon power itself. Think of the terminology used with the Deck of Dragons. Houses ... Houses of Dark, of Light, of Life and Death ...' She slowly faced him. 'Think of the word "Finnest". Its meaning, as the T'lan Imass know it, is "Hold of Ice". Long ago, among the Elder races, a Hold was synonymous with a House in its meaning and common usage, and indeed, synonymous with Warren. Where resides a Jaghut's wellspring of power? In a Finnest.' She paused again, searching Paran's eyes. 'Tremorlor is Trellish for "House of Life".'

*Firmest ... as in Firmest House, in Darujhistan ... a House of the Azath. I've never heard of Tremorlor.*

'It is an Azath House in Seven Cities. In Malaz City in your own empire, there is the Deadhouse – the House of Death...'

'You believe the Houses of the Azath and the Houses of the Deck are one and the same.'

'Yes. Or linked, somehow. Think on it!'

Paran was doing just that. He had little knowledge of either, and could not think of any possible way in which he might be connected with them. His unease deepened, followed by a painful roil in his stomach. The captain scowled. He was too tired to think, yet think he must. 'It's said that the old emperor, Kellanved, and Dancer found a way into Deadhouse ...'

'Kellanved and Dancer have since ascended and now hold the House of Shadow. Kellanved is Shadowthrone, and Dancer is Cotillion, the Rope, Patron of Assassins.'

The captain stared at her. 'What?'

Silverfox grinned. 'It's obvious when you consider it, isn't it? Who among the ascendants went after Laseen ... with the aim of destroying her? Shadowthrone and Cotillion. Why would any ascendant care one way or another about a mortal woman? Unless they thirsted for vengeance.'

Paran's mind raced back, to a road on the coast of Itko Kan, to a dreadful slaughter, wounds made by huge,
bestial jaws – Hounds. *Hounds of Shadow – Shadowthrone’s pups...* From that day, the captain had begun a new path. On the trail of the young woman Cotillion had possessed. From that day, his life had begun its fated unravelling. ‘Wait! Kellanved and Dancer went into *Deadhouse* – why didn’t they take that aspect – the aspect of the House of Death?’

‘I’ve thought about that myself, and have arrived at one possibility. The realm of Death was already occupied, Paran. The King of High House Death is Hood. I believe now that each Azath is home to every gate, a way into every warren. Gain entry to the House, and you may ... choose. Kellanved and Dancer found an empty House, an empty throne, and upon taking their places as Shadow’s rulers, the House of Shadow appeared, and became part of the Deck of Dragons. Do you see?’

Paran slowly nodded, struggling to take it all in. Tremors of pain twisted his stomach – he pushed them away. ‘But what has this to do with me?’

‘The House of Shadow was once a Hold,’ Silverfox went on. ‘You can tell – it doesn’t share the hierarchical structure of the other Houses. It is bestial, a wilder place, and apart from the Hounds it knew no ruler for a long, long time.’

‘What of the Deck’s Unaligned?’

She shrugged. ‘Failed aspects? The imposition of chance, of random forces? The Azath and the Deck are both impositions of order, but even order needs freedom, lest it solidify and become fragile.’

‘And where do you think I fit in? I’m nothing, Silverfox. A stumble-footed mortal.’ Gods, leave me out of all this – all that you seem to be leading up to. Please.

‘I have thought long and hard on this, Paran. Anomander Rake is Knight of the House of Dark,’ she said, ‘yet where is the House itself? Before all else there was Dark, the Mother who birthed all. So it must be an ancient place, a Hold, or perhaps something that came before Holds themselves. A focus for the gate into Kurald Galain ... undiscovered, hidden, the First Wound, with a soul trapped in its maw, thus sealing it.’

‘A soul,’ Paran murmured, a chill clambering up his spine, ‘or a legion of souls ...’

The breath hissed from Silverfox.

‘Before Houses there were Holds,’ Paran continued with remorseless logic. ‘Both fixed, both stationary. Settled. Before settlement ... there was *wandering* House from Hold, Hold from ... a gate in motion, ceaseless motion ...’ He squeezed shut his eyes. ‘A wagon, burdened beneath the countless souls sealing the gate into Dark. ... *And I sent two Hounds through that wound, I saw the seal punctured ... by the Abyss* ...

‘Paran, something has happened – to the Deck of Dragons. A new card has arrived. Unaligned, yet, I think, dominant. The Deck has never possessed a ... master.’ She faced him. ‘I now believe it has one. You.’

His eyes snapped open; he stared at her in disbelief, then scorn. ‘Nonsense, Tatter— Silverfox. Not me. You are wrong. You must be—’

‘I am not. My hand was guided in fashioning the card that is you—’

‘What card?’

She did not answer, continued as if she had not heard him. ‘Was it the Azath that guided me? Or some other unknown force? I do not know. *Jen’isand Rul*, the Wanderer within the Sword.’ She met his eyes. ‘You are a new Unaligned, Ganoes Paran. Birthed by accident or by some purpose the need of which only the Azath know. You must find the answer for your own creation, you must find the purpose behind what you have become.’

His brows rose mockingly. ‘You set for me a quest? Really, Silverfox. Aimless, purposeless men do not undertake quests. That’s for wall-eyed heroes in epic poems. I don’t believe in goals – not any more. They’re naught but self-delusions. You set for me this task and you shall be gravely disappointed. As shall the Azath.’

‘An unseen war has begun, Paran. The warrens themselves are under assault – I can feel the pressure within
the Deck of Dragons, though I have yet to rest a hand upon one. An army is being ... assembled, perhaps, and you – a soldier – are part of that army.'

_Oh yes, so speaks Tattersail. 'I have enough wars to fight, Silverfox...'_

Her eyes glistened as she looked up at him. 'Perhaps, Ganoes Paran, they are all one war.'

'I'm no Dujek, or Brood – I can't manage all these ... campaigns. It's – it's tearing me apart.'

'I know. You cannot hide your pain from me – I see it in your face, and it breaks my heart.'

He looked away. 'I have dreams as well ... a child within a wound. Screaming.'

'Do you run from that child?'

'Aye,' he admitted shakily. 'Those screams are ... terrible.'

'You must run towards the child, my love. Flight will close your heart.'

He turned to her. 'My love' – words to manipulate my heart? 'Who is that child?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know. A victim in the unseen war, perhaps.' She attempted a smile. 'Your courage has been tested before, Paran, and it did not fail.'

Grimacing, he muttered, 'There's always a first time.'

'You are the Wanderer within the Sword. The card exists.'

'I don't care.'

'Nor does it,' she retorted. 'You don't have any choice—'

He rounded on her. 'Nothing new in that! Now ask Oponn how well I performed!' His laugh was savage. 'I doubt the Twins will ever recover. The wrong choice, Tattersail, I am ever the wrong choice!'

'She stared up at him, then, infuriatingly, simply shrugged.'

Suddenly deflated, Paran turned away. His gaze fell on the Mhybe, Whiskeyjack, Mallet and Quick Ben. The four had not moved in all this time. Their patience – _dammit, their faith_ – made the captain want to scream. _You choose wrongly. Every damned one of you._ But he knew they would not listen. 'I know nothing of the Deck of Dragons,' he said dully.

'If we've the time, I will teach you. If not, you will find your own way.'

Paran closed his eyes. The pain in his stomach was returning, rising, a slowly building wave he could no longer push back. Yes, of course. _Tattersail could do no less than she has done. There you have it then, Whiskeyjack. She now leads, and the others follow. A good soldier, is Captain Ganoes Paran._

In his mind he returned to that fraught, nightmarish realm within the sword Dragnipur, the legions of chained souls ceaselessly dragging their impossible burden . . . and at the heart of the wagon, a cold, dark void, from whence came the chains. _The wagon carries the gate, the gate into Kurald Galain, the warren of Darkness. The sword gathers souls to seal it . . . such a wound it must be, to demand so many souls . . . _He grunted at a wave of pain. Silverfox's small hand reached up to touch his arm.

He almost flinched at the contact.

_I will fail you all._
CHAPTER FIVE

He rises bloodless from dust,
with dead eyes that are pits
twin reaches to eternal pain.

He is the lodestone
to the gathering clan,
made anew and dream-racked.

The standard a rotted hide,
the throne a bone cage, the king
a ghost from dark fields of battle.

And now the horn moans
on this grey clad dawn
drawing the disparate host

To war, to war,
and the charging frenzy
of unbidden memories of ice.

Lay of the First Sword
Irig Thann Delusa (b. 1091)

Two days and seven leagues of black, clinging clouds of ash, and Lady Envy's telaba showed not a single stain. Grumbling, Toc the Younger pulled the caked cloth from his face and slowly lowered his heavy leather pack to the ground. He never thought he'd bless the sight of a sweeping, featureless grassy plain, but, after the volcanic ash, the undulating vista stretching northward beckoned like paradise.

'Will this hill suffice for a camp?' Lady Envy asked, striding over to stand close to him. 'It seems frightfully exposed. What if there are marauders on this plain?'

'Granted, marauders aren't usually clever,' Toc replied, 'but even the stupidest bandit would hesitate before trying three Seguleh. The wind you're feeling up here will keep the biting insects away come night, Lady. I wouldn't recommend low ground – on any prairie.'

'I bow to your wisdom, Scout.'

He coughed, straightening to scan the area. 'Can't see your four-legged friends anywhere.'

'Nor your bony companion.' She turned wide eyes on him. 'Do you believe they have stumbled into mischief?'

He studied her, bemused, and said nothing.

She raised an eyebrow, then smiled.

Toc swiftly turned his attention back to his pack. 'I'd best pitch the tents,' he muttered.

'As I assured you last night, Toc, my servants are quite capable of managing such mundane activities. I'd much rather you assumed for yourself a higher rank than mere menial labourer for the duration of this great adventure.'

He paused. 'You wish me to strike heroic poses against the sunset, Lady Envy?'
'Indeed!' 

'I wasn't aware I existed for your entertainment.'

'Oh, now you're cross again.' She stepped closer, rested a sparrow-light hand on his shoulder. 'Please don't be angry with me. I can hardly hold interesting conversations with my servants, can I? Nor is your friend Tool a social blossom flushed with enlivening vigour. And while my two pups are near-perfect companions in always listening and never interrupting, one yearns for the spice of witty exchanges. You and I, Toc, we have only each other for this journey, so let us fashion the bonds of friendship.'

Staring down at the bundled tents, Toc the Younger was silent for a long moment, then he sighed. 'I'm a poor excuse for witty exchanges, Lady, alas. I am a soldier and scant else.'

'More, I've a soldier's scars – who can naught but flinch upon seeing me?'

'Not modesty, but deception, Toc'

He winced at the edge to her tone.

'You have been educated, far beyond what is common for a professional soldier. And I have heard enough of your sharp exchanges with the T'lan Imass to value your wit. What is this sudden shyness? Why the growing discomfort?'

Her hand had not moved from his shoulder. 'You are a sorceress, Lady Envy. And sorcery makes me nervous.'

The hand withdrew. 'I see. Or, rather, I do not. Your T'lan Imass was forged by a ritual of such power as this world has not seen in a long time, Toc the Younger. His stone sword alone is invested to an appalling degree – it cannot be broken, not even chipped, and it will cut through wards effortlessly. No warren can defend against it. I would not wager on any blade against it when in Tool's hands. And the creature himself. He is a champion of sorts, isn't he? Among the T'lan Imass, Tool is something unique. You have no idea of the power – the strength – he possesses. Does Tool make you nervous, soldier? I've seen no sign of that.'

'Well,' Toc snapped, 'he's shrunken hide and bones, isn't he? Tool doesn't brush against me at every chance. He doesn't throw smiles at me like lances into my heart, does he? He doesn't mock that I once had a face that didn't make people turn away, does he?'

Her eyes were wide. 'I do not mock your scars,' she said quietly.

He glared over to the three motionless, masked Seguleh. Oh, Hood, I've made a mess of things here, haven't I? Are you laughing behind those face-shields, warriors? 'My apologies, Lady,' he managed. 'I regret my words —,'

'Yet hold to them none the less. Very well, it seems I must accept the challenge, then.'

He looked up at her. 'Challenge?'

She smiled. 'Indeed. Clearly, you think my affection for you is not genuine. I must endeavour to prove otherwise.'

'Lady—'

'And in your efforts to push me away, you'll soon discover that I am not easily pushed.'

'To what end, Lady Envy? All my defences broken down . . . for your amusement?'

Her eyes flashed and Toc knew, with certainty, the truth of his thoughts. Pain stole through him like cold iron. He began unfolding the first tent.

Garath and Baaljagg arrived, bounding up to circle around Lady Envy. A moment later a swirl of dust rose from the ochre grasses a few paces from where Toc crouched. Tool appeared, carrying across his shoulders the carcass of a pronghorn antelope, which he shrugged off to thump on the ground.
Toc saw no wounds on the animal. *Probably scared it to death.*

'Oh, wonderful!' Lady Envy cried. 'We shall dine like nobles tonight! She swung to her servants. 'Come, Senu, you have some butchering to do.'

*Won't be the first time, either.*

'And you other two, uhm, what shall we devise for you? Idle hands just won't do. Mok, you shall assemble the hide bath-tub. Set it on that hill over there. You needn't worry about water or perfumed oils – I shall take care of all that. Thurule, unpack my combs and robe, there's a good lad.'

Toc glanced over to see Tool facing him. The scout grimaced wryly.

The T’lan Imass strode over. 'We can begin our arrow-making efforts, soldier.'

'Aye, once I'm done with the tents.'

'Very well. I shall assemble the raw material we have collected. We must fashion a tool kit.'

Toc had put up enough tents in his soldiering days to allow him to maintain fair attention on Tool's preparations while he worked. The T’lan Imass knelt beside the antelope and, with no apparent effort, broke off both antlers down near the base. He then moved to one side and unslung the hide bag he carried, loosening the drawstring so that it unfolded onto the ground, revealing a half-dozen large obsidian cobbles collected on their passage across the old lava flow, and an assortment of different kinds of stones which had come from the shoreline beyond the Jaghut tower, along with bone-reeds and a brace of dead seagulls, both of which were still strapped to Toc's pack.

It was always a wonder – and something of a shock – to watch the deftness of the undead warrior's withered, almost fleshless hands, as he worked. An artist's hands. Selecting one of the obsidian cobbles, the T’lan Imass picked up one of the larger beach stones and with three swift blows detached three long, thin blades of the volcanic glass. A few more concussive strikes created a series of flakes that varied in size and thickness.

Tool set down the hammerstone and the obsidian core. Sorting through the flakes, he chose one, gripping it in his left hand, then, with his right, he reached for one of the antlers. Using the tip of the foremost tine of the antler, the T’lan Imass began punching minute flakes from the edge of the larger flake.

Beside Toc the Younger, Lady Envy sighed. 'Such extraordinary skill. Do you think, in the time before we began to work metal, we all possessed such abilities?'

The scout shrugged. 'Seems likely. According to some Malazan scholars, the discovery of iron occurred only half a thousand years ago – for the peoples of the Quon Tali continent, in any case. Before that, everyone used bronze. And before bronze we used unalloyed copper and tin. Before those, why not stone?'

'Ah, I knew you had been educated, Toc the Younger. Human scholars, alas, tend to think solely in terms of human accomplishments. Among the Elder Races, the forging of metals was quite sophisticated. Improvements on iron itself were known. My father's sword, for example.'

He grunted. 'Sorcery. Investment. It replaces technological advancement – it's often a means of supplanting the progress of mundane knowledge.'

'Why, soldier, you certainly do have particular views when it comes to sorcery. However, did I detect something of rote in your words? Which bitter scholar – some failed sorcerer no doubt – has espoused such views?'

Despite himself, Toc grinned. 'Aye, fair enough. Not a scholar, in fact, but a High Priest.'

'Ah, well, cults see any advancement – sorcerous or, indeed, mundane – as potential threats. You must dismantle your sources, Toc the Younger, lest you do nothing but ape the prejudices of others.'

'You sound just like my father.'
'You should have heeded his wisdom.'

'I should have. But I never did. Leave the Empire, he said. Find someplace beyond the reach of the court, beyond the commanders and the Claw. Keep your head low, son...'

Finished with the last of the three tents, Toc made his way to Tool's side. Seventy paces away, on the summit of a nearby hill, Mok had assembled the wood-framed hide-lined bath-tub. Lady Envy, Thurule marching at her side with folded robe and bath-kit in his arms, made her way towards it. The wolf and dog sat close to Senu where he worked on the antelope. The Seguleh flung spare bits of meat to the animals every now and then.

Tool had completed four small stone tools – a backed blade; some kind of scraper, thumbnail-sized; a crescent-bladed piece with its inside edge finely worked; and a drill or punch. He now turned to the original three large flakes of obsidian.

Crouching down beside the T'lan Imass, Toc examined the finished items. 'All right,' he said after a few moments' examination, 'I'm starting to understand this. These ones are for working the shaft and the fletching, yes?'

Tool nodded. 'The antelope will provide us with the raw material. We need gut string for binding. Hide for the quiver and its straps.'

'What about this crescent-shaped one?'

'The bone-reed shafts must be trued.'

'Ah, yes, I see. Won't we need some kind of glue or pitch?'

'Ideally, yes. Since this is a treeless plain, however, we shall make do with what we possess. The fletching will be tied on with gut.'

'You make the fashioning of arrowheads look easy, Tool, but something tells me it isn't.'

'Some stone is sand, some is water. Edged tools can be made of the stone that is water. Crushing tools are made of the stone that is sand, but only the hardest of those.'

'And here I've gone through life thinking stone is stone.'

'In our language, we possess many names for stone. Names that tell of its nature, names that describe its function, names for what has happened to it and what will happen to it, names for the spirit residing within it, names—'

'All right, all right! I see your point. Why don't we talk about something else?'

'Such as?'

Toc glanced over at the other hill. Only Lady Envy's head and knees were visible above the tub's framework. The sunset blazed behind her. The two Seguleh, Mok and Thurule, stood guard over her, facing outward. 'Her.'

'Of Lady Envy, I know little more than what I have already said.'

'She was a ... companion of Anomander Rake's?'

Tool resumed removing thin, translucent flakes of obsidian from what was quickly assuming the shape of a lanceolate arrowhead. 'At first, there were three others, who wandered together, for a time. Anomander Rake, Caladan Brood, and a sorceress who eventually ascended to become the Queen of Dreams. Following that event, dramas ensued – or so it is told. The Son of Darkness was joined by Lady Envy, and the Soletaken known as Osric. Another three who wandered together. Caladan Brood chose a solitary path at the time, and was not seen on this world for score centuries. When he finally returned – perhaps a thousand years ago – he carried the hammer he still carries: a weapon of the Sleeping Goddess.'

'And Rake, Envy and this Osric – what were they up to?'
The T’lan Imass shrugged. ‘Of that, only they could tell you. There was a falling out. Osric is gone – where, no-one knows. Anomander Rake and Lady Envy remained companions. It is said they parted – argumentatively – in the days before the ascendants gathered to chain the Fallen One. Rake joined in that effort. The lady did not. Of her, this is the sum of my knowledge, soldier.’

‘She’s a mage.’

‘The answer to that is before you.’

‘The hot bathwater appearing from nowhere, you mean.’

Tool set the finished arrowhead down and reached for another blank. ‘I meant the Seguleh, Toc the Younger.’

The scout grunted. ‘Ensorcelled – forced to serve her – Hood’s breath, she’s made them slaves!’

The T’lan Imass paused to regard him. ‘This bothers you? Are there not slaves in the Malazan Empire?’

‘Aye. Debtors, petty criminals, spoils of war. But, Tool, these are Seguleh! The most feared warriors on this continent. Especially the way they attack without the slightest warning, for reasons only they know—’

‘Their communication,’ Tool said, ‘is mostly non-verbal. They assert dominance with posture, faint gestures, direction of stance and tilt of head.’

Toc blinked. ‘They do? Oh. Then why haven’t I, in my ignorance, been cut down long ago?’

‘Your unease in their presence conveys submission,’ the T’lan Imass replied.

‘A natural coward, that’s me. I take it, then, that you show no ... unease.’

‘I yield to no-one, Toc the Younger.’

The Malazan was silent, thinking on Tool’s words. Then he said, ‘That oldest brother – Mok – his mask bears but twin scars. I think I know what that means, and if I’m right...’ He slowly shook his head.

The undead warrior glanced up, shadowed gaze not wavering from the scout’s face. ‘The young one who challenged me – Senu – was ... good. Had I not anticipated him, had I not prevented him from fully drawing his swords, our duel might well have been a long one.’

Toc scowled. ‘How could you tell how good he was when he didn’t even get his swords clear of their scabbards?’

‘He parried my attacks with them none the less.’

Toc’s lone eye slowly widened. ‘He parried you with half-drawn blades?’

‘The first two attacks, yes, but not the third. I need only to study the eldest’s movements, the lightness of his steps on the earth – his grace – to sense the full measure of his skill. Senu and Thurule both acknowledge him as their master. Clearly you believe, by virtue of his mask, that he is highly ranked among his own kind.’

‘Third, I think. Third highest. There’s supposed to be a legendary Seguleh with an unmarked mask. White porcelain. Not that anyone has ever seen him, except the Seguleh themselves, I suppose. They are a warrior caste. Ruled by the champion.’

Toc turned to study the two distant warriors, then glanced over a shoulder at Senu, who still knelt over the antelope not ten paces away. ‘So what has brought them to the mainland, I wonder?’

‘You might ask the youngest, Toc.’

The scout grinned at Tool. ‘Meaning you’re as curious as I am. Well, I am afraid I can’t do your dirty work for you, since I rank below him. He may choose to speak with me, but I cannot initiate. If you want answers, it is up to you to ask the questions.’
Tool set down the antler and blank, then rose to his feet in a muted clack of bones. He strode towards Senu. Toc followed.

'Warrior,' the T'lan Imass said.

The Seguleh paused in his butchering, dipped his head slightly.

'What has driven you to leave your homeland? What has brought you and your brothers to this place?'

Senu's reply was a dialect of Daru, slightly archaic to Toc's ears. 'Master Stoneblade, we are the punitive army of the Seguleh.'

Had anyone other than a Seguleh made such a claim, Toc would have laughed outright. As it was, he clamped his jaw tight.

Tool seemed as taken aback as was the scout, for it was a long moment before he spoke again. 'Punitive. Whom does the Seguleh seek to punish?'

'Invaders to our island. We kill all that come, yet the flow does not cease. The task is left to our Blackmasks – the First Level Initiates in the schooling of weapons – for the enemy comes unarmed and so are not worthy of duelling. But such slaughter disrupts the discipline of training, stains the mind and so damages the rigours of mindfulness. It was decided to travel to the homeland of these invaders, to slay the one who sends his people to our island. I have given you answer, Master Stoneblade.'

'Do you know the name of these people? The name by which they call themselves?'

'Priests of Pannion. They come seeking to convert. We are not interested. They do not listen. And now they warn of sending an army to our island. To show our eagerness for such an event, we sent them many gifts. They chose to be insulted by our invitation to war. We admit we do not understand, and have therefore grown weary of discourse with these Pannions. From now on, only our blades will speak for the Seguleh.'

'Yet Lady Envy has ensnared you with her charms.'

Toc's breath caught.

Senu dipped his head again, said nothing.

'Fortunately,' Tool continued in his dry, uninflected tone, 'we are now travelling towards the Pannion Domin.'

'The decision pleased us,' Senu grated.

'How many years since your birth, Senu?' the T'lan Imass asked.

'Fourteen, Master Stoneblade. I am Eleventh Level Initiate.'

Square-cut pieces of meat on skewers dripped sizzling fat into the flames. Lady Envy appeared from the gloom with her entourage in tow. She was dressed in a thick, midnight blue robe that hung down to brush the dew-laden grasses. Her hair was tied back into a single braid.

'A delicious aroma – I am famished!'

Toc caught Thurule's casual turn, gloved hands lifting. The unsheathing of his two swords was faster than the scout's eye could track, as was the whirling attack. Sparks flashed as bright steel struck flint. Tool was driven back a half-dozen paces as blow after blow rained down on his own blurred weapon. The two warriors vanished into the darkness beyond the hearth's lurid glow.

Wolf and dog barked, plunging after them.

'This is infuriating!' Lady Envy snapped.
Sparks exploded ten paces away, insufficient light for Toc to discern anything more than the vague twisting of arms and shoulders. He shot a glance at Mok and Senu. The latter still crouched at the hearth, studiously tending to the supper. The twin-scarred eldest stood motionless, watching the duel — though it seemed unlikely he could see any better than Toc could. Maybe he doesn't need to...

More sparks rained through the night.

Lady Envy stifled a giggle, one hand to her mouth.

'I take it you can see in the dark, Lady,' Toc murmured.

'Oh yes. This is an extraordinary duel — I have never... no, it's more complicated. An old memory, dredged free when you first identified these as Seguleh. Anomander Rake once crossed blades with a score of Seguleh, one after the other. He'd paid an unannounced visit to the island — knowing nothing of the inhabitants. Taking human form and fashioning a mask for himself, he elected to walk down the city's main thoroughfare. Being naturally arrogant, he showed no deference to any who crossed his path . . .'

Another clash lit up the night, the exchange followed by a loud, solid grunt. Then the blades collided once again.

'Two bells. That was the full duration of Rake's visit to the island and its people. He described the ferocity of that short time, and his dismay and exhaustion which led him to withdraw into his warren if only to slow the hammering of his heart.'

A new voice, rasping and cold, now spoke. 'Blacksword.'

They turned to see Mok facing them.

'That was centuries ago,' Lady Envy said.

'The memory of worthy opponents does not fade among the Seguleh, mistress.'

'Rake said the last swordsman he faced wore a mask with seven symbols.'

Mok tilted his head. 'That mask still awaits him. Blacksword holds the Seventh position. Mistress, we would have him claim it.'

She smiled. 'Perhaps soon you can extend to him the invitation in person.'

'It is not an invitation, mistress. It is a demand.'

Her laugh was sweet and full-throated. 'Dear servant, there is no-one whom the Lord of Darkness will not meet with a steady, unwavering eye. Consider that a warning.'

'Then shall our swords cross, mistress. He is the Seventh. I am the Third.'

She turned on him, arms folded. 'Oh, really! Do you know where that score of Seguleh souls ended up when he killed them ... including the Seventh? Chained within the sword Dragnipur, that's where. For eternity. Do you truly wish to join them, Mok?'

There was another loud thud from the darkness beyond the firelight, then silence.

'Seguleh who die, fail,' Mok said. 'We spare no thoughts for the failed among us.'

'Does that,' Toc softly enquired, 'include your brother?'

Tool had reappeared, his flint sword in his left hand, dragging Thurule's body by the collar with his right. The Seguleh's head lolled. Dog and wolf trailed the two, tails wagging.

'Have you killed my servant, T'lan Imass?' Lady Envy asked.

'I have not,' Tool replied. 'Broken wrist, broken ribs, a half-dozen blows to the head. I believe he will
recover. Eventually'

'Well, that won't do at all, I'm afraid. Bring him here, please. To me.'

'He is not to be healed magically,' Mok said.

The Lady's temper snapped then. She spun, a wave of argent power surging out from her. It struck Mok, threw him back through the air. He landed with a heavy thud. The coruscating glare vanished. 'Servants do not make demands of me! I remind you of your place, Mok. I trust once is enough.' She swung her attention back to Thurule. 'Heal him I shall. After all,' she continued in a milder tone, 'as any lady of culture knows, three is the absolute minimum when it comes to servants.' She laid a hand on the Seguleh's chest.

Thurule groaned.

Toc glanced at Tool. 'Hood's breath, you're all chopped up!'

'It has been a long time since I last faced such a worthy opponent,' Tool said. 'All the more challenging for using the flat of my blade.'

Mok was slowly climbing to his feet. At the T'lan Imass's last words, he went still, then slowly faced the undead warrior.

'I'll be damned, Tool, you gave the Third pause.'

'There will be no more duels this night,' Lady Envy said in a stern voice. 'I'll not constrain my wrath the next time.'

Mok casually slid his attention away from the T'lan Imass.

Straightening, Lady Envy sighed. Thurule is mended. I am almost weary! Senu, dear, get out the plates and utensils. And the Elin Red. A nice quiet meal is called for, I should say.' She flashed Toc a smile. 'And witty discourse, yes?'

It was now Toc's turn to groan.

The three horsemen drew rein to halt on the low hill's summit. Pulling his mount around to face the city of Pale, Whiskeyjack stared for a time, jaw muscles bunching.

Quick Ben said nothing, watching the grey-bearded commander, his old friend, with fullest understanding. *Upon this hill, we came to retrieve Hairlock. Amidst piles of empty armour – gods, they're still here, rotting in the grasses – and the sorceress Tattersail, the last left standing of the cadre. We'd just crawled out of the collapsed tunnels, leaving hundreds of brothers and sisters buried behind us. We burned with rage . . . we burned with the knowledge of betrayal."

*Here . . . on this sorcery-blasted hill, we were ready to commit murder. With cold, cold hands . . . The wizard glanced over at Mallet. The healer's small eyes were narrowed on Whiskeyjack, and Quick Ben knew that he too was reliving bitter memories.

*There is no burying the history of our lives. Yellow nails and fingers of bone claw up from the ground at our feet, and hold us fast.*

'Summarize,' Whiskeyjack growled, his grey eyes on the empty sky above the city.

Mallet cleared his throat. 'Who starts?'

The commander swung his head to the healer.

'Right,' Mallet said. 'Paran's ... affliction. His mortal flesh has the taint of ascendant blood ... and ascendant places ... but as Quick will tell you, neither one should be manifesting as illness. No, that blood, and those places, are like shoves down a corridor.'
'And he keeps crawling back,' Quick Ben added. 'Trying to escape. And the more he tries—"

'The sicker he gets,' Mallet finished.

Whiskeyjack, eyes once again on Pale, grimaced wryly. 'The last time I stood on this hill I had to listen to Quick and Kalam finishing each other's sentences. Turns out less has changed than I'd thought. Is the captain himself ascendant?'

'As near as,' the wizard admitted. And, needless to say, that's worrying. But it'd be even more worrying if Paran . . . wanted it. Then again, who knows what ambitions lie hidden beneath that reluctant visage?

'What do you two make of his tale of the Hounds and Rake's sword?'

'Troubling,' Mallet replied.

'That's an understatement,' Quick Ben said. 'Damned scary.'

Whiskeyjack scowled at him. 'Why?'

'Dragnipur's not Rake's sword – he didn't forge it. How much does the bastard know about it? How much should he know? And where in Hood's name did those Hounds go? Wherever it is, Paran's linked by blood with one of them—'

'And that makes him . . . unpredictable,' Mallet interjected.

'What's at the end of this corridor you described?'

'I don't know. '

'Me neither,' Quick Ben said regretfully. 'But I think we should add a few shoves of our own. If only to save Paran from himself.'

'And how do you propose we do that?'

The wizard grinned. 'It's already started, Commander. Connecting him to Silverfox. She reads him like Tattersail did a Deck of Dragons, sees more every time she rests eyes on him.'

'Maybe that's just Tattersail's memories . . . undressing him,' Mallet commented.

'Very funny,' Whiskeyjack drawled. 'So Silverfox dips into his soul – no guarantee she'll be sharing her discoveries with us, is there?'

'If Tattersail and Nightchill's personae come to dominate . . .'

'The sorceress is well enough, but Nightchill . . .' Whiskeyjack shook his head.

'She was a nasty piece of work,' Quick Ben agreed. 'Something of a mystery there. Still, a Malazan . . .'

'Of whom we know very little,' the commander growled. 'Remote. Cold.'

Mallet asked, 'What was her warren?'

'Rashan, as far as I could tell,' Quick Ben said sourly. 'Darkness.'

'That's knowledge that Silverfox can draw on, then,' the healer said after a moment.

'Probably instinctively, in fragments – not much of Nightchill survived, I gather.'

'Are you sure of that, wizard?' Whiskeyjack asked.

'No.' About Nightchill, I'm less sure than I'm implying. There have been other Nightchills . . . long before the Malazan Empire. The First Age of the Nathilog Wars. The Liberation of Karakarang on Seven Cities, nine
centuries back. The Seti and their expulsion from Venn, on Quon Tali, almost two thousand years ago. A woman, a sorceress, named Nightchill, again and again. If she’s the same one ...

The commander leaned in his saddle and spat to the ground. 'I'm not happy.'

Wizard and healer said nothing.

I'd tell him about Burn . . .but if he ain't happy now what'll the news of the world's impending death do to him? No, deal with that one on your own, Quick, and be ready to jump when the time comes . . . The Crippled God's declared war on the gods, on the warrens, on the whole damned thing and every one of us in it. Fine, O Fallen One, but that means you'll have to outwit me. Forget the gods and their clumsy games, I'll have you crawling in circles before long ...

Moments passed, the horses motionless under the riders except for the flicking of tails and the twitching of coats and ears to ward off biting flies.

'Keep facing Paran in the right direction,' Whiskeyjack finally said. 'Shove when the opportunity arises. Quick Ben, find out all you can about Nightchill – through any and every source available. Mallet, explain about Paran to Spindle – I want all three of you close enough to the captain to count nose hairs.' He gathered the reins and swung his mount round. 'The Darujhistan contingent's due to arrive at Brood's any time now – let's head back.'

They rode down from the hill and its ruinous vestiges at a canter, leaving the flies buzzing aimlessly above the summit.

Whiskeyjack reined in before the tent that had been provided for Dujek Onearm, his horse breathing hard from the extended ride, through the Bridgeburners' encampment where he'd left Quick Ben and Mallet, and into Brood's sprawled camp. He swung from the saddle, wincing as he stepped down on his bad leg.

The standard-bearer Artanthos appeared. 'I'll take the reins, Commander,' the young man said. 'The beast needs rubbing down—'

'He ain't the only one,' Whiskeyjack muttered. 'Onearm's within?'

'Aye. He has been expecting you.'

Without another word the commander entered the tent.

'Damned about time,' Dujek growled from his cot, grunting as as he sat up. 'Pour us some ale, there, on the table. Find a chair. You hungry?'

'No.'

'Ver. Let's drink.'

Neither spoke until Whiskeyjack had finished repositioning furniture and pouring ale. The silence continued until they'd both finished the first tankards and the commander refilled them from the jug.

'Moon's Spawn,' Dujek said after wiping his mouth then reaching for the tankard once again. 'If we're lucky, we'll see it again, but not till Coral, or even later. So, Anomander Rake's agreed to throw his – and the Moon's – weight against this Pannion Domin. Reasons? Unknown. Maybe he just likes a fight.'

Whiskeyjack frowned. 'At Pale, he struck me as a reluctant combatant, Dujek.'

'Only because his Tiste Andii were busy elsewhere. Good thing, too, or we would have been annihilated.'

'You might be right. Seems we're mustering a whole lot to take on a middling-sized empire of zealots, Dujek. I know, the Domin's smelled foul from the start, and something's building. Even so . . .'

'Aye.' After a moment, Dujek shrugged. 'We'll see what we see. Did you speak with Twist?'
Whiskeyjack nodded. ‘He agrees that his flights should remain unseen – no supplying of our forces on the march if at all possible. He has scouts seeking a strategic place to hold up close to the Pannion border – hidden but close enough to strike when the time comes.’

‘Good. And is our army ready to leave Pale?’

‘As ready as it'll ever be. The question of supply on the march remains.’

‘We'll cover that when the emissaries from Darujhistan get here. Now. Silverfox . . .’

‘Hard to say, Dujek. This gathering of Plan Imass is worrying, especially when she asserts that we'll all need those undead warriors when we take on the Pannion Domin. High Fist, we don't know enough about our enemy –.’

‘That will change – have you instructed Quick Ben on initiating contact with that mercenary company in Capustan?’

‘He's worked something out. We'll see if they take the bait.’

‘Back to Silverfox, Whiskeyjack. Tattersail was a solid ally – a friend—’

‘She's there, in this Rhivi child. Paran and she have ... spoken.' He fell silent for a moment, then sighed, his eyes on the tankard in his hands. 'Things have yet to unfold, so we'll just have to wait and see.’

‘Any creature that so devours its parent. . .’

‘Aye, but then again, whenever have the T’lan Imass shown a speck of compassion? They're undead, soulless and let’s face it, once-allies or not, damned horrific. They were on the Emperor's leash and no-one else's. Fighting alongside them back in Seven Cities was not a comforting experience – we both know that, Dujek.’

‘Expedience always comes arm-in-arm with discomfort,’ the High Fist muttered. ‘And now they're back, only this time they're on a child's leash . . .’

Whiskeyjack grunted. ‘That's a curious observation, but I see what you mean. Kellanved showed ... restraint with the T’lan Imass, discounting that mess at Aren. Whereas a child, born of ravaged souls within the warren of Tellann, acquiring such power . . .’

‘And how many children have you met capable of showing restraint? Tattersail's wisdom needs to come to the fore, and soon.’

‘We'll do all we can, Dujek.’

The old man sighed, then nodded. ‘Now, your sense of our newfound allies?’

‘The departure of the Crimson Guard is a blow,’ Whiskeyjack said. ‘A disparate collection of dubious mercenaries and hangers-on in their place signifies a drop in quality. The Mott Irregulars are the best of the bunch, but that’s not saying a whole lot. The Rhivi and Barghast are solid enough, as we both know, and the Tiste Andii are unequalled. Still, Brood needs us. Badly.’

‘Perhaps more than we need him and his forces, aye,’ Dujek said. ‘In a normal kind of war, that is.’

‘Rake and Moon’s Spawn are Brood’s true shaved knuckles in the hole. High Fist, with the T’lan Imass joined to our cause, I cannot see any force on this continent or any other that could match us. God knows, we could annex half the continent—’

‘Could we now?’ Dujek grinned sourly. ‘Stow that thought, old friend, stow it deep so it never again sees the light of day. We’re about to march off and sword-kiss a tyrant – what happens afterwards is a discussion that will have to await another time. Right now, we're both edging around a deadly pit—’

‘Aye, we are. Kallor.’
'Kallor.'

'He will try to kill the child,' Whiskeyjack said.

'He won't,' Dujek countered. 'If he tries, Brood will go for him.' The one-armed man leaned forward with his tankard and Whiskeyjack refilled it. Settling back, the High Fist studied the commander, then said, 'Caladan Brood is the real shaved knuckle in the hole, old friend. I've read of his times up around Laederon, in the Nathilog Histories. Hood's breath, you don't want to get him riled – whether you're an ally or an enemy makes no difference to Brood when his rage is unleashed. At least with Anomander Rake, it's a cold, taut power. Not so with the warlord. That hammer of his ... it's said that it's the only thing that can awaken Burn. Swing it against the ground, hard enough, and the goddess will open her eyes. And the truth is, if Brood didn't have the strength to do so, he wouldn't be carrying the hammer in the first place.'

Whiskeyjack mused on this for a while, then said, 'We have to hope that Brood remains as the child's protector.'

'Kallor will work to sway the warlord,' Dujek asserted, 'with argument rather than with his sword. He may well seek Rake's support, as well...'

The commander eyed the High Fist. 'Kallor's paid you a visit.'

'Aye, and he's a persuasive bastard. Even to the point of dispelling his enmity towards you – he's not been physically struck in centuries, or so he said. He also said he deserved it.'

'Generous of him,' Whiskeyjack drawled. When it's politically expedient. 'I'll not stand to one side in the butchering of a child,' the commander added in a cold voice. 'No matter what power or potential is within her.'

Dujek glanced up. 'In defiance of my command, should I give it?'

'We've known each other a long time, Dujek.'

'Aye, we have. Stubborn.'

'When it matters.'

The two men said nothing for a time, then the High Fist looked away and sighed. 'I should bust you back down to sergeant.'

Whiskeyjack laughed.

'Pour me another,' Dujek growled. 'We've got an emissary from Darujhistan on the way and I want to be properly cheerful when he arrives.'

'What if Kallor's right?'

The Mhybe's eyes narrowed. 'Then, Warlord, you had best give him leave to cut me down the same time he kills my daughter.'

Caladan Brood's wide, flat brow furrowed as he scowled down at her. 'I remember you, you know. Among the tribes when we campaigned in the north. Young, fiery, beautiful. Seeing you – seeing what the child has done to you – causes pain within me, woman.'

'Mine is greater, I assure you, Warlord, yet I choose to accept it—'

'Your daughter is killing you – why?'

The Mhybe glanced across at Korlat. The Tiste Andii's expression was distraught. The air within the tent was sweltering, the currents around the three of them damp and turgid. After a moment, the old woman returned her gaze to Caladan Brood. 'Silverfox is of Tellann, of the T'lan Imass, Warlord. They have no life-force to give her. They are kin, yet can offer no sustenance, for they are undead, whilst their new child is flesh and blood.'
Tattersail too is dead. As was Nightchill. Kinship is more important than you might think. Blood-bound lives are the web that carries each of us; they make up that which a life climbs, from newborn to child, then child to adulthood. Without such life-forces, one withers and dies. To be alone is to be ill, Warlord, not just spiritually, but physically as well. I am my daughter's web, and I am alone in that—'

Brood was shaking his head. 'Your explanation does not answer her ... impatience, Mhybe. She claims she will command the T'lan Imass. She claims they have heard her summons. Does this not in turn mean that the undead armies have already accepted her?'

Korlat spoke up. 'Warlord, you believe Silverfox seeks to hasten her own growth in order to confirm her authority when she comes face to face with the T'lan Imass? The undead armies will reject a child summoner – is this your belief?'

'I am seeking the reason for what she's doing to her mother, Korlat,' Brood said, with a pained expression. 'You might well be correct, Warlord,' the Mhybe said. 'Bone and flesh can hold only so much power – the limit is always finite. For such beings as you and Anomander Rake – and you, too, Korlat – you possess the centuries of living necessary to contain what you command. Silverfox does not, or, rather, her memories tell her she does, yet her child's body denies those memories. Thus, vast power awaits her, and to fully command it she must be a grown woman – and even then ...'

'Ascendancy is born of experience,' Korlat said. 'An interesting notion, Mhybe.'

'And experience ... tempers,' the Rhivi woman nodded.

'Thus, Kallor's fear,' Brood rumbled, rising from his chair with a restless sigh. 'Untempered power.'

'It may be,' Korlat said in a low voice, 'that Kallor himself is the cause of the child's impatience – she seeks to become a woman in order to alleviate his fears.'

'I'd doubt he'd appreciate the irony,' the warlord muttered. 'Alleviate, you said? Thinking on it, more likely she knows she'll have to defend herself against him sooner or later—'

'A secret hovers between them,' Korlat murmured.

There was silence. All knew the truth of that, and all were troubled. One of the souls within Silverfox had crossed paths with Kallor before. Tattersail, Bellurdan or Nightchill.

After a long moment, Brood cleared his throat. 'Life experiences ... the child possesses those, does she not, Mhybe? The three Malazan mages ...'

The Mhybe smiled wearily. 'A Thelomen, two women, and myself – one father and three reluctant mothers to the same child. The father's presence seems so faint that I have begun to suspect it exists only as Nightchill's memory. As for the two women, I am seeking to discover who they were, and what I have learned thus far – of Tattersail – comforts me.'

'And Nightchill?' Korlat asked.

Brood interjected, 'Did not Rake kill her here at Pale?'

'No, Nightchill was ambushed – betrayed – by the High Mage Tayschrenn,' the Tiste Andii replied. 'We have been informed,' she added drily, 'that Tayschrenn has since fled back to the Empress.' Korlat faced the Mhybe again. 'What have you learned of her?'

'I have seen flashes of darkness within Silverfox,' the Rhivi woman replied reluctantly, 'which I would attribute to Nightchill. A seething anger, a hunger for vengeance, possibly against Tayschrenn. At some time, perhaps soon, there will be a clash between Tattersail and Nightchill – the victor will come to dominate my daughter's nature.'

Brood was silent for a half-dozen breaths, then said, 'What can we do to aid this Tattersail?'
The Malazans are seeking to do that very thing, Warlord. Much rests on their efforts. We must have faith in them. In Whiskeyjack, and in Captain Paran – the man who was once Tattersail's lover.'

'I have spoken with Whiskeyjack,' Korlat said. 'He possesses an unshakeable integrity, Warlord. An honourable man.'

'I hear your heart in your words,' Brood observed.

Korlat shrugged. 'Less cause to doubt me, then, Caladan. I am not careless in such matters.'

The warlord grunted. 'I dare not take another step in that direction,' he said wryly. 'Mhybe, hold close to your daughter. Should you begin to see the spirit of Nightchill rising and that of Tattersail setting, inform me at once.'

And should that occur, my telling you will see my daughter killed.

'My thoughts,' Brood continued, his thin eyes fixed on her, 'are not settled on that matter. Rather, such an event may well lead to my more directly supporting the Malazans in their efforts on Tattersail's behalf.'

The Mhybe raised her brows. 'Precisely how, Warlord?'

'Have faith in me,' Brood said.

The Rhivi woman sighed, then nodded. 'Very well, I shall so inform you.'

The tent flap was drawn back and Hurlochel, Brood's standard-bearer, entered. 'Warlord,' he said, 'the Darujhistan contingent approach our camp.'

'Let us go to meet them, then.'

Since arriving, the hooded driver seemed to have fallen asleep. The huge, ornate carriage's double doors opened from within and a regent-blue slippered foot emerged. Arrayed before the carriage and its train of six jewel-decked horses, in a crescent, were the representatives of the two allied armies: Dujek, Whiskeyjack, Twist and Captain Paran to the left, and Caladan Brood, Kallor, Korlat, Silverfox and the Mhybe to the right.

The Rhivi matron had been left exhausted by the events of the night just past, and her meeting with Brood had added yet more layers of weariness – the holding back on so much in the face of the warlord's hard questions had been difficult, yet, she felt, necessary. Her daughter's meeting with Paran had been far more strained and uncertain than the Mhybe had suggested to Brood. Nor had the intervening hours since then diminished the awkwardness of the situation. Worse, the reunion may have triggered something within Silverfox – the child had drawn heavily on the Mhybe since then, stripping away year after year from her mother's failing life. Is it Tattersail behind the fevered demand on my life-spirit? Or Nightchill?

This will end soon. I yearn for the release of the Hooded One's embrace. Silverfox has allies, now. They will do what is necessary, I am certain of it – please, Spirits of the Rhivi, make me certain of it. The time for me is surely past, yet those around me continue to make demands of me. No, I cannot go on . . .

The slippered foot probed daintily downward, wavering until it touched ground. A rather plump calf, knee and thigh followed. The short, round man who emerged was wearing silks of every colour, the effect one of clashing discord. A shimmering, crimson handkerchief was clutched in one pudgy hand, rising to dab a glittering forehead. Both feet finally on the ground, the Daru loosed a loud sigh. 'Burn's fiery heart, but it's hot!'

Caladan Brood stepped forward. 'Welcome, representative of the City of Darujhistan, to the armies of liberation. I am Caladan Brood, and this is Dujek Onearm . . .'

The short, round man blinked myopically, mopped his brow once again, then beamed a smile. 'Representative of the City of Darujhistan? Indeed! None better, Kruppe says, though he be a lowly citizen, a curious commoner come to cast kindly eyes upon this momentous occasion! Kruppe is suitably honoured by your formal, nay, respectful welcome – what vast display, Kruppe wonders, will you formidable warriors
unveil when greeting the Council of Darujhistan's official representatives? The sheer escalation now imminent has Kruppe's heart all aflutter with anticipation! Look on, to the south — the councillors' carriage even now approaches!

A Great Raven's cackle spilled into the silence following the man's pronouncements.

Despite her fraught, worn emotions, the Mhybe smiled. Oh yes, of course. I know this man. She stepped forward, unable to resist herself as she said, 'I have been in your dreams, sir.'

Kruppe's eyes fixed on her and widened in alarm. He mopped his brow. 'My dear, while all things are possible ...'

Crone cackled a second time.

'I was younger then,' the Mhybe added. 'And with child. We were in the company of a Bonecaster ... and an Elder God.'

Recognition lit his round, flushed face, followed swiftly by dismay. For once he seemed at a loss for words. His gaze held on hers a moment longer, then dropped to the child at her side. She noted his narrowing eyes. He senses the way of things between us. Instantly. Howl And why is it I know the truth of my conviction? How profound is this link?

Caladan Brood cleared his throat. 'Welcome, citizen Kruppe. We are now aware of the events surrounding the birth of the child, Silverfox. You, then, are the mortal involved. The identity of this Elder God, however, remains unknown to us. Which one? The answer to that question may well do much to determine our ... relationship with the girl.'

Kruppe blinked up at the warlord. He patted the soft flesh beneath his chin with the silk cloth. 'Kruppe understands. Indeed he does. A sudden tension permeates this prestigious gathering, yes? The god in question. Yes, hmm. Ambivalence, uncertainty, all anathema to Kruppe of Darujhistan ... possibly, then again possibly not.' He glanced over a shoulder as the official delegation's carriage approached, mopped his brow again. 'Swift answers may well mislead, nay, give the wrong impression entirely. Oh my, what to do?'

'Damn you!' The cry came from the other carriage driver as the ornate contrivance arrived. 'Kruppe! What in Hood's name are you doing here?'

The silk-clad man pivoted and attempted a sweeping bow which, despite its meagre success, nevertheless managed to seem elegant. 'Dear friend Murillio. Have you climbed in the world with this new profession, or perhaps sidled sideways? Kruppe was unaware of your obvious talents in leading mules—'

The driver scowled. 'Seems the Council's select train of horses inexplicably vanished moments before our departure. Horses decidedly similar to ones you and Meese seem to have acquired, might I add.'

'Extraordinary coincidence, friend Murillio.'

The carriage doors opened and out climbed a broad-shouldered, balding man. His blunt-featured face was dark with anger as he strode towards Kruppe.

The small round citizen spread his arms wide even as he involuntarily stepped back. 'Dearest friend and lifelong companion. Welcome, Councillor Coll. And who is that behind you? Why, none other than Councillor Estraysian D'Ariel In such fashion all the truly vital representatives of fair Darujhistan are thus gathered!'

'Excluding you, Kruppe,' Coll growled, still advancing on the man who was now back-pedalling to his own carriage.

'Untrue, friend Coll! I am here as representative of Master Baruk—'

Coll halted. He crossed his burly arms. 'Oh, indeed? The alchemist sent you on his behalf, did he?'

'Well, not in so many words, of course. Baruk and I are of such closeness in friendship that words are often
unnecessary—'

'Enough, Kruppe.' Coll turned to Caladan Brood. 'My deepest apologies, Warlord. I am Coll, and this
gentleman at my side is Estraysian D'Arle. We are here on behalf of the Ruling Council of Darujhistan. The
presence of this ... this Kruppe ... was unintended, and indeed is unwelcome. If you can spare me a moment I
will send him on his way.'

'Alas, it seems we have need of him,' Brood replied. 'Rest assured I will explain. For now, however, perhaps
we should reconvene in my command tent.'

Coll swung a glare on Kruppe. 'What outrageous lies have you uttered now?'

The round man looked offended. 'Kruppe and the truth are lifelong partners, friend Coll! Indeed, wedded
bliss – we only yesterday celebrated out fortieth anniversary, the mistress of veracity and I. Kruppe is most
certainly of need – in all things, at all times and in all places! It is a duty Kruppe must accept, howsoever
humbly—'

With a low growl Coll raised a hand to cuff the man.

Estraysian D'Arle stepped forward and laid a hand on Coll's shoulder. 'Be at ease,' the councillor murmured.
'It appears to be obvious to all that Kruppe does not speak for anyone but Kruppe. We are not responsible for
him. If in truth he is to prove useful, the task of impressing us falls upon him and him alone.'

'And impress I shall!' Kruppe cried, suddenly beaming again.

Crone bounded down to hop towards Kruppe. 'You, sir, should have been a Great Raven!

'And you a dog!' he shouted back.

Crone halted, teetered a moment, wings half spreading. She cocked her head, whispered, 'A dog?'

'Only so that I might ruffle you behind the ears, my dear!'

'Ruffle? Ruffle!'

'Very well, not a dog, then. A parrot?'

'A parrot!'

'Perfect!'

'Enough!' Brood roared. 'All of you, follow me!' He whirled and stomped towards the Tiste Andii
encampment.

It took only a glance from the Mhybe to start Whiskeyjack laughing. Dujek joined him a moment later, then
the others.

Silverfox squeezed her hand. 'Kruppe has already revealed his value,' she said in low voice, 'don't you think?'

'Aye, child, that he has. Come, we'd best lead the way in catching up with the warlord.'

As soon as all were within the command tent and the removal of cloaks and weapons had begun, Paran strode
over to Councillor Coll. 'It is good to see you again,' the captain said, 'though,' he added in a low tone, 'you
wore a soldier's armour with more ease, I think, than those robes.'

Coll grimaced. 'You're right enough in that. Do you know I at times think back on that night camped in the
Gadrobi Hills with something like nostalgia. We weren't anything but ourselves, then.' He met Paran's eyes
with a flicker of worry at what he saw. They gripped hands. 'Simpler times ...'

'An unlikely toast,' a voice said and they turned as Whiskeyjack joined them, an earthenware jug in one hand.
'There's tankards there behind you, Councillor, on what passes for a table. Brood has no servants as such so I've elected myself to that worthy task.'

Pulling three tankards close, Paran frowned at the table. 'This is the bed of a wagon – you can still see the straw.'

'Which also explains this place smelling like a stable,' the commander added, pouring the tankards full of Gredfallan ale. 'Brood's map table went missing last night.'

Coll raised an eyebrow. 'Someone stole a table?'

'Not someone,' Whiskeyjack replied, glancing at Paran. 'Your Bridgeburners, Captain. I'd lay a column on it.'

'What in Hood's name for?'

'That's something you'll have to find out. Fortunately, the warlord's only complaint was at the inconvenience.'

Caladan Brood's deep voice rose then. 'If one and all will find seats, we can get to the business of supply and materiel.'

Kruppe was the first to lower himself into a chair – at the head of the makeshift table. He held a tankard and a handful of Rhivi sweetcakes. 'Such rustic environs!' he sighed, round face flushed with pleasure. 'And traditional pastries of the plains to lure the palate. More, this ale is most delicious, perfectly cooled—'

'Be quiet, damn you,' Coll growled. 'And what are you doing in that chair?'

'Why, sitting, friend Coll. Our mutual friend the alchemist—'

'Would skin you alive if he knew you were here, claiming to represent him.'

Kruppe's brows rose and he nearly choked on a mouthful of sweetcake, spraying crumbs as he coughed. He quickly drank down his ale, then belched. 'By the Abyss, what a distasteful notion. And entirely in error, Kruppe assures everyone. Baruk has a keen interest in the smooth conduct of this prestigious gathering of legendary persons. The success of the venture impending is uppermost in his mind, and he pledges to do all that is within his – and his servant Kruppe's – formidable abilities.'

'Has your master specific suggestions?' Brood asked.

'Innumerable suggestions of a specific nature, sir Warlord. So many that, when combined, they can only be seen or understood in the most general terms!' He then lowered his tone. 'Vague and seemingly vacuous generalities are proof of Master Baruk's all-embracing endeavours, Kruppe sagely points out.' He offered everyone a broad, crumb-flecked smile. 'But please, let us get under way lest this meeting stretch on, forcing the delivery of a sumptuous supper replete with the dryest of wines to whet the gullet and such a selection of sweets as to leave Kruppe groaning in fullest pleasure!'

'Gods forbid,' Coll muttered.

Estraysian D'Arle cleared his throat. 'We are faced with only minor difficulties in maintaining a supply route to your combined armies, Warlord and Dujek Onearm. The most pressing of these centres on the destroyed bridge west of Darujhistan. There are but few manageable crossings on the Catlin River, and the destruction of that stone bridge by the Jaghut Tyrant has created an inordinate amount of difficulty—'

'Ah,' Kruppe interjected, raising a pudgy finger, 'but are not bridges naught but a means of travelling from one side of a river to another? Does this not assume certain prerequisites regarding the projected plans of movement as directed by the leaders of the armies? Kruppe is left wondering ...' He reached for another sweetcake.

'As are we all,' D'Arle drawled after a moment.

Dujek, his eyes narrowed on Kruppe, cleared his throat. 'Well, much as I hate to admit it, there's something in that.' He swung his gaze to Estraysian. 'Catlin River only presents a problem if we look to employing the
south routes. And we’d only want those if the armies seek to cross early in the march.’

Both councillors frowned.

‘It is our intent,’ Brood explained, ‘to remain north of the river, to march directly towards Capustan. Our route will take us north of Saltoan…well north. Then proceed in a southeast direction.’

Coll spoke. ‘You describe a direct route to Capustan, sir, for your forces. Such a route will, however, strain our efforts at maintaining supply. We will not be able to deliver via the river. An overland train of such magnitude will sorely test our capabilities.’

‘It must be understood,’ Estraysian D’Arle added, ‘that the Council must needs deal with private enterprises in fulfilling your supply needs.’

‘Such delicacy!’ Kruppe cried. ‘The issues, martial comrades, are these. The Council of Darujhistan consists of various noble houses, of which virtually one and all possess interests in mercantile endeavours. Discounting the potentially confusing reality of the Council’s providing vast loans to your armies with which you will in turn purchase supplies from the Council, the particular nature of the redistribution of said wealth is paramount to specific members of the Council. The vying, the back-chamber deals and conniving – well! One would be hard-pressed to imagine such a nightmarish tangle of weights, measures, wefts and webs, dare Kruppe say! The instructions delivered to these two worthy representatives are no doubt manifest, not to mention a veritable skein of conflicting commands. The councillors here before you are thus constrained by a knot that not even the gods could disentangle! It falls to Kruppe, lowly but worthy citizen of fair Darujhistan, to propose his and Master Baruk’s solution.’

Coll leaned forward and rubbed his eyes. ‘Let’s hear it, then, Kruppe.’

‘An impartial and exquisitely competent manager of said supply is required, of course. Not on the Council and therefore possessing nothing of the internal pressures so afflicting its honourable members. Skilled, as well, in mercantile matters. A vast capacity for organizing. In all, a superior—’

Coll’s fist thumped down on the table, startling everyone. He rounded on Kruppe. ‘If you imagine yourself in such a role – you, a middling fence to middling pickpockets and warehouse thieves—’

But the small, round man raised his hands and leaned back. ‘Dear friend Coll! You flatter me with such an offer! However, poor Kruppe is far too busy with his own middling affairs to tackle such an endeavour. Nay, in close consultation with his loyal and wise servant Kruppe, Master Baruk proposes a different agent entirely—’

‘What is all this?’ Coll hissed dangerously. ‘Baruk doesn’t even know you’re here!’

‘A minor breakdown in communication, nothing more. The alchemist’s desire was plain to Kruppe, he assures you one and all! Whilst Kruppe may well and with some justification claim sole credit for the impending proposal, alas, he must bow to the virtue of truthfulness and therefore acknowledge Master Baruk’s minor – yet vital – contribution. Why, it was only yesterday that he mused on the peculiar talents of the agent in question, and if this was not a hint as to his desires, then what, dear Coll, could it have been?’

‘Get on with it, sir,’ Estraysian D’Arle grated.

‘Kruppe delights in doing so, friend Councillor – and by the way, how fares your daughter, Challice? Has she indeed partaken of marriage nuptials with that hero of the fete? Kruppe so regrets his missing that no doubt sumptuous event—’

‘Which has yet to occur,’ D’Arle snapped. ‘She is well, sir. My patience with you is growing very thin, Kruppe—’

‘Alas, I can only dream of thin. Very well, the agent in question is none other than the newly arrived mercantile enterprise known as the Trygalle Trade Guild.’ Beaming, he sat back, lacing his fingers together over his belly.

Brood turned to Coll. ‘An enterprise I have never heard of…’
The councillor was frowning. ‘As Kruppe said, newly arrived in Darujhistan. From the south – Elingarth, I believe. We used them but once – a singularly difficult delivery of funds to Dujek Onearm.’ He looked to Estraysian D’Arle, who shrugged, then spoke.

‘They have made no bids regarding the contracts to supply the combined armies. Indeed, they have sent no representative to the meetings – that single use of them Coll mentioned was a sub-contract, I believe.’ He swung a scowl on Kruppe. ‘Given their obvious lack of interest, why would you – or, rather, Master Baruk – believe that this Trygalle Trade Guild is amenable to participating, much less acting as mitigator?’

Kruppe poured himself another tankard of ale, sipped, then smacked his lips appreciatively. ‘The Trygalle Trade Guild does not offer bids, for every other enterprise would be sure to greatly underbid them without even trying. In other words, they are not cheap. More exactly, their services demand a king’s ransom generally. One thing you can be sure of, however, is that they will do precisely what they have been hired to do, no matter how ... uh, nightmarish ... the logistics.’

‘You've invested in them, haven't you, Kruppe?’ Coll’s face had darkened. ‘So much for impartial advice – and Baruk has absolutely nothing to do with you being here. You're acting on behalf of this Trygalle Trade Guild, aren't you?’

‘Kruppe assures, the conflict of interest is a matter of appearance only, friend Coll! The truth is more precisely a convergence. The needs are evident here before us all, and so too is the means of answering them! Happy coincidence! Now, Kruppe would partake of more of these delicious Rhivi cakes, whilst you discuss the merits of said proposal and no doubt reach the propitious, inevitable conclusion.’

Crone could smell sorcery in the air. And it doesn't belong. No, not Tiste Andii, not the Rhivi spirits awakened either ... She circled over the encampment, questing with all her senses. The afternoon had drawn into dusk, then night, as the meeting within Caladan Brood’s command tent stretched on, and on. The Great Raven was quickly bored by interminable discussions of caravan routes and how many tons of this and that were required on a weekly basis to keep two armies fed and content on the march. Granted, that repugnant creature Kruppe was amusing enough, in the manner that an obese rat trying to cross a rope bridge was worth a cackle or three. A finely honed mind dwelt beneath the smeared, grotesque affectations, she well knew, and his ability at earning his seat at the head of the table and of confounding the flailing councillors of Darujhistan was most certainly an entertaining enough display of deftness ... until Crone had sensed the stirrings of magic somewhere in the camp.

There, that large tent directly below ... I know it. The place where the Rhivi dress the Tiste Andii dead. Crooking her wings, she dropped in a tight spiral.

She landed a few paces from the entrance. The flap was drawn shut, tightly tied, but the leather thongs and their knots were poor obstacles for Crone's sharp beak. In moments she was within, hopping silently and unseen beneath the huge table – a table she recognized with a silent chuckle – and among a few scattered folded cots in the darkness.

Four figures leaned on the table above her, whispering and muttering. The muted clatter of wooden cards echoed through to Crone, and she cocked her head.

‘There it is again,’ a gravelly-voiced woman said. ‘You sure you shuffled the damned things, Spin?’

‘Will you – of course I did, Corporal. Stop asking me. Look, four times now, different laying of the fields every one, and it's simple. Obelisk dominates – the dolmen of time is the core. It's active, plain as day – the first time in decades . . .’

‘Could still be that untoward skew,’ another voice interjected. ‘You ain't got Fid's natural hand, Spin—’

‘Enough of that, Hedge,’ the corporal snapped. ‘Spindle's done enough readings to be the real thing, trust me.’

‘Didn't you just—’


'Shut up.'

'Besides,' Spindle muttered, 'I told you already, the new card's got a fixed influence – it's the glue holding everything together, and once you see that it all makes sense.'

'The glue, you said,' the fourth and final voice – also a woman's – mused. 'Linked to a new ascendant, you think?'

'Beats me, Blend,' Spindle sighed. 'I said a fixed influence, but I didn't say I knew the aspect of that influence. I don't know, and not because I'm not good enough. It's like it hasn't ... woken up yet. A passive presence, for the moment. Nothing more than that. When it does awaken ... well, things should heat up nicely, is my guess.'

'So,' the corporal said, 'what are we looking at here, mage?'

'Same as before. Soldier of High House Death's right-hand to Obelisk. Magi of Shadow's here – first time for that one, too – a grand deception's at work, is my guess. The Captain of High House Light holds out some hope, but it's shaded by Hood's Herald – though not directly, there's a distance there, I think. The Assassin of High House Shadow seems to have acquired a new face, I'm getting hints of it ... bloody familiar, that face.'

The one named Hedge grunted. 'Should bring Quick Ben in on this—'

'That's it!' Spindle hissed. 'The Assassin's face – it's Kalam!'

'Bastard!' Hedge growled. 'I'd suspected as much – him and Fid paddling off the way they did – you know what this means, don't you...'

'We can guess,' the corporal said, sounding unhappy. 'But the other thing's clear, Spin, isn't it?'

'Aye. Seven Cities is about to rise – may have already. The Whirlwind ... Hood must be smiling right now. Smiling something fierce.'

'I got some questions for Quick Ben,' Hedge muttered. 'Don't I just.'

'You should ask him about the new card, too,' Spindle said. 'If he don't mind crawling, let him take a look.'

'Aye...'

_A new card of the Deck of Dragons?_ Crone cocked her head up farther, thinking furiously. New cards were trouble, especially ones with power. The House of Shadow was proof enough of that... Her eyes – one, then, as she further cocked her head, the other – slowly focused, her mind dragged back from its abstracted realm, fixing at last on the underside of the table.

To find a pair of human eyes, the paint glittering as if alive, staring back down at her.

The Mhybe stepped out of the tent, her mind befuddled with exhaustion. Silverfox had fallen asleep in her chair, during one of Kruppe's rambling accounts describing yet another peculiarity of the Trygalle Trade Guild's Rules of Contract, and the Mhybe had decided to let the child be.

In truth, she longed for some time away from her daughter. A pressure was building around Silverfox, an incessant need that, moment by moment, was taking ever more of the Mhybe's life-spirit. Of course, this feeble attempt at escape was meaningless. The demand was boundless, and no conceivable distance could effect a change. Her flight from the tent, from her daughter's presence, held naught but symbolic meaning.

Her bones were a rack of dull, incessant pains, an ebb and flow of twinges that only the deepest of sleep could temporarily evade – the kind of sleep that had begun to elude her.

Paran emerged from the tent and approached. 'I would ask you something, Mhybe, then I shall leave you in peace.'
Oh, you poor, savaged man. What would you have me answer? 'What do you wish to know, Captain?'

Paran stared out at the sleeping camp. 'If someone wished to hide a table ...'

She blinked, then smiled. 'You will find them in the tent of the Shrouds – it is unfrequented for the moment. Come, I shall take you there.'

'Directions will suffice—'

'Walking eases the aches, Captain. This way.' She made her way between the first of the tent rows. 'You have stirred Tattersail awake,' she observed after a few moments. 'As a dominant personality for my daughter, I think I am pleased by the development.'

'I am glad for that, Mhybe.'

'What was the sorceress like, Captain?'

'Generous ... perhaps to a fault. A highly respected and indeed well-liked cadre mage.'

Oh, sir, you hold so much within yourself, chained and in darkness. Detachment is a flaw, not a virtue – don't you realize that?

He went on, 'You might well have viewed, from your Rhivi perspective, the Malazan forces on this continent as some kind of unstoppable, relentless monster, devouring city after city. But it was never like that. Poorly supplied, often outnumbered, in territories they had no familiarity with – by all accounts, Onearm's Host was being chewed to pieces. The arrival of Brood, the Tiste Andii, and the Crimson Guard stopped the campaign in its tracks. The cadre mages were often all that stood between the Host and annihilation.'

'Yet they had the Moranth ...'

'Aye, though not as reliable as you might think. None the less, their alchemical munitions have changed the nature of warfare, not to mention the mobility of their quorls. The Host has come to rely heavily on both.'

'Ah, I see faint lantern-glow coming from the Shroud – there, directly ahead. There have been rumours that all was not well with the Moranth ...'

Paran shot her a glance, then shrugged. 'A schism has occurred, triggered by a succession of defeats weathered by their elite forces, the Gold. At the moment, we have the Black at our side, and none other, though the Blue continue on the sea-lanes to Seven Cities.'

They were startled by the staggering appearance of a Great Raven from the Shroud's flap. She reeled drunkenly, flopped onto her chest but three paces from the Mhybe and the Malazan. Crone's head jerked up, one eye fixing on Paran.

'You!' she hissed, then, spreading her vast wings, she sprang into the air. Heavy, savage thuds of her wings lifted her up into the darkness. A moment later she was gone.

The Mhybe glanced at the captain. The man was frowning.

'Crone showed no sign of fearing you before,' she murmured.

Paran shrugged.

Voices sounded from the Shroud, and a moment later figures began filing out, the lead one carrying a hooded lantern.

'Far enough,' the captain growled.

The woman with the lantern flinched, then thumped a wrong-handed salute. 'Sir. We have just made a discovery – in this tent, sir. The purloined table has been found.'
'Indeed,' Paran drawled. 'Well done, Corporal. You and your fellow soldiers have shown admirable
diligence.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The captain strode towards the tent. 'It is within, you said?'

'Yes sir.'

'Well, military decorum insists we return it to the warlord at once, wouldn't you agree, Picker?'

'Absolutely, sir.'

Paran paused and surveyed the soldiers. 'Hedge, Spindle, Blend. Four in all. I trust you will be able to
manage.'

Corporal Picker blinked. 'Sir?'

'Carrying the table, of course.'

'Uh, might I suggest we find a few more soldiers—'

'I think not. We are departing in the morning, and I want the company well rested, so best not disturb their
sleep. It shouldn't take the four of you more than an hour, I would judge, which will give you a few moments to
spare readying your kits. Well, best not delay, Corporal, hmm?'

'Yes, sir.' Picker glumly swung to her soldiers. 'Dust up your hands, we've work to do. Spindle, you got a
problem?'

The man in question was staring slack-jawed at Paran.

'Spindle?'

'Idiot,' the mage whispered.

'Soldier!'

'How could I have missed it? It's him. As plain as can be . . .'

Picker stepped up and cuffed the mage. 'Snap out of it, damn you!'

Spindle stared at her, then scowled. 'Don't hit me again, or you'll regret it till the end of your days.'

The corporal stood firm. 'The next time I hit you, soldier, you won't be getting up. Any more threats from
you will be your last, am I clear?'

The mage shook himself, eyes straying once more to Paran. 'Everything will change,' he whispered. 'Can't
happen yet. I need to think. Quick Ben . . .'

'Spindle!'

He flinched, then gave his corporal a sharp nod. 'Pick up the table, aye. Let's get to it, aye, right away. Come
on, Hedge. Blend.'

The Mhybe watched the four soldiers re-enter the Shroud, then turned to Paran. 'What was all that about,
Captain?'

'I have no idea,' he replied levelly.

'That table needs more than four pairs of hands.'

'I imagine it does.'
'Yet you won't provide them.'

He glanced at her. 'Hood no. They stole the damned thing in the first place.'

A bell remained before the sun's rise. Leaving Picker and her hapless crew to their task, and departing as well from the Mhybe's presence, Paran made his way to the Bridgeburner encampment situated at the southwest edge of Brood's main camp. A handful of soldiers stood at sentry duty at the pickets, offering ragged salutes as the captain passed them.

He was surprised to find Whiskeyjack near the centre hearth, the commander busy saddling a tall chestnut gelding.

Paran approached. 'Has the meeting concluded, sir?' he asked.

The commander's glance was wry. 'I am beginning to suspect it will never end, if Kruppe has his way.'

'This trade guild of his has not gone down well, then.'

'To the contrary, it has been fully endorsed, though they'll cost the Council a king's ransom in truth. We have guarantees, now, ensuring the overland supply lines. Precisely what we required.'

'Why then does the meeting continue, sir?'

'Well, it seems that we'll have some envoys attached to our army.'

'Not Kruppe—'

'Indeed, the worthy Kruppe. And Coll – I suspect he's eager to get out of those fancy robes and back into armour.'

'Aye, he would be.'

Whiskeyjack cinched the girth strap one last time, then faced Paran. He seemed about to say one thing, then he hesitated, and chose another. 'The Black Moranth will take you and the Bridgeburners to the foot of the Barghast Range.'

The captain's eyes widened. 'That's quite a journey. And once there?'

'Once there, Trotts detaches from your command. He's to initiate contact with the White Face Barghast, by whatever means he deems proper. You and your company are to provide his escort, but you will not become otherwise entangled in the negotiations. We need the White Face clan – the entire clan.'

'And Trotts will do the negotiating? Beru fend.'

'He's capable of surprising you, Captain.'

'I see. Assuming he manages to succeed, we are then to proceed south?'

Whiskeyjack nodded. 'To the relief of Capustan, aye.' The commander set a boot within the stirrup and, with a wince, pulled himself up into the saddle. He gathered the reins, looking down on the captain. 'Any questions?'

Paran glanced around, studying the sleeping camp, then shook his head.

'I'd offer you Oponn's luck—'

'No, thank you, sir.'

Whiskeyjack nodded.

The gelding shied under the commander suddenly, pitching to one side with a squeal of terror. Wind buffeted the camp, ripping the small tents from their shallow moorings. Voices shouted in alarm. Paran stared upward as
a vast black shape swept towards the Tiste Andii encampment. A faint aura outlined the enormous draconian form to the captain's eyes, silvery-white and flickering. Paran's stomach flared with pain, intense but mercifully brief, leaving him trembling.

'Verse's breath,' Whiskeyjack cursed, struggling to calm his horse as he looked around. 'What was that?'

_He could not see as I saw – he has not the blood for that._ Anomander Rake has arrived, sir. He descends among his Tiste Andii.' Paran studied the chaos that had been the slumbering Bridgeburners' camp, then sighed. 'Well, it's a little early, but now's as good a time as any.' He strode forward, raised his voice. 'Everyone up! Break camp! Sergeant Antsy – rouse the cooks, will you?'

'Uh, aye, sir! What woke us?'

'A gust of wind, Sergeant. Now get moving.'

'Aye, sir!'

'Captain.'

Paran turned to Whiskeyjack. 'Sir?'

'I believe you will find yourself busy for the next few bells. I return to Brood's tent – would you like me to send Silverfox to you for a final goodbye?'

The captain hesitated, then shook his head. 'No, thank you, sir. Distance no longer presents a barrier to us – a private, personal link, too fraught to be unveiled to anyone. Her presence in my head is torture enough. Fare you well, Commander.'

Whiskeyjack studied him a moment longer, then nodded. He wheeled his horse around and nudged the gelding into a trot.

The Tiste Andii had gathered into a silent ring around the central clearing, awaiting the arrival of their master.

The black, silver-maned dragon emerged from the darkness overhead like a piece of night torn loose, flowing down to settle with a soft crunch of talons in the plain's stony soil. The huge, terrible beast blurred even as it landed, with a warm flow of spice-laden air swirling out to all sides as the semblung drew the dragon's shape inward. A moment later the Son of Darkness stood, cloaked, framed by the gouged tracks of the dragon's front talons, his slightly epicanthic eyes glimmering dull bronze as he surveyed his kin.

The Mhybe watched as Korlat strode to meet her master. She had seen Anomander Rake but once before, just south of Blackdog Forest, and then from a distance as the Son of Darkness spoke with Caladan Brood. She remembered Moon's Spawn, filling the sky above the Rhivi Plain. Rake had been about to ascend to that floating fortress. A pact with the wizards of Pale had been achieved, and the city was about to be besieged by Onearm's Host. He had stood then as he did now: tall, implacable, a sword emanating sheer terror hanging down the length of his back, his long, silver hair drifting in the breeze.

A slight turn of his head was his only acknowledgement of Korlat's approach.

Off to their right appeared Caladan Brood, Kallor, Dujek and the others.

Tension bristled in the air, yet one that the Mhybe recalled as being present at that last meeting, years before. Anomander Rake was an ascendant as unlike Caladan Brood as to make them seem the opposite ends of power's vast spectrum. Rake was an atmosphere, a heart-thudding, terror-threaded presence no-one could ignore, much less escape. Violence, antiquity, sombre pathos, and darkest horror – the Son of Darkness was a gelid eddy in immortality's current, and the Mhybe could feel, crawling beneath her very skin, every Rhivi spirit awakened in desperation.

_The sword, yet more than the sword. Dragnipur in the hands of cold justice, cold and unhuman. Anomander Rake, the only one among us whose presence sparks fear in Kallor's eyes . . . the only one . . . except, it seems,
for Silverfox – for my daughter. What might Kallor fear most, if not an alliance between the Son of Darkness and Silverfox?

All traces of exhaustion torn away by the thought, the Mhybe stepped forward.

Kallor’s voice boomed. ‘Anomander Rake! I seek your clearest vision – I seek the justice of your sword – allow none to sway you with sentiment, and that includes Korlat, who would now whisper urgent in your ear!’

The Son of Darkness, a lone brow raised, slowly turned to regard the High King. ‘What else, Kallor,’ he said in a low, calm voice, ‘keeps my blade from your black heart. . . if not sentiment?’

With the light of the dawn finally stealing into the sky, the ancient warrior’s weathered, lean face assumed a paler shade. ‘I speak of a child,’ he rumbled. ‘No doubt you sense her power, the foulest of blossoms—’

‘Power? It abounds in this place, Kallor. This camp has become a lodestone. You are right to fear.’ His gaze swung to the Mhybe, who had stopped but a few paces from him.

Her steps ceased. His attention was a fierce pressure, power and threat, enough to make her softly gasp, her limbs weakening.

‘Forces of nature, Mother,’ he said, ‘are indifferent to justice, would you not agree?’

It was a struggle to reply. ‘I would, Lord of Moon’s Spawn.’

‘Thus it falls to us sentient beings, no matter how unworthy, to impose the moral divide.’

Her eyes flashed. ‘Does it now?’

‘She has spawned the abomination, Rake,’ Kallor said, striding closer, his expression twisted with anger as he glared at the Mhybe. ‘Her vision is stained. Understandably, granted, but even that does not exculpate.’

‘Kallor,’ the Son of Darkness murmured, his eyes still on the Mhybe, ‘approach further at your peril.’

The High King halted.

‘It would appear,’ Rake continued, ‘that my arrival has been anticipated, with the collective desire that I adjudicate what is clearly a complex situation—’

‘Appearances deceive,’ Caladan Brood said from where he stood outside the command tent – and the Mhybe now saw that Silverfox was at the warlord’s side. ‘Decide what you will, Rake, but I will not countenance Dragnipur’s unsheathing in my camp.’

There was silence, as explosive as any the Rhivi woman had ever felt. By the Abyss, this could go very, very wrong. . . She glanced over at the Malazans. Dujek had drawn his soldier’s expressionless mask over his features, but his taut stance revealed his alarm. The standard-bearer Artanthos was a step behind and slightly to the right of Onearm, a marine’s rain cape drawn about him, hiding his hands. The young man’s eyes glittered. Is that power swirling from the man? No, I am mistaken – I see nothing now ... Anomander Rake slowly faced the warlord. ‘I see that the lines have been drawn,’ he said quietly. ‘Korlat?’

‘I side with Caladan Brood in this, Master.’

Rake eyed Kallor. ‘It seems you stand alone.’

‘It was ever thus.’

Oh, a sharp reply, that.

Anomander Rake’s expression tightened momentarily. ‘I am not unfamiliar with that position, High King.’

Kallor simply nodded.
Horse hooves sounded then, and the Tiste Andii lining the southeast side of the ring parted. Whiskeyjack rode into the clearing, slowing his mount to a walk, then to a perfect square-stanced halt. It was unclear what the commander had heard, yet he acted none the less. Dismounting, he strode towards Silverfox, stopping directly before her. His sword slid smoothly from its scabbard. Whiskeyjack faced Rake, Kallor and the others in the centre of the clearing, then planted his sword in the ground before him.

Caladan Brood stepped to the Malazan's side. 'With what you might face, Whiskeyjack, it would be best if you—'

'I stand here,' the commander growled.

Sorcery flowed from Anomander Rake, grainy grey, rolling in a slow wave across the clearing, passing through Whiskeyjack effortlessly, then swallowing Silverfox in an opaque, swirling embrace.

The Mhybe cried out, lurched forward, but Korlat's hand closed on her arm. 'Fear not,' she said, 'he but seeks to understand her – understand what she is . . .'

The sorcery frayed suddenly, flung away in tattered fragments to all sides. The Mhybe hissed. She knew enough of her daughter to see, in her reappearance, that she was furious. Power, twisting like taut ropes, rose around her, knotting, bunching.

Oh, spirits below, I see Nightchill and Tattersail both . . . a shared rage. And, by the Abyss, another! A stolid will, a sentence slow to anger . . . so much like Brood – who? Is this – oh! – is this Bellurdan? Gods! We are moments from tearing ourselves apart. Please . . .

'Well,' Rake drawled, 'I have never before had my hand slapped in such a fashion. Impressive, though perilously impertinent. What is it, then, that the child does not wish me to discover?' He reached over his left shoulder for Dragnipur's leather-wrapped handle.

Grunting a savage curse, Brood unlimbered his hammer.

Whiskeyjack shifted his stance, raising his own blade.

Gods no, this is wrong—

'Rake,' Kallor rasped, 'do you wish me on your left or right?'

Snapping tent poles startled everyone. A loud yelp from the command tent was followed by a massive, awkward, flying shape exploding out from the tent's entrance. Cavorting, spinning wildly in the air, the huge wooden table the Mhybe had last seen emerging from the Shroud now rose above the clearing, and from one leg dangled Kruppe, sweetcakes fluttering away from him. He yelped again, kicking the air with his slippered feet. 'Aai! Help! Kruppe hates flying!'

As the Bridgeburners completed assembling their gear, the sentries positioned to the east shouting out the news that the Black Moranth had been seen and now approached on their winged quorls, Captain Paran, plagued by a growing unease, strode among the gathered soldiers.

Off to one side, an exhausted Picker sat watching him, her expression a strange mixture of dismay and admiration, and thus she was the only one to see him taking yet another forward step, then simply vanishing.

The corporal bolted to her feet. 'Oh, Hood's balls! Spindle! Get Quick Ben!'

A few paces away, the hairshirted mage glanced up. 'Why?'

'Someone's just snatched Paran – find Quick Ben, damn you!'

The vision of busy soldiers vanished before the captain's eyes, and from a blurred veil that swiftly parted Paran found himself facing Anomander Rake and Kallor – both with weapons drawn – and behind them the Mhybe
and Korlat, with a ring of alert Tiste Andii just beyond.

Countless eyes fixed on him, then darted up over his right shoulder, then back down. No-one moved, and Paran realized he was not alone in his shock.

‘Help!’

The captain spun at that plaintive cry, then looked up. An enormous wooden table twisted silently in the air, Kruppe’s round, silk-flowing form hanging beneath it. On the underside of the table, painted in bright, now glowing colours, was the image of a man. Slowly blinking in and out of Paran’s view, it was a few moments before he recognized the figure’s face. That’s me …

Pain ripped into him, a black surge that swallowed him whole.

The Mhybe saw the young captain buckle, drop to his knees, as if drawing tight around an overwhelming agony.

Her attention darted to her daughter, in time to see those bound coils of power snake outward from Silverfox, slipping round and past the motionless forms of Brood and Whiskeyjack, then upward to touch the table.

The four legs snapped. With a shriek Kruppe plunged earthward, to land in a flailing of limbs and silk among a crowd of Tiste Andii. Cries and grunts of pain and surprise followed. The table now steadied, the underside facing Rake and Kallor, the image of Paran coruscating with sorcery. Wisps of it reached down to clothe the hunched, kneeling captain in glittering, silver chains.

‘Well,’ a slightly breathless voice said beside her, ‘that’s the largest card of the Deck I’ve ever seen.’

She pulled her gaze away, stared wide-eyed at the lithe, dark-skinned mage standing beside her. ‘Quick Ben …’

The Bridgeburner stepped forward then, raising his hands. ‘Please excuse my interruption, everyone! Whilst it seems that a confrontation is desired by many of you here, might I suggest the absence of … uh, wisdom … in inviting violence here and now, when it is clear that the significance of all that seems to be occurring is as yet undetermined. The risks of precipitate action right now … Well, I trust you see what I mean.’

Anomander Rake stared at the mage a moment, then, with a faint smile, he sheathed his sword. ‘Cautious words, but wise ones. Who might you be, sir?’

‘Just a soldier, Son of Darkness, come to retrieve my captain.’

At that moment Kruppe emerged from the muttering, no doubt bruised crowd that had cushioned his fall. Brushing dust from his silks, he strode seemingly unaware to halt directly between the kneeling Paran and Anomander Rake. He looked up then, blinking owlishly. ‘What an unseemly conclusion to Kruppe’s post-breakfast repast! Has the meeting adjourned?’

Captain Paran was insensate to the power bleeding into him. In his mind he was falling, falling. Then striking hard, rough flagstones, the clash of his armour echoing. The pain was gone. Gasping, shivering uncontrollably, he raised his head.

In the dim light of reflected lanterns, he saw that he was sprawled in a narrow, low-ceilinged hallway. Heavy twin doors divided the strangely uneven wall on his right; on his left, opposite the doors, was a wide entrance, with niches set in its flanking walls. On all sides, the stone appeared rough, undressed, resembling the bark of trees. A heavier door of sheeted bronze – black and pitted – was at the far end, eight or so paces distant. Two shapeless humps lay at the inner threshold.

Where? What?

Paran pushed himself upright, using one wall for support. His gaze was drawn once again to the shapes at the
foot of the bronze door. He staggered closer.

A man, swathed in the tightly bound clothes of an assassin, his narrow, smooth-shaven face set in a peaceful expression, his long black braids still glistening with oil. An old-fashioned crossbow lay beside him.

Lying at his side, a woman, her cloak stretched and twisted as if the man had dragged her across the threshold. A nasty head wound glittered wetly on her brow, and, from the blood-smears on the flagstones, she was the bearer of other wounds as well.

_They're both Daru . . . wait, I have seen the man before. At Simtal's Fete . . . and the woman! She's the Guild Master . . ._

Rallick Nom and Vorcan, both of whom vanished that night of the ill-fated fete. _I am in Darujhistan, then. I must be._

Silverfox's words returned to him, resounding now with veracity. He scowled. _The table – the card, with my image painted upon it. Jen'isand Rul, the Unaligned newly come to the Deck of Dragons . . . powers unknown. I have walked within a sword. It seems now that I can walk . . . anywhere._

_And this place, this place ... I am in the Firmest House. Gods, I am in a House of the Azath!_

He heard a sound, a shuffling motion approaching the twin doors opposite, and slowly turned, reaching for the sword belted at his hip.

The wooden portals swung wide.

Hissing, Paran backed up a step, his blade sliding from its scabbard.

The Jaghut standing before him was almost fleshyless, ribs snapped and jutting, strips of flayed skin and muscle hanging in ghastly ribbons from his arms. His gaunt, ravaged face twisted as he bared his tusks. 'Welcome,' he rumbled. 'I am Raest. Guardian, prisoner, damned. The Azath greets you, as much as sweating stone is able. I see that, unlike the two sleeping in the threshold, you have no need for doors. So be it.' He lurched a step closer, then cocked his head. 'Ah, you are not here in truth. Only your spirit.'

'If you say so.' His thoughts travelled back to that last night of the fete. The debacle in the estate's garden. Memories of sorcery, detonations, and Paran's unexpected journey into the realm of Shadow, the Hounds and Cotillion. _A journey such as this one ... He studied the Jaghut standing before him. Hood take me, this creature is the Jaghut Tyrant – the one freed by Lorn and the T'lan Imass – or, rather, what's left of him. 'Why am I here?_

The grin broadened. 'Follow me.'

Raest stepped into the corridor and turned to his right, each bared foot dragging, grinding as if the bones beneath the skin were all broken. Seven paces along, the hallway ended with a door on the left and another directly in front. The Jaghut opened the one on the left, revealing a circular chamber beyond, surrounding spiral stairs of root-bound wood. There was no light, yet Paran found he could see well enough.

They went down, the steps beneath them like flattened branches spoking out from the central trunk. The air warmed, grew moist and sweet with the smell of humus.

'Raest,' Paran said as they continued to descend, 'the assassin and the Guild Master ... you said they were asleep – how long have they been lying there?'

'I measure no days within the House, mortal. The Azath took me. Since that event, a few outsiders have sought entry, have probed with sorceries, have indeed walked the yard, but the House has denied them all. The two within the threshold were there when I awoke, and have not moved since. It follows, then, that the House has already chosen.'

_As the Deadhouse did Kellanved and Dancer. 'All very well, but can't you awaken them?_'
'I have not tried.'

'Why not?'

The Jaghut paused, glanced back up at the captain. 'There has been no need.'

'Are they guardians as well?' Paran asked as they resumed the descent.

'Not directly. I suffice, mortal. Unwitting servants, perhaps. Your servants.'

'Mine? I don't need servants – I don't want servants. Furthermore, I don't care what the Azath expects of me. The House is mistaken in its faith, Raest, and you can tell it that for me. Tell it to find another ... another whatever I am supposed to be.'

'You are the Master of the Deck. Such things cannot be undone.'

'The what? Hood's breath, the Azath had better find a way of undoing that choice, Jaghut,' Paran growled.

'It cannot be undone, as I've already told you. A Master is needed, so here you are.'

'I don't want it!'

'I weep a river of tears for your plight, mortal. Ah, we have arrived.'

They stood on a landing. Paran judged that they had gone down six, perhaps seven levels into the bowels of the earth. The stone walls had disappeared, leaving only gloom, the ground underfoot a mat of snaking roots.

'I can go no further, Master of the Deck,' Raest said. 'Walk into the darkness.'

'And if I refuse?'

'Then I kill you.'

'Unforgiving bastard, this Azath,' Paran muttered.

'I kill you, not for the Azath, but for the wasted effort of this journey. Mortal, you've no sense of humour.'

'And you think you do?' the captain retorted.

'If you refuse to go further, then ... nothing. Apart from irritating me, that is. The Azath is patient. You will make the journey eventually, though the privilege of my escort occurs but once, and that once is now.'

'Meaning I won't have your cheery company next time? How will I cope?'

'Miserably, if there was justice in the world.'

Paran faced the darkness. 'And is there?'

'You ask that of a Jaghut? Now, do we stand here for ever?'

'All right, all right,' the captain sighed. 'Pick any direction?'

Raest shrugged. 'They are all one to me.'

Grinning in spite of himself, Paran strode forward. Then he paused and half turned. 'Raest, you said the Azath has need for a Master of the Deck. Why? What's happened?'

The Jaghut bared his tusks. 'A war has begun.'

Paran fought back a sudden shiver. 'A war? Involving the Houses of the Azath?'

'No entity will be spared, mortal. Not the Houses, not the gods. Not you, human, nor a single one of your short-lived, insignificant comrades.'
Paran grimaced. 'I've enough wars to deal with as it is, Raest.'

'They are all one.'

'I don't want to think about any of this.'

'Then don't.'

After a moment, Paran realized his glare was wasted on the Jaghut. He swung about and resumed his journey. With his third step his boot struck flagstone instead of root, and the darkness around him dissolved, revealing, in a faint, dull yellow light, a vast concourse. Its edges, visible a hundred paces or more in every direction, seemed to drift back into gloom. Of Raest and the wooden stairs there was no sign. Paran's attention was drawn to the flagstones beneath him.

Carved into their bleached surfaces were cards of the Deck of Dragons. No, more than just the Deck of Dragons – there's cards here I don't recognize. Lost Houses, and countless forgotten Unaligned. Houses, and ... The captain stepped forward, crouched down to study one image. As he focused his attention on it the world around him faded, and he felt himself moving into the carved scene.

A chill wind slid across his face, the air smelling of mud and wet fur. He could feel the earth beneath his boots, chill and yielding. Somewhere in the distance crows cackled. The strange hut he had seen in the carving now stood before him, long and humped, the huge bones and long tusks comprising its framework visible between gaps in the thick, umber fur-skins clothing it. Houses . . . and Holds, the first efforts at building. People once dwelt within such structures, like living inside the rib-cage of a dragon. Gods, those tusks are huge – whatever beast these came from must have been massive . . .

I can travel at will, it seems. Into each and every card, of every Deck that ever existed. Amidst the surge of wonder and excitement he felt ran an undercurrent of terror. The Deck possessed a host of unpleasant places.

And this one?

A small stone-lined hearth smouldered before the hut's entrance. Wreathed in the smoke was a rack made of branches, on which hung strips of meat. The clearing, Paran now saw, was ringed with weathered skulls – doubtless from the beasts whose bones formed the framework of the hut itself. The skulls faced inward, and he could see by the long, yellowed molars in the jaws that the animals had been eaters of plants, not flesh.

Paran approached the hut's entrance. The skulls of carnivores hung down from the doorway's ivory frame, forcing him to duck as he entered.

Swiftly abandoned, from the looks of it. As if the dwellers just left but moments ago ... At the far end sat twin thrones, squat and robust, made entirely of bones, on a raised dais of ochre-stained human skulls – well, close enough to human in any case. More like T'lan Imass...

Knowledge blossomed in his mind. He knew the name of this place, knew it deep in his soul. The Hold of the Beasts . . . long before the First Throne . . . this was the heart of the T'lan Imass's power – their spirit world, when they were still flesh and blood, when they still possessed spirits to be worshipped and revered. Long before they initiated the Ritual of Tellann . . . and so came to outlast their own pantheon ...

A realm, then, abandoned. Lost to its makers. What then, is the Warren of Tellann that the T'lan Imass now use? Ah, that warren must have been born from the Ritual itself, a physical manifestation of their Vow of Immortality, perhaps. Aspected, not of life, nor even death. Aspected . . . of dust.

He stood unmoving for a time, struggling to comprehend the seemingly depthless layers of tragedy that were the burden of the T'lan Imass.

Oh my, they've outlasted their own gods. They exist in a world of dust in truth – memories untethered, an eternal existence ... no end in sight. Sorrow flooded him in a profound, heart-rending wave. Beru fend . . . so alone, now. So alone for so long . . . yet now they are gathering, coming to the child seeking benediction . . . and something more ...
Paran stepped back – and stood on the flagstones once again. With an effort he pulled his eyes from the carved Hold of Beasts – but why were there two thrones and not just one? – as he now knew the card was called. Another etched stone, a dozen paces to his left, caught his attention. A throbbing, crimson glow suffused the air directly above it.

He walked to it, looked down.

The image of a sleeping woman, as seen from above, dominated the flagstone. Her flesh seemed to spin and swirl. Paran slowly lowered himself into a crouch, his eyes narrowing. Her skin was depthless, revealing ever more detail as the captain's vision was drawn ever closer. Skin, not skin. Forests, sweeps of bedrock, the seething floor of the oceans, fissures in the flesh of the world – she is Burn! She is the Sleeping Goddess.

Then he saw the flaw, the marring a dark, suppurating welt. Waves of nausea swept through Paran, yet he would not look away. There, at the wound's heart, a humped, kneeling, broken figure. Chained. Chained to Burn's own flesh. From the figure, down the length of the chains, poison flowed into the Sleeping Goddess.

She sensed the sickness coming, sinking claws into her. Sensed . . . and chose to sleep. Less than two thousand years ago, she chose to sleep. She sought to escape the prison of her own flesh, in order to do battle with the one who was killing that flesh. She – oh gods above and below! She made of herself a weapon! Her entire spirit, all its power, into a single forging ... a hammer, a hammer capable of breaking . . . breaking anything. And Burn then found a man to wield it...

_Caladan Brood._

But breaking the chains meant freeing the Crippled God. And an unchained Crippled God meant an unleashing of vengeance – enough to sweep all life from the surface of this world. And yet Burn, the Sleeping Goddess, was indifferent to that. She would simply begin again.

Now he saw it, saw the truth – he refuses! The bastard refuses! To defy the Crippled God's unleashing of a deadly will, that would see us all destroyed, Caladan Brood refuses her!

Gasping, Paran pulled himself away, pushed himself upright, staggering back – and was at Raest's side once again.

The Jaghut's tusks glimmered. 'Have you found knowledge a gift, or a curse?'

_Too prescient a question ... 'Both, Raest.'_

'And which do you choose to embrace?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You are weeping, mortal. In joy or sorrow?'

Paran grimaced, wiped at his face. 'I want to leave, Raest,' he said gruffly. 'I want to return—'

His eyes blinked open, and he found himself on his knees, facing, with an interval of but a half-dozen paces, a bemused Son of Darkness. Paran sensed that but moments had passed since his sudden arrival, yet something of the tension he had first picked up had eased in the interval.

A hand rested on his shoulder and he looked up to find Silverfox standing beside him, the Mhybe hovering uncertainly a step behind. The Daru, Kruppe, stood nearby, carefully adjusting his silk clothing and humming softly, while Quick Ben took a step closer to the captain – though the wizard's eyes held on the Knight of Darkness.

The captain closed his eyes. His mind was spinning. He felt uprooted by all that he had discovered – starting with myself. Master of the Deck. Latest recruit to a war I know nothing about. And now ... this. 'What,' Paran growled, 'in Hood's name is going on here?'
'I drew on power,' Silverfox replied, her eyes slightly wild.

Paran drew a deep breath. *Power, oh yes, I am coming to know that feeling. Jen'isand Rul. We each have begun our own journey, yet you and I, Silverfox, are destined to arrive at the same place. The Second Gathering. Who, I wonder, will ascend to those two ancient, long-forgotten thrones? Where, dear child, will you lead the T'lan Imass?*

Anomander Rake spoke. 'I had not anticipated such a ... taut reunion, Caladan—'

Paran's head snapped around, found the warlord. And the hammer held so lightly in his massive arms. *I know you now, Warlord. Not that I'll reveal your dark secret – what would be the point in that? The choice is yours and yours alone. Kill us all, or the goddess you serve. Brood, I do not envy the curse of your privilege to choose. Oh, I do not, you poor bastard. Still, what is the price of a broken vow?*

The Son of Darkness continued. 'My apologies to one and all. As this man,' Rake gestured towards Quick Ben, 'has wisely noted, to act now – knowing so little of the nature of the powers revealed here – would indeed be precipitous.'

'It may already be too late,' Kallor said, his flat, ancient eyes fixed on Silverfox. 'The child's sorcery was Tellann, and it has been a long time since it has been so thoroughly awakened. We are now all of us in peril. A combined effort, begun immediately, might succeed in cutting down this creature – we may never again possess such an opportunity.'

'And should we fail, Kallor?' Anomander Rake asked. 'What enemy will we have made for ourselves? At the moment this child has acted to defend herself, nothing more. Not an inimical stance, is it? You risk too much in a single cast, High King.'

'Finally,' boomed Caladan Brood, returning the dreaded, all-breaking hammer to its harness, 'the notion of strategy arrives.' The anger remained in his voice, as if he was furious at having to state what to him had been obvious all along. 'Neutrality remains the soundest course open to us, until the nature of Silverfox's power reveals itself. We've enough enemies on our plate as it is. Now, enough of the drama, if you please. Welcome back, Rake. No doubt you've information to impart regarding the status of Moon's Spawn, among other details of note.' He faced Paran with sudden exasperation. 'Captain, can you not do something about that damned floating table!'

Flinching at the attention, Paran stared up at it. 'Well,' he managed, 'nothing immediately comes to mind, Warlord. Uh, I'm no mage—'

Brood grunted, swung away. 'Never mind, then. We'll consider it a crass ornament.'

Quick Ben cleared his throat. 'I might be able to manage something, Warlord, in time ...'

Caladan glanced at Dujek, who grinned and nodded his permission to Quick Ben.

'Not simply a soldier, I see,' Anomander Rake said.

The Seven Cities mage shrugged. 'I appreciate challenges, Lord. No guarantee that I'll have any success, mind you – no, do not quest towards me, Son of Darkness. I value my privacy.'

'As you wish,' Rake said, turning away.

'Is anyone else hungry?'

All eyes turned to Kruppe.

With everyone's attention elsewhere, the Mhybe edged away from the clearing, between two rows of peaked Tiste Andii tents, then she spun and tried to run. Bone and muscle protested, even as her veins burned with panic and terror.
She hobbled on, half blinded by tears, her breath harsh, rattling gasps broken by soft whimpers. Oh . . . dear spirits . . . look upon me. Show me mercy, I beg you. Look at me stumble and totter — look! Pity me, spirits below! I demand it! Take my soul, you cruel ancestors, I beg you!

The copper on her wrists and ankles — minor tribal wards against the aches in her bones — felt cold as ice against her withered skin, cold as a rapist's touch, disdainful of her frailty, contemptuous of her labouring heart.

The Rhivi spirits refused her, mocking, laughing.

The old woman cried out, staggered, fell hard to her knees. The jolt of the impact drove the air from her lungs. Twisting, she sagged to the ground, bedraggled, alone in an alley of dirt.

"Flesh," a voice murmured above her, "which is the life within." These, cherished friend, are the words of birth, given in so many forms, in countless languages. They are joy and pain, loss and sacrifice, they give voice to the binds of motherhood ... and more, they are the binds of life itself.

Grey hair dangling, the Mhybe raised her head.

Crone sat atop a tent's ridgepole, wings hunched, eyes glittering wet. 'I am not immune to grief, you see, my dear – tell no-one you have seen me so weakened by love. How can I comfort you?'

The Mhybe shook her head, croaked, 'You cannot.'

'She is you more than the others — more than the woman Tattersail, and Nightchill, more than the T'lan Imass —'

'Do you see me, Crone? Do you truly see me?' The Mhybe pushed herself to her hands and knees, then sat back and glared up at the Great Raven. 'I am naught but bones and leather skin, I am naught but endless aches. Dried brittle – spirits below, each moment of this life, this terrible existence, and I edge closer to ... to ...' her head drooped, 'to hatred,' she finished in a ragged whisper. A sob racked her.

'And so you would die now,' Crone said. 'Yes, I understand. A mother must not be led to hate the child she has birthed ... yet you demand too much of yourself.'

'She has stolen my life!' the Mhybe screamed, gnarled hands closing to fists from which the blood within them fled. The Rhivi woman stared at those fists, eyes wide as if they were seeing a stranger's hands, skeletal and dead, there at the end of her thin arms. 'Oh, Crone,' she cried softly. 'She has stolen my life . . .'

The Great Raven spread her wings, tilted forward on the pole, then dropped in a smooth curve to thud on the ground before the Mhybe. 'You must speak with her.'

'I cannot!'

'She must be made to understand—'

'She knows, Crone, she knows. What would you have me do — ask my daughter to stop growing? This river flows unceasing, unceasing . . .'

'Rivers can be dammed. Rivers can be ... diverted.'

'Not this one, Crone.'

'I do not accept your words, my love. And I shall find a way. This I swear.'

'There is no solution — do not waste your time, my friend. My youth is gone, and it cannot be returned, not by alchemy and not by sorcery – Tellann is an unassailable warren, Crone. What it demands cannot be undone. And should you somehow succeed in stopping this flow, what then? You would have me an old woman for decades to come? Year after year, trapped within this cage? There is no mercy in that — no, it would be a curse unending. No, leave me be, please . . .'

Footsteps approached from behind. A moment later Korlat lowered herself to the Mhybe's side, laid a
protective arm around her and held her close. 'Come,' the Tiste Andii murmured. 'Come with me.'

The Mhybe let Korlat help her to her feet. She felt ashamed at her own weakness, but all her defences had crumbled, her pride was in tatters, and she felt in her soul nothing but helplessness. I was a young woman once. What point in raging at the loss? My seasons have tumbled, it is done. And the life within fades, whilst the life beyond flowers. This is a battle no mortal can win, but where, dear spirits, is the gift of death? Why do you forbid me an end?

She straightened slightly in Korlat's arms. Very well, then. Since you have already so cursed my soul, the taking of my own life can cause me no greater pain. Very well, dear spirits, I shall give you my answer. I shall defy your plans. 'Take me to my tent,' she said.

'No,' Korlat said.

The Mhybe twisted round, glared up at the Tiste Andii. 'I said—'

'I heard you, Mhybe, indeed, more than you intended me to hear. The answer is no. I shall remain at your side, and I am not alone in my faith—'

The Rhivi woman snorted. 'Faith? You are Tiste Andii! Do you take me for a fool with your claims to faith?' Korlat's expression tightened and she looked away. 'Perhaps you are right.'

Oh, Korlat, I am sorry for that – I would take it back, I swear—

'None the less,' the Tiste Andii continued, 'I shall not abandon you to despair.'

'I am familiar with being a prisoner,' the Mhybe said, angry once again. 'But I warn you, Korlat – I warn you all, hatred is finding fertile soil within me. And in your compassion, in your every good intention, you nurture it. I beg you, let me end this.'

'No, and you underestimate our resilience, Mhybe. You'll not succeed in turning us away.'

'Then you shall indeed drag me into hatred, and the price will be all I hold dear within me, all that you might have once valued.'

'You would make our efforts worthless?'

'Not by choice, Korlat – and this is what I am telling you

– I have lost all choice. To my daughter. And now, to you. You will create of me a thing of spite, and I beg you again – if you care for me at all – to let me cease this terrible journey.'

'I'll not give you permission to kill yourself, Mhybe. If it must be hate that fuels you, so be it. You are under the care – the guardianship – of the Tiste Andii, now.'

The Rhivi woman sagged, defeated. She struggled to fashion words for the feelings within her, and what came to her left her cold.

Self-pity. To this I have fallen ...

All right, Korlat, you've won for now.

'Burn is dying.'

Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake stood alone in the tent, the remnants of tension still swirling around them. From the sounds in the clearing outside the mage Quick Ben seemed to have succeeded in pulling the massive wooden card back to the ground, and a discussion was under way as to what to do with it.

The Son of Darkness removed his gauntlets, letting them drop to the tabletop before facing the warlord.
'Barring the one thing you must not do, can you do nothing else?'

Brood shook his head. 'Old choices, friend – only the one possibility remains, as it always has. I am Tennes –
the goddess's own warren – and what assails her assails me as well. Aye, I could shatter the one who has so
infected her—'

'The Crippled God,' Rake murmured, going perfectly still. 'He has spent an eternity nurturing his spite – he
will be without mercy, Brood. This is an old tale. We agreed – you, I, the Queen of Dreams, Hood – we all
agreed ...'

The warlord's broad face seemed on the verge of crumpling. Then he shook himself as would a bear, turned
away. 'Almost twelve hundred years, this burden—'

'And if she dies?'

He shook his head. 'I do not know. Her warren dies, surely, that at the least, even as it becomes the Crippled
God's pathway into every other warren ... then they all die.'

'And with that, all sorcery.'

The warlord nodded, then drew a deep breath and straightened. 'Would that be so bad a thing, do you think?'

Rake snorted. 'You assume the destruction would end with that. It seems that, no matter which of the two
choices is made, the Crippled God wins.'

'So it seems.'

'Yet, having made your choice, you gift this world, and everyone on it, with a few more generations of living
—'

'Living, and dying, waging wars and unleashing slaughter. Of dreams, hopes and tragic ends—'

'Not a worthy track, these thoughts of yours, Caladan.' Rake stepped closer. 'You have done, you continue to
do, all that could be asked of you. We were there to share your burden, back then, but it seems we are – each of
us – ever drawn away, into our own interests . . . abandoning you. . .'

'Leave this path, Anomander. It avails us nothing. There are more immediate concerns to occupy this rare
opportunity to speak in private.'

Rake's broad mouth found a thin smile. 'True enough.' He glanced over to the tent's entrance. 'Out there ...'

He faced Brood again, 'Given the infection of Tennes, was your challenge a bluff?'

The warlord bared his filed teeth. 'Somewhat, but not entirely. The question is not my ability to unleash
power, it is the nature of that power. Wrought through with poison, rife with chaos—'

'Meaning it might well be wilder than your usual maelstrom? That is alarming indeed, Brood. Is Kallor aware
of this?'

'No.'

Rake grunted. 'Best keep it that way.'

'Aye,' the warlord growled. 'So practise some restraint of your own, next time, Rake.'

The Tiste Andii walked over to pour himself some wine. 'Odd, I could have sworn I'd just done that.'

'We must now speak of the Pannion Domin.'

'A true mystery indeed, Caladan. Far more insidious than we had surmised. Layers of power, one hidden
beneath another, then another. The Warren of Chaos lies at its heart, I suspect – and the Great Ravens concur.'

'This strides too close a path to the Crippled God for it to be accidental, Rake. The Chained One's poison is
that of Chaos, after all.'

'Aye,' Rake smiled. 'Curious, isn't it? I think there can be no question of who is using whom—'

'Maybe.'

'Dealing with the Pannion Domin will present us with formidable challenges.'

Brood grimaced, 'As the child insisted, we will need help.'

The Son of Darkness frowned. 'Explain, please.'

'The T'lan Imass, friend. The undead armies are coming.'

The Tiste Andii's face darkened. 'Is this Dujek Onearm's contribution, then?'

'No, the child. Silverfox. She is a flesh and blood Bonecaster, the first in a long, long time.'

'Tell me of her.'

The warlord did, at length, and when he was done there was silence in the tent.

Studying Paran with hooded eyes, Whiskeyjack strode over. The young captain was trembling, as if gripped by fever, his face bone-white and slick with sweat. Quick Ben had somehow managed to lower the tabletop to the ground; sorcery still wreathed it with dancing lightning that seemed reluctant to fade. The wizard had crouched down beside it and Whiskeyjack recognized by his flat expression that the man was in a sorcerous trance. Questing, probing ...

'You are a fool.'

The commander turned at the rasping words. 'None the less, Kallor.'

The tall, grey-haired man smiled coldly. 'You will come to regret your vow to protect the child.'

Shrugging, Whiskeyjack turned to resume his walk.

'I am not done with you!' Kallor hissed.

'But I am with you,' the Malazan calmly replied, continuing on.

Paran was facing him now. The captain's eyes were wide, uncomprehending. Behind him, the Tiste Andii had begun to drift away, spectral and seemingly indifferent now that their lord had retired within the command tent with Caladan Brood. Whiskeyjack looked for Korlat but didn't see her; nor, he realized after a moment, was the Mhybe anywhere in sight. The child Silverfox stood a dozen paces from Paran, watching the captain with Tattersail's eyes.

'No questions,' Paran growled as Whiskeyjack halted before him. 'I have no answers for you – not for what's happened here, not for what I've become. Perhaps it would be best if you placed someone else in command of the Bridgeburners—'

'No reason for that,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Besides, I hate changing my mind on anything, Captain.'

Quick Ben joined them. He grinned. 'That was close, wasn't it?'

'What is that thing?' Whiskeyjack asked him, nodding towards the tabletop.

'Just what it appears to be. A new Unaligned card in the Deck of Dragons. Well, it's the Unaligned of all Unaligneds. The table holds the entire Deck, remember.' The wizard glanced over at Paran. 'The captain here's on the threshold of ascendency, as we suspected. And that means that what he does – or chooses not to do – could have profound effects. On all of us. The Deck of Dragons seems to have acquired a Master. Jen'isand Rul.'
Paran turned away, clearly not wanting to be part of this conversation.

Whiskeyjack frowned at the wizard. 'Jen'isand Rul. I thought that was a name referring to his ... escapades within a certain weapon.'

'It is, but since that name is on the card it seems the two are linked... somehow. If the captain's in the dark as much as the rest of us, then I'll have to do some hard thinking on what that linkage signifies. Of course,' he added, 'the captain might well know enough to help me along in this, provided he's willing.'

Paran opened his mouth for a reply but Whiskeyjack spoke first. 'He's got no answers for us... right now. I take it we're carrying that ridiculous tabletop along with us on the march?'

Quick Ben slowly nodded. 'It would be best, at least for a while, so I can study it some more. Still, I would advise we unload it before we cross into Pannion territory. The Trygalle Trade Guild can deliver it to the alchemist in Darujhistan for safekeeping.'

A new voice cut in, 'The card does not leave us.'

The three men turned to find Silverfox standing close. Behind her, a dozen Rhivi warriors were lifting the tabletop.

Watching the dark-skinned, lithe men carrying the tabletop away, Quick Ben frowned. 'Risky, taking an object of such power into battle, lass.'

'We must accept that risk, Wizard.'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'Why?'

'Because the card belongs to Paran, and he will have need of it.'

'Can you explain that?'

'We struggle against more than one enemy, as shall be seen.'

'I don't want that card,' Paran snapped. 'You'd better paint a new face on that thing. I have the blood of a Hound of Shadow within me. I am a liability – when will you all see that? Hood knows, I do!'

The rustle of armour alerted them to Kallor's approach.

Whiskeyjack scowled. 'You are not part of this conversation.'

Kallor smiled wryly. 'Never part of, but often the subject of—'

'Not this time.'

The High King's flat, grey eyes fixed on Quick Ben. 'You, wizard, are a hoarder of souls ... I am a man who releases souls – shall I break the chains within you? An easy thing, to leave you helpless.'

'Even easier,' Quick Ben replied, 'to make a hole in the ground.'

Kallor dropped from sight, the earth gone from beneath him. Armour clattered, followed by a bellow of rage.

Silverfox gasped, eyes widening on Quick Ben.

The wizard shrugged. 'You're right, I don't care who, or what, Kallor is.'

Whiskeyjack stepped to the edge of the pit, glanced down. 'He's climbing out... not bad for an old man.'

'But since I'm not stupid,' Quick Ben said hastily, 'I'll take leave, now.' The wizard gestured and seemed to blur a moment before vanishing altogether.

Turning his back on the grunting, cursing Kallor – whose gauntleted hands were now visible scrabbling at
the crumbly edge of the pit – Whiskeyjack said to Paran, 'Return to the Bridgeburners, Captain. If all goes well, we'll meet again at Capustan.'

'Yes, sir.' Somewhat unsteadily, Paran strode away.

'I suggest,' Silverfox said, eyes fixed on Kallor's efforts to extricate himself, 'we too should depart this particular place.'

'Agreed, lass.'

Slumped in his saddle, Whiskeyjack watched the columns of Onearm's Host marching out from the city of Pale. The day was hot, the hint of thunderstorms in the humid air. Quorl-mounted Black Moranth circled high above the two de-camped armies, fewer in number than was usual – their Achievant, Twist, had departed with Captain Paran and the Bridgeburners four days ago, and eight of the eleven Flights had left in the night just past, on their way to the Vision Mountains on the northwest border of the Domin.

The commander was exhausted. The ache in his leg was robbing him of sleep, and each day was filled with the demands of supply, details on the planned deployment on the march, and the ceaseless swarm of messengers delivering reports and orders then hurrying off with the same. He was restless to begin the journey across half a continent, if only to answer the thousand questions of what awaited them.

Quick Ben sat in silence beside Whiskeyjack, the mage's horse shifting nervously beneath him.

'Your mount's picked up on your state of mind, Quick,' the commander said.

'Aye.'

'You're wondering when I'll cut you loose so you can chase after and catch up with Paran and the Bridgeburners, and put some distance between you and Kallor. You're also eager to get as far away from Silverfox as you can.'

Quick Ben started at this last observation, then he sighed. 'Aye. I imagine I haven't managed to hide my unease – at least not from you, it's clear. The child's grown five years or more since we arrived, Whiskeyjack – I looked in on the Mhybe this morning. Korlat's doing what she can, as are the Rhivi shoulderwomen, but Silverfox has taken from that old woman almost her entire life-force – Hood knows what's keeping her alive. The thought of converging T'lan Imass ain't making me happy, either. And then there's Anomander Rake – he wants to know all about me—'

'Has he attempted any further probing?'

'Not yet, but why tempt him?'

'I need you for a while longer,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Ride with my entourage – we'll keep our distance from the Son of Darkness, as best we can. Have those mercenaries in Capustan taken your bait yet?'

'They're playing with it.'

'We'll wait another week, then. If nothing, then off you go.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now,' Whiskeyjack drawled, 'why don't you tell me what else you've got going, Quick Ben?'

The mage blinked innocently. 'Sir?'

'You've visited every temple and every seer in Pale, mage. You've spent a small fortune on readers of the Deck. Hood, I've had a report of you sacrificing a goat at dawn atop a barrow – what in the Abyss were you up to with that, Quick?'

'All right,' the man muttered, 'the goat thing stinks of desperation. I admit it. I got carried away.'
'And what did the lost spirits in the barrow tell you?'

'Nothing. There, uh, there weren't any.'

Whiskeyjack's eyes narrowed. 'There weren't any? It was a Rhivi barrow, was it not?'

'One of the few still remaining in the area, aye. It was, uh, cleaned out. Recently.'

'Cleaned out?'

'Someone or something gathered them up, sir. Never known that to happen before. It's the strangest thing. Not a single soul remains within those barrows. I mean, where are they?'

'You're changing the subject, Quick Ben. Nice try.'

The mage scowled. 'I'm doing some investigating. Nothing I can't handle, and it won't interfere with anything else. Besides, we're now officially on the march, right? Not much I can do out in the middle of nowhere, is there? Besides, I have been sidetracked, sir. Those snatched spirits ... someone took them, and it's got me curious.'

'When you figure it out you'll let me know, right?'

'Of course, sir.'

Whiskeyjack gritted his teeth and said no more. I've known you too long, Quick Ben. You've stumbled onto something, and it's got you scampering like a stoat with its tail between its legs.

Sacrificing a goat, for Hood's sake!

On the road from Pale, Onearm's Host – almost ten thousand veterans of the Genabackan Campaign – moved to join the ranks of Caladan Brood's vast army. The march had begun, onward to war, against an enemy they had never seen and of whom they knew almost nothing.
Saltoan’s sunset gate was reached by a broad, arching causeway over the canal. Both the bridge and the canal itself were in serious need of repair, the mortar crumbling and webbed in wide, grass-tufted cracks where the foundations had settled. One of the Vision Plain’s oldest cities, Saltoan had once stood alongside the river Catlin, growing rich on the cross-continent trade, until the river changed its course in the span of a single, rain-drenched spring. Korselan’s Canal was built in an effort to re-establish the lucrative link with the river trade, as well as four deep lakes – two within the old river bed itself – for moorage and berths. The effort had seen only marginal success, and the four hundred years since that time had witnessed a slow, inexorable decline.

Gruntle’s scowl as he guided his horse onto the causeway deepened upon seeing Saltoan’s low, thick walls ahead. Brown stains ran in streaks down their sloped sides. The caravan captain could already smell the raw sewage. There were plenty of figures lining the battlements, but few if any of them actual constabulary or soldiers. The city had sent its vaunted Horse Guard north to join Caladan Brood’s forces in the war against the Malazan Empire. What remained of its army wasn’t worth the polish on their boots.

He glanced back as his master’s carriage clattered onto the causeway. Sitting on the driver’s bench, Harllo waved. At his side, Stonny held the traces and Gruntle could see her lips moving to a stream of curses and complaints. Harllo’s wave wilted after a moment.

Gruntle returned his attention to Sunset Gate. There were no guards in sight, and little in the way of traffic. The two huge wooden doors hung ajar and looked not to have been closed in a long time. The captain’s mood soured even further. He slowed his horse until the carriage drew alongside him.

‘We’re passing right through, right?’ Stonny asked. ‘Straight through to Sunrise Gate, right?’

‘So I have advised,’ Gruntle said.

‘What’s the point of our long experience if the master won’t heed our advice? Answer me that, Gruntle!’

The captain simply shrugged. No doubt Keruli could hear every word, and no doubt Stonny knew that.

They approached the arched entrance. The avenue within quickly narrowed to a tortuous alley buried beneath the gloom of the flanking buildings’ upper levels, which projected outward until they almost touched overhead. Gruntle moved ahead of the carriage again. Mangy chickens scattered from their path, but the fat, black rats in the gutters only momentarily paused in their feasting on rotting rubbish to watch the carriage wheels slip past.

‘We’ll be scraping sides in a moment,’ Harllo said.

‘If we can manage Twistface Passage, we’ll be all right.’

‘Aye, but that’s a big if, Gruntle. Mind you, there’s enough that passes for grease on these walls …’

The alley narrowed ahead to the chokepoint known as Twistface Passage. Countless trader wagons had gouged deep grooves in both walls. Broken spokes and torn fittings littered the cobbles. The neighbourhood had a wreckers’ mentality, Gruntle well knew. Any carriage trapped in the Passage was free salvage, and the locals weren’t averse to swinging swords if their claims were contested. Gruntle had only spilled blood here once, six, seven years back. A messy night, he recalled. He and his guards had depopulated half a tenement block of cut-throats and thugs in those dark, nightmarish hours before they’d managed to back the wagon out of the passage, remove the wheels, lay rollers and manhandle their way through.
He did not want a repetition.

The hubs scraped a few times as they passed through the chokepoint, but then, with a swearing Stonny and a grinning Harllo ducking beneath sodden clothes hanging from a line, they were clear and into the square beyond.

No deliberate intent created Wu's Closet Square. The open space was born of the happenstance convergence of thirteen streets and alleys of various breadth. The inn to which they all once led no longer existed, having burned down a century or so ago, leaving a broad, uneven expanse of flagstones and cobbles that had, unaccountably, acquired the name of Wu's Closet.

'Take Mucosin Street, Stonny,' Gruntle directed, gesturing towards the wide avenue on the east side of the square.

'I remember well enough,' she growled. 'Gods, the stink!'

A score of urchins had discovered their arrival, and now trailed the carriage like flightless vultures, their dirty, pocked faces closed and all too serious. None spoke.

Still in the lead, Gruntle walked his horse into Mucosin Street. He saw a few faces peer out from grimy windows, but there was no other traffic. *Not here . . . not ahead. This isn't good.*

'Captain,' Harllo called.

Gruntle did not turn. 'Aye?'

'Them kids ... they've just vanished.'

'Right.' He loosened his Gadrobi cutlasses. 'Load your crossbow, Harllo.'

'Already done.'

*I know, but why not announce it anyway.*

Twenty paces ahead three figures stepped into the street. Gruntle squinted. He recognized the tall woman in the middle. 'Hello, Nektara. I see you've expanded your holdings.'

The scar-faced woman smiled. 'Why, it's Gruntle. And Harllo. And who else? Oh, would that be Stonny Menackis? No doubt as unpleasant as ever, my dear, though I still lay down my heart at your feet.'

'Unwise,' Stonny drawled. 'I never step lightly.'

Nektara's smile broadened. 'And you do make that heart race, love. Every time.'

'What's the toll?' Gruntle asked, drawing his mount to a halt ten paces from the woman and her two silent bodyguards.

Nektara's plucked brows rose. 'Toll? Not this time, Gruntle. We're still in Garno's holdings – we've been granted passage. We're simply here by way of escort.'

'Escort?'

The sound of the carriage's shutters clattering open made the captain turn. He saw his master's hand appear, then languidly wave him over.

Gruntle dismounted. He reached the carriage's side door, peered in to see Keruli's round, pale face.

'Captain, we are to meet with this city's ... rulers.'

'The king and his Council? Why—'

A soft laugh interrupted him. 'No, no. Saltoan's *true* rulers. At great expense, and through extraordinary
negotiation, a gathering of all the hold-masters and mistresses has been convened, to whom I shall make address this night. You have leave to permit the escort just offered. I assure you, all is well.'

'Why didn't you explain all this earlier?'

'I was not certain that the negotiations were successful. The matter is complex, for it is the masters and mistresses who have asked for ... assistance. I, in turn, must endeavour to earn their confidence, to the effect that I represent the most efficacious agent to provide said assistance.'

You? Then who in Hood's name are you? 'I see. All right, then, trust these criminals if you like, but I'm afraid we'll not be sharing your faith.'

'Understood, Captain.'

Gruntle returned to his horse. Collecting the reins he faced Nektara. 'Lead on.'

Saltoan was a city with two hearts, their chambers holding different hues of blood but both equally vile and corrupt. Seated with his back to the wall of the low-ceilinged, crowded tavern, Gruntle looked out with narrowed eyes on a motley collection of murderers, extortionists and thugs whose claim to power was measured in fear.

Stonny leaned against the wall to the captain's left, Harllo sharing the bench on his right. Nektara had dragged her chair and a small, round table close to Stonny. Thick coils of smoke rose from the hookah before the hold-mistress, wreathing her knife-kissed features in the cloying, tarry fumes. With the hookah's mouthpiece in her left hand, her other hand was on Stonny's leather-clad thigh.

Keruli stood in the centre of the room, facing the majority of the crimelords and ladies. The short man's hands were clasped above his plain grey silk belt, his cloak of black silk shimmering like molten obsidian. A strange, close-fitting cap covered his hairless pate, its style reminiscent of that worn by figures found among Darujhistan's oldest sculptures and in equally ancient tapestries.

He had begun his speech in a voice soft and perfectly modulated. 'I am pleased to be present at this auspicious gathering. Every city has its secret veils, and I am honoured by this one's select parting. Of course I realize that many of you might see me as cut from the same cloth as your avowed enemy, but I assure you this is not the case. You have expressed your concern as regards the influx of priests of the Pannion Domin into Saltoan. They speak of cities newly come under the divine protection of the Pannion Seer's cult, and offer to the common people tales of laws applied impartially to all citizens, of rights and enscripted privileges, of the welcome imposition of order in defiance of local traditions and manners. They sow seeds of discord among your subjects – a dangerous precedent, indeed.'

Murmurs of agreement followed from the masters and mistresses. Gruntle almost smiled at the mannered decorum among these street-bred killers. Glancing over, he saw, his brows rising, Nektara's hand plunged beneath the leather folds of Stonny's leggings at the crotch. Stonny's face was flushed, a faint smile on her lips, her eyes almost closed. Queen of Dreams, no wonder nine-tenths of the men in this room are panting, not to mention drinking deep from their cups of wine. He himself reached for his tankard.

'A wholesale slaughter,' one of the mistresses growled. 'Every damned one of them priests should be belly-smiling, that's the only way to deal with this, I say.'

'Martyrs to the faith,' Keruli responded. 'Such a direct attack is doomed to fail, as it has in other cities. This conflict is one of information, lords and ladies, or, rather, misinformation. The priests are conducting a campaign of deception. The Pannion Domin, for all its imposition of law and order, is a tyranny, characterized by extraordinary levels of cruelty to its people. No doubt you have heard tales of the Tenescowri, the Seer's army of the dispossessed and the abandoned – all that you may have heard is without exaggeration. Cannibals, rapers of the dead—'

'Children of the Dead Seed.' One man spoke up, leaning forward. 'It is true? Is it even possible? That women should descend onto battlefields and soldiers whose corpses are not yet cold ...'
Keruli’s nod was sombre. ‘Among the Tenescowri’s youngest generation of followers . . . aye, there are the Children of the Dead Seed. Singular proof of what is possible.’ He paused, then continued, ‘The Domin possesses its sanctified faithful, the citizens of the original Pannion cities, to whom all the rights and privileges the priests speak of applies. No-one else can acquire that citizenship. Non-citizens are less than slaves, for they are the subjects – the objects – of every cruelty conceivable, without recourse to mercy or justice. The Tenescowri offers their only escape, the chance to match the inhumanity inflicted on them. The citizens of Saltoan, should the Domin subjugate this city, will be one and all cast from their homes, stripped of all possessions, denied food, denied clean water. Savagery will be their only possible path, as followers sworn into the Tenescowri.

‘Masters and mistresses, we must fight this war with the weapon of truth, the laying bare of the lies of the Pannion priests. This demands a very specific kind of organization, of dissemination, of crafted rumours and counter-intelligence. Tasks at which you all excel, my friends. The city’s commonalty must themselves drive the priests from Saltoan. They must be guided to that decision, to that cause, not with fists and knouts, but with words.’

‘What makes you so sure that will work?’ a master demanded.

‘You have no choice but to make it work,’ Keruli replied. ‘To fail is to see Saltoan fall to the Pannions.’

Keruli continued, but Gruntle was no longer listening. His eyes, half shut, studied the man who had hired them. An intermediary had brokered the contract in Darujhistan. Gruntle's first sight of the master was the morning outside Worry Gate, at the rendezvous, arriving on foot, robed as he was now. The carriage was delivered scant moments after him, of local hire. Keruli had quickly entered it and from then on Gruntle had seen and spoken with his master but twice on this long, wearying journey.

A mage, I’d concluded. But now, I think, a priest. Kneeling before which god, I wonder? No obvious signs. That itself is telling enough, I suppose. There’s nothing obvious about Keruli, except maybe the bottomless coin-chest backing his generosity. Any new temples in Darujhistan lately? Can’t recall – oh, that one in Gadrobi District. Sanctified to Treach, though why anyone would be interested in worshipping the Tiger of Summer is beyond me—

‘—killings.’

‘Been quiet these two nights past, though.’

The masters and mistresses were speaking amongst themselves. Keruli’s attention was nevertheless keen, though he said nothing.

Blinking, Gruntle eased slightly straighter on the bench. He leaned close to Harllo. ‘What was that about killings?’

‘Unexplained murders for four nights running, or something like that. A local problem, though I gather it's past.’

The captain grunted, then settled back once again, trying to ignore the cool sweat now prickling beneath his shirt. They made good time, well ahead of us – that carriage moved with preternatural speed. But it would never have managed Saltoan's streets. Too wide, too high. Must have camped in Waytown. A score of paces from Sunrise Gate . . . Proof of your convictions, friend Buke?

‘I was bored out of my mind, what do you think?’ Stonny poured herself another cup of wine. ‘Nektara managed to alleviate that, and – if all those sweating hairy faces were any indication – not just for me. You're all pigs.’

‘Wasn't us on such public display,’ Gruntle said.

‘So what? You didn't all have to watch, did you? What if it'd been a baby on my hip and my tit bared?’

‘If that,’ Harllo said, ‘I would have positively stared.’
'You're disgusting.'

'You misunderstand me, dearest. Not your tit – though that would be a fine sight indeed – but you with a baby! Ha, a baby!'

Stonny threw him a sneer.

They were sitting in a back room in the tavern, the leavings of a meal on the table between them.

'In any case,' Gruntle said, sighing, 'that meeting will last the rest of the night, and come the morning our master will be the only one among us privileged to catch up on his sleep – in the comfy confines of his carriage. We've got rooms upstairs with almost-clean beds and I suggest we make use of them.'

'That would be to actually sleep, dearest Stonny,' Harllo explained.

'Rest assured I'll bar the door, runt.'

'Nektara has a secret knock, presumably.'

'Wipe that grin off your face or I'll do it for you, Harllo.'

'How come you get all the fun, anyway?'

She grinned. 'Breeding, mongrel. What I got and you ain't got.'

'Education, too, huh?'

'Precisely.'

A moment later, the door swung open and Keruli entered.

Gruntle leaned back in his chair and eyed the priest. 'So, have you succeeded in recruiting the city's thugs, murderers and extortionists to your cause?'

'More or less,' Keruli replied, striding over to pour himself some wine. 'War, alas,' he sighed, 'must be fought on more than one kind of battlefield. The campaign will be a long one, I fear.'

'Is that why we're headed to Capustan?'

The priest's gaze settled on Gruntle for a moment, then he turned away. 'I have other tasks awaiting me there, Captain. Our brief detour here in Saltoan is incidental, in the great scheme of things.'

*And which great scheme is that, Priest?* Gruntle wanted to ask, but didn't. His master was beginning to make him nervous, and he suspected that any answer to that question would only make matters worse. *No, Keruli, you keep your secrets.*

The archway beneath Sunrise Gate was as dark as a tomb, the air chill and damp. Waytown's shanty sprawl was visible just beyond, through a haze of smoke lit gold by the morning sun.

Grainy-eyed and itching with flea bites, Gruntle nudged his horse into an easy trot as soon as he rode into the sunlight. He'd remained in Saltoan, lingering around the Gate for two bells, whilst Harllo and Stonny had driven the carriage and its occupant out of the city a bell before dawn. They would be at least two leagues along the river road, he judged.

Most of the banditry on the first half of this stretch to Capustan was headquartered in Saltoan – the stretch's second half, in Capan territory, was infinitely safer. Spotters hung around Sunrise Gate to mark the caravans heading east, much as he'd seen their counterparts on the west wall at Sunset Gate keeping an eye out for caravans bound for Darujhistan. Gruntle had waited to see if any local packs had made plans for Keruli's party, but no-one had set out in pursuit, confirming the master's assertion that safe passage had been guaranteed. It wasn't in Gruntle's nature to take thieves at their word, however.
He worked his horse into a canter to escape Waytown's clouds of flies and, flanked by half-wild, barking dogs, rode clear of the shanty-town and onto the open, rocky river road. Vision Plain's gently rolling prairie reached out to the distant Barghast Range on his left. To his right was a rough bank of piled stones – mostly overgrown with grasses – and beyond it the reedy flats of the river's floodplain.

The dogs abandoned him a few hundred paces beyond Waytown and the captain found himself alone on the road. The trader track would fade before long, he recalled, the dyke on his right dwindling, the road itself becoming a sandy swath humped with ant nests, bone-white driftwood and yellow knots of grass, with floods wiping the ruts away every spring. There was no chance of getting lost, of course, so long as one kept Catlin River within sight to the south.

He came upon the corpses less than a league further on. The highwaymen had perfectly positioned their ambush, emerging from a deeply cut, seasonal stream bed and no doubt surrounding their victim's carriage in moments. The precise planning hadn't helped, it seemed. Two or three days old at the most, bloated and almost black under the sun, their bodies were scattered to both sides of the track. Swords, lance-heads, buckles and anything else that was metal had all melted under some ferocious heat, yet clothing and leather bindings were unmarked. A number of the bandits wore spurs, and indeed there would have been no way of getting out this far without horses, but of the beasts there was no sign.

Dismounted and wandering among the dead, Gruntle noted that the tracks of Keruli's carriage – they too had stopped to examine the scene – were overlying another set. A wider, heavier carriage, drawn by oxen.

There were no visible wounds on the corpses.

_I doubt Buke had to even so much as draw his blade._

The captain climbed back into his saddle and resumed his journey.

He caught sight of his companions half a league further on, and rode up alongside the carriage a short while later.

Harllo gave him a nod. 'A fine day, wouldn't you say, Gruntle?'

'Not a cloud in the sky. Where's Stonny?'

'Took one of the horses ahead. Should be back soon.'

'Why did she do that?'

'Just wanted to make certain the wayside camp was ... uh, unoccupied. Ah, here she comes.'

Gruntle greeted her with a scowl as she reined in before them. 'Damned stupid thing to do, woman.'

'This whole journey's stupid if you ask me. There's three Barghast at the wayside camp – and no, they ain't roasted any bandits lately. Anyway, Capustan's bare days away from a siege – maybe we make the walls in time, in which case we'll be stuck there with the whole Pannion army between us and the open road, or we don't make it in time and those damned Tenescowri have fun with us.'

Gruntle's scowl deepened. 'Where are those Barghast headed, then?'

'They came down from the north, but now they're travelling the same as us – they want to take a look at things closer to Capustan and don't ask me why – they're Barghast, ain't they? Brains the size of walnuts. We got to talk with the master, Gruntle.'

The carriage door swung open and Keruli climbed out. 'No need, Stonny Menakis, my hearing is fine. Three Barghast, you said. Which clan?'

'White Face, if the paint's any indication.'

'We shall invite them to travel with us, then.'
"Master—" Gruntle began, but Keruli cut him off.

'We shall arrive in Capustan well before the siege, I believe. The Septarch responsible for the Pannion forces is known for a methodical approach. Once I am delivered, your duties will be discharged and you will be free to leave immediately for Darujhistan.' His dark, uncanny eyes narrowed on Gruntle. 'You do not have a reputation for breaking contracts, else I would not have hired you.'

'No, sir, we've no intention of breaking our contract. None the less, it might be worth discussing our options – what if Capustan is besieged before we arrive?'

'Then I shall not see you lose your lives in any desperate venture, Captain. I need then only be dropped off outside the range of the enemy, and I shall make my own way into the city, and such subterfuge is best attempted alone.'

'You would attempt to pass through the Pannion cordon?'

Keruli smiled. 'I have relevant skills for such an undertaking.'

*Do you now?* 'What about these Barghast? What makes you think they can be trusted to travel in our company?'

'If untrustworthy, better they be in sight than out of it, wouldn't you agree, Captain?'

He grunted. 'You've a point there, master.' He faced Harllo and Stonny, slowly nodded.

Harllo offered him a resigned smile.

Stonny was, predictably, not so nearly laconic. 'This is insanity!' Then she tossed up her hands. 'Fine, then! We ride into the dragon's maw, why not?' She spun her horse round. 'Let's go throw bones with the Barghast, shall we?'

Grimacing, Gruntle watched her ride off.

'She is a treasure, is she not?' Harllo murmured with a sigh.

'Never seen you so lovestruck before,' Gruntle said with a sidelong glance.

'It's the unattainable, friend, that's what's done for me. I long helplessly, morosely maundering over unrequited adoration. I dream of her and Nektara ... with me snug between 'em—'

'Please, Harllo, you're making me sick.'

'Uhm,' Keruli said, 'I believe I shall now return to the carriage.'

The three Barghast were clearly siblings, with the woman the eldest. White paint had been smeared on their faces, giving them a skull-like appearance. Braids stained with red ochre hung down to their shoulders, knotted with bone fetishes. All three wore hauberks of holed coins – the currency ranging from copper to silver and no doubt from some looted hoard, as most of them looked ancient and unfamiliar to Gruntle's eye. Coin-backed gauntlets covered their hands. A guardblock's worth of weapons accompanied the trio – bundled lances, throwing axes and copper-sheathed long-hafted fighting axes, hook-bladed swords and assorted knives and daggers.

They stood on the other side of a small stone-ringed firepit – burned down to faintly smouldering coals – with Stonny still seated on her horse to their left. A small heap of jackrabbit bones indicated a meal just completed.

Gruntle's gaze settled on the Barghast woman. 'Our master invites you to travel in our company. Do you accept?'

The woman's dark eyes flicked to the carriage as Harllo drove it to the camp's edge. 'Few traders still journey to Capustan,' she said after a moment. 'The trail has become ... perilous.'
Gruntle frowned. 'How so? Have the Pannions sent raiding parties across the river?'

'Not that we have heard. No, demons stalk the wild-lands. We have been sent to discover the truth of them.'

*Demons? Hood's breath.* 'When did you learn of these demons?'

She shrugged. 'Two, three months past.'

The captain sighed, slowly dismounted. 'Well, let us hope there's nothing to such tales.'

The woman grinned. 'We hope otherwise. I am Hetan, and these are my miserable brothers, Cafal and Netok. This is Netok's first hunt since his Deathnight.'

Gruntle glanced at the glowering, hulking youth. 'I can see his excitement.'

Hetan turned, gaze narrowing on her brother. 'You must have sharp eyes.'

*By the Abyss, another humourless woman for company . . .*

Looping a leg over her saddle, Stonny Menackis dropped to the ground, raising a puff of dust. 'Our captain's too obvious with his jokes, Hetan. They end up thudding like ox dung, and smelling just as foul. Pay him no mind, lass, unless you enjoy being confused.'

'I enjoy killing and riding men and little else,' Hetan growled, crossing her muscled arms.

Harllo quickly clambered down from the carriage and approached her with a broad smile. 'I am named Harllo and I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Hetan!'

'You can kill him any time you like,' Stonny drawled.

The two brothers were indeed miserable creatures, taciturn and, as far as Gruntle could determine, singularly thick. Harllo's futile efforts with Hetan proved amusing enough whilst they sat around the rekindled hearth beneath a star-spattered sky. Keruli made a brief appearance shortly before everyone began bedding down, but only to share a bowl of herbal tea before once again retiring to his carriage. It fell to Gruntle – he and Hetan the last two lingering at the firepit – to pry loose more information from the Barghast.

'These demons,' he began, 'how have they been described?'

She leaned forward and ritually spat into the fire. 'Fast on two legs. Talons like an eagle's, only much larger, at the ends of those legs. Their arms are blades—'

'Blades? What do you mean?'

She shrugged. 'Bladed. Blood-iron. Their eyes are hollow pits. They stink of urns in the dark circle. They make no sound, no sound at all.'

*Urns in the dark circle? Cremation urns . . . in a chamber bar-row. Ah, they smell of death, then. Their arms are blades . . . how? What in Hood's name does that mean? Blood-iron – that's iron quenched in snow-chilled blood . . . a Barghast practice when shamans invest weapons. Thus, the wielder and the weapon are linked. Merged...* 'Has anyone in your clan seen one?'

'No, the demons have not journeyed north to our mountain fastnesses. They remain in these grasslands.'

'Who, then, delivered the tales?'

'Our shoulermen have seen them in their dreams. The spirits whisper to them and warn of the threat. The White Clan has chosen a warchief – our father – and await what is to come. But our father would know his enemy, so he has sent his children down onto the flatlands.'

Gruntle ruminated on this, his eyes watching the fire slowly ebb. 'Will your father the warchief of the White
Faces lead the clans south? If Capustan is besieged, the Capan territories will be vulnerable to your raids, at least until the Pannions complete their conquest.

‘Our father has no plans to lead us south, Captain.’ She spat a second time into the fire. ‘The Pannion war will come to us, in time. So the shouldermen have read in bhederin blades. Then, there shall be war.’

‘If these demons are advance elements of the Pannion forces...’

‘Then, when they first appear in our fastnesses, we will know that the time has come.’

‘Fighting,’ Gruntle muttered. ‘What you enjoy the most.’

‘Yes, but for now, I would ride you.’

Ride? More like batter me senseless. Ah, well... ‘What man would say no to such an elegant offer?’

Collecting her bedroll in both arms, Hetan rose. ‘Follow me, and hurry.’

‘Alas,’ he replied, slowly gaining his feet, ‘I never hurry, as you’re about to discover.’

‘Tomorrow night I shall ride your friend.’

‘You’re doing so tonight, dear, in his dreams.’

She nodded seriously. ‘He has big hands.’

‘Aye.’

‘So do you.’

‘I thought you were in a hurry, Hetan.’

‘I am. Let’s go.’

The Barghast Range crept down from the north as the day slowly passed, from distant mountains to worn, humped-back hills. Many of the hills edging the traders’ track to Capustan were sacred sites, their summits displaying the inverted tree trunks that were the Barghast custom of anchoring spirits – or so Hetan explained as she walked alongside Gruntle, who was leading his horse by the reins. While the captain had little interest in things religious, he admitted to some curiosity as to why the Barghast would bury trees upside-down in hills.

‘Mortal souls are savage things,’ she explained, spitting to punctuate her words. ‘Many must be held down to keep them from ill-wandering. Thus, the oaks are brought down from the north. The shouldermen carve magic into their trunks. The one to be buried is pinned beneath the tree. Spirits are drawn as well, as guardians, and other traps are placed along the edges of the dark circle. Even so, sometimes the souls escape – imprisoned by one of the traps, yet able to travel the land. Those who return to the clans where they once lived are quickly destroyed, so they have learned to stay away – here, in these lowlands. Sometimes, such a sticksnare retains a loyalty to its mortal kin, and will send dreams to our shouldermen, to tell us of danger.’

‘A sticksnare, you called it. What does that mean?’

‘You may well see for yourself,’ she replied with a shrug.

‘Was it one of these sticksnares that sent the dreams of demons?’

‘Yes, and other spirits besides. That so many sought to reach us...’

Added veracity to the threat, aye, I understand. He scanned the empty land before them, wondering what was out there.

Stormy rode fifty paces ahead. At the moment, Gruntle could not see her, as the trail leaned round a boulder-studded hill and vanished from sight thirty paces on. She had a frustrating knack for ignoring his orders – he'd
wanted her to remain in sight at all times. The two Barghast brothers ranged to the sides, flanking the carriage from a distance that varied with the demands of the ground they covered. Cafal had taken the inland side and was jogging up the same hill's rocky slope. Netok walked along the sandy bank of the river, surrounded by a cloud of midges that seemed to grow larger and thicker with every stride. Given the alarmingly thick and rancid greases with which the Barghast covered their bodies, Gruntle suspected those insects were suffering from frustration – drawn close by a warm body but unwilling or unable to alight.

That grease had been something of a challenge the night just past, Gruntle reflected, but he'd managed none the less, sporting a formidable collection of bruises, scratches and bites as proof. Hetan had been ... energetic—

A shout from Cafal. At the same moment Stonny reappeared. The slow canter at which she approached eased the captain's nerves somewhat, though it was clear that both she and the Barghast on the hill had spotted something ahead/He glanced over to see Cafal now crouched low, his attention fixed on something further up the trail, but he had not drawn his weapons.

Stonny reined in, her expression closed. 'Bauchelain's carriage ahead. It's been ... damaged. There's been a fight of some kind. Messy.'

'See anyone still standing?'

'No, just the oxen, looking placid enough. No bodies either.'

Hetan faced her brother on the hill and caught his eye. She made a half-dozen hand gestures, and, drawing forth a lance, Cafal padded forward, dropping down from view.

'All right,' Gruntle sighed. 'Weapons out – let's go for a look.'

'Want me to keep back?' Harllo asked from the driver's bench.

'No.'

Rounding the hill, they saw that the trail opened out again, the land flattening on both sides. Forty paces on was Bauchelain and Korbål Broach's massive carriage, on its side, the rear spoke torn entirely off and lying shattered nearby. The four oxen stood a few paces away, grazing on the prairie grasses. Swathes of burned ground stretched out from the carriage, the air reeking of sorcery. A low mound just beyond had been blasted open, the inverted tree it had contained torn up and shattered as if it had been struck by lightning. Smoke still drifted from the gaping pit where the burial chamber had once been. Cafal was even now cautiously approaching it, his left hand scribing warding gestures in the air, the lance poised for a cast in his right.

Netok jogged up from the river bank, a two-handed axe in his grip. He halted at his sister's side. 'Something is loose,' he growled, his small eyes darting.

'And still close,' Hetan nodded. 'Flank your brother.'

He padded off.

Gruntle strode up to her. 'That barrow ... you're saying a spirit or ghost's broken free.'

'Aye.'

Drawing a hook-bladed sword, the Barghast woman walked slowly towards the carriage. The captain followed.

Stonny trotted her horse back to take a defensive position beside Keruli's contrivance.

A savage hole had been torn into the carriage's side, revealing on its jagged edges what looked to be sword-cuts, though larger than any blade Gruntle had ever seen. He clambered up to peer inside the compartment, half dreading what he might discover.

It was empty – no bodies. The leather-padded walls had been shredded, the ornate furnishings scattered. Two huge trunks, once bolted to the floorboards, had been ripped loose. Their lids were open, contents spilled out.
'Hood take us,' the captain whispered, his mouth suddenly dry. One of the trunks contained flat slabs of slate—now shattered—on which arcane symbols had been meticulously etched, but it was the other trunk whose contents had Gruntle close to gagging. A mass of blood-slick ... organs. Livers, lungs, hearts, all joined together to form a shape all the more horrifying for its familiarity. When alive—as he sensed it must have been until recently—it had been human-shaped, though no more than knee-high when perched on its boneless, pod-like appendages. Eyeless and, as far as Gruntle could see in the compartment’s gloom, devoid of anything resembling a brain, the now-dead creature still leaked thin, watery blood.

_Necromancy, but not the demonic kind. These are the arts of those who delve into mortality, into resurrection and undeath. Those organs . . . they came from living people. People murdered by a madman. Damn you, Buke, why did you have to get involved with those bastards?_

'Are they within?' Hetan asked from below.

He leaned back, shook his head. 'Just wreckage.'

Harllo called out from the driver’s bench. 'Look uptrail, Gruntle! Party coming.'

Four figures, two leather-cloaked and in black, one short and bandy-legged, the last one tall, thin. _No losses, then. Still, something nasty hit them. Hard._ 'That's them,' he muttered.

Hetan squinted up at him. 'You know these men?'

'Aye, only one well, though. The guard—that grey-haired, tall one.'

'I don't like them,' the woman growled, her sword twitching as she adjusted her grip.

'Keep your distance,' Gruntle advised. 'Tell your brothers. You don't want to back-brush their hides—those cloaked two. Bauchelain—with the pointed beard—and Korbal Broach—the ... the other one.'

Cafal and Netok rejoined their sister. The older brother was scowling. 'It was taken yesterday,' he said. 'The wards were unravelled. Slow. Before the hill was broken open.'

Gruntle, still perched on top of the carriage, narrowed his gaze on the approaching men. Buke and the servant, Emancipor Reese, both looked exhausted, deeply shaken, whilst the sorcerers might well have simply been out on a stroll for all the discomfort in their composure. Yet they were armed. All-metal crossbows, stained black, were cradled on their vambraced forearms, quarrels set and locked. Squat black quivers at their hips showed but a few quarrels remaining in each.

Climbing down from the carriage, Gruntle strode to meet them.

'Well met, Captain,' Bauchelain said with a faint smile. 'Fortunate for you that we made better time since the river. Since Saltoan our peregrination has been anything but peaceful.'

'So I've gathered, sir.' Gruntle's eyes strayed to Buke. His friend looked ten years older than when he'd last seen him. He would not meet the captain's eyes.

'I see your entourage has grown since we last met,' Bauchelain observed. 'Barghast, yes? Extraordinary, isn't it, that such people can be found on other continents as well, calling themselves by the same name and practising, it seems, virtually identical customs. What vast history lies buried and now lost in their ignorance, I wonder?'

'Generally,' Gruntle said quietly, 'that particular usage of the word "buried" is figurative. Yet you have taken it literally.'

The black-clad man shrugged. 'Plagued by curiosity, alas. We could not pass by the opportunity. We never can, in fact. As it turned out, the spirit we gathered into our embrace—though once a shaman of some power—could tell us nothing other than what we had already surmised. The Barghast are an ancient people indeed, and were once far more numerous. Accomplished seafarers as well.' His flat, grey eyes fixed on Hetan. A thin brow slowly lifted. 'Not a question of a fall from some civilized height into savagery, however. Simply an eternal ...
stagnation. The belief system, with all its ancestor worship, is anathema to progress, or so I have concluded given the evidence.'

Hetan offered the sorcerer a silent snarl.

Cafal spoke, his voice ragged with fury. 'What have you done with our soul-kin?'

'Very little, warrior. He had already eluded the inner bindings, yet had fallen prey to one of your shamanistic traps – a tied bundle of sticks, twine and cloth. Was it compassion that offered them the semblance of bodies with those traps? Misguided, if so—'

'Flesh,' Korbal Broach said in a reedy, thin voice, 'would far better suit them.'

Bauchelain smiled. 'My companion is skilled in such ... assemblages, a discipline of lesser interest to me.'

'What happened here?' Gruntle asked.

'That is plain,' Hetan snapped. 'They broke into a dark circle. Then a demon attacked them – a demon such as the one my brothers and I hunt. And these ... men ... fled and somehow eluded it.'

'Not quite, my dear,' Bauchelain said. 'Firstly, the creature that attacked us was not a demon – you can take my word on such matters for demons are entities I happen to know very well indeed. We were most viciously set upon, however, as you surmise. Whilst we were preoccupied with this barrow. Had not Buke alerted us, we might well have sustained even further damage to our accoutrements, not to mention our less capable companions.'

'So,' Gruntle cut in, 'if not a demon, then what was it?'

'Ah, a question not easily answered, Captain. Undead, most certainly. Commanded by a distant master, and formidable in the extreme. Korbal and I were perforce required to unleash the full host of our servants to fend the apparition off, nor did the subsequent pursuit yield us any profit. Indeed, the loss of a good many of those servants was incurred, upon the appearance of two more of the undead hunters. And while the trio have been driven off, the relief is but temporary. They will attack again, and if they have gathered in greater numbers, we might well – all of us – be sorely tested.'

'If I may,' Gruntle said, 'I would like to speak in private with my master, and with Hetan, here.'

Bauchelain tilted his head. 'By all means. Come, Korbal and companions, let us survey the full damage to our hapless carriage.'

Taking Hetan's arm, Gruntle led her to where Harllo and Stonny waited beside Keruli's carriage. Cafal and Netok followed.

'They have enslaved our soul-kin,' Hetan hissed, her eyes like fanned coals. 'I will kill them – kill them all!'

'And die before you close a single step,' Gruntle snapped. 'These are sorcerers, Hetan. Worse, they're necromancers. Korbal practises the art of the undead. Bauchelain's is demonic summoning. The two sides of the skull-faced coin. Hood-cursed and foul ... and deadly. Do you understand me? Don't even think of trying them.'

Keruli's voice emerged from the carriage, 'Even more poignantly, my friends, very soon, I fear, we will have need of those terrible men and their formidable powers.'

Gruntle turned with a scowl. The door's window shutter had been opened to a thin slit. 'What are these undead hunters, master? Do you know?'

There was a long pause before Keruli responded. 'I have ... suspicions. In any case, they are spinning threads of power across this land, like a web, from which they can sense any tremor. We cannot pass undetected—'

'Then let us turn round,' Stonny snapped. 'Now, before it's too late.'

'But it already is,' Keruli replied. 'These undead servants continue to cross the river from the southlands, all
in service to the Pannion Seer. They range ever closer to Saltoan. Indeed, I believe there are now more of them behind us than between here and Capustan.'

_Hood-damned convenient, Master Keruli._

'Ve must,' the man within the carriage continued, 'fashion a temporary alliance with these necromancers – until we reach Capustan.'

'Well,' Gruntle said, _they certainly view it as an obvious course to take._

'They are practical men, for all their other ... faults.'

'The Barghast will not travel with them,' Hetan snarled.

'I don't think we have any choice,' Gruntle sighed. 'And that includes you and your brothers, Hetan. What's the point of finding these undead hunters only to have them tear you to pieces?'

'You think we come unprepared for such battle? We stood long in the bone circle, Captain, whilst every shaman of the gathered clans danced the weft of power. Long in the bone circle.'

'Three days and three nights,' Cafal growled.

_No wonder she damn near ripped my chest open last night._

Keruli spoke. 'It may prove insufficient, should your efforts draw the full attention of the Pannion Seer. Captain, how many days of travel before we reach Capustan?'

_You know as well as I. 'Four, master._

'Surely, Hetan, you and your brothers can achieve a certain stoicism for such a brief length of time? We well understand your outrage. The desecration of your sacred ancestors is an insult not easily accommodated. But, do not your own kind bow to a certain pragmatism in this regard as well? The inscribed wards, the sticksnares? Consider this an extension of such necessity ...'

Hetan spat, turned away. 'It is as you say,' she conceded after a moment. 'Necessary. Very well.'

Gruntle returned to Bauchelain and the others. The two sorcerers were crouched down with the shattered axle between them. The stench of melted iron wafted up.

'Our repairs, Captain,' Bauchelain murmured, 'will not take long.'

'Good. You said there's three of these creatures out there – how far away?'

'Our small shaman friend keeps pace with the hunters. Less than a league, and I assure you, they can – if they so will it – cover that distance in a matter of a few hundred heartbeats. We will have little warning, but enough to muster a defence, I believe.'

'Why are you travelling to Capustan?'

The sorcerer glanced up, an eyebrow lifting. 'No particular reason. By nature, we wander. Upon arriving on the west coast of this continent, we set our sights eastward. Capustan is as far as we can travel east, yes?'

'Close enough, I suppose. The land juts further east to the south, beyond Elingarth, but the kingdoms and city states down there are little more than pirate and bandit holdings. Besides, you'd have to pass through the Pannion Domin to get there.'

'And I gather that would be trying.'

'You'd never make it.'

Bauchelain smiled, bent once more to concentrate on the axle.

'You're in trouble, friend,' the captain said in a low voice.

Buke scowled, said nothing – but the truth was evident in his eyes.

'When we reach Capustan, take the closing coin and don't look back. I know, Buke, you were right in your suspicions – I saw what was within the carriage. I saw. They'll do worse than kill you if you try anything. Do you understand? Worse.'

The man grinned wryly, squinted out to the east. 'You think we'll make it that far, do you, Gruntle? Well, surprise – we won't live to see the next dawn.' He fixed wild eyes on the captain. 'You wouldn't believe what my masters unleashed – such a nightmare menagerie of servants, guardians, spirit-slayers – and their own powers! Hood take us! Yet all of it barely managed to drive one of those beasts off, and when the other two arrived, we were the ones retreating. That menagerie is nothing but smouldering pieces scattered for leagues across the plain. Gruntle, I saw demons cut to shreds. Aye, these two look unshaken, but believe me, that's of no account. None at all.' He lowered his voice still further. 'They are insane, friend. Thoroughly, ice-blooded, lizard-eyed insane. And poor Mancy's been with them for three years now and counting – the stories he's told me ...' The man shuddered.

'Mancy? Oh, Emancipor Reese. Where's the cat, by the way?'

Buke barked a laugh. 'Ran off – just like all our horses and we had an even dozen of them after those stupid bandits attacked us. Ran off, once I'd done prying its claws from Mancy's back, which was where it jumped when all the warrens broke loose.'

Repairs completed and carriage righted, the journey resumed. A league or two of daylight remained. Stonny once again rode to point, Cafal and Netok taking their places ranging on the flanks. Emancipor guided the carriage, the two sorcerers having retired within.

Buke and Gruntle walked a few paces ahead of Keruli's carriage, saying little for a long while, until the captain sighed heavily and glanced at his friend. 'For what it's worth, there's people who don't want to see you dead, Buke. They see you wasting away inside, and they care enough so that it pains them—'

'Guilt's a good weapon, Gruntle, or at least it has been for a long time. Doesn't cut any more, though. If you choose to care, then you better swallow the pain. I don't give a damn, myself.'

'Stonny—'

'Is worth more than messing herself up with me. I'm not interested in being saved, anyway. Tell her that.'

'You tell her, Buke, and when she puts her fist in your face just remember that I warned you here and now. You tell her – I won't deliver your messages of self-pity.'

'Back off, Gruntle. I'd hurt you bad before you finished using those cutlasses on me.'

'Oh, that's sweet – get one of your few remaining friends to kill you. Seems I was wrong, it's not just self-pity, is it? You're not obsessed with the tragic deaths of your family, you're obsessed with yourself, Buke. Your guilt's an endlessly rising tide, and that ego of yours is a levee and all you do is keep slapping fresh bricks on it. The wall gets higher and higher, and you're looking down on the world from a lofty height – with a Hood-damned sneer.'

Buke was pale and trembling. 'If that's the way you see it,' he rasped, 'then why call me friend at all?'

Beru knows, I'm beginning to wonder. He drew a deep breath, managed to calm himself down. 'We've known each other a long time. We've never crossed blades. And you were in the habit of getting drunk for days on end, a habit you broke ... but one I haven't. Took the deaths of everyone you loved to do that, and I'm terrified it might take the same for me.'
Thank Hood the lass married that fat merchant.

'Doesn't sound like much, Gruntle.'

We're two of a kind, you bastard – cut past your own ego and you'd see that fast enough. But he said nothing.

'Sun's almost down,' Buke observed after a time. They'll attack when it's dark.'

'How do you defend against them?'

'You don't. Can't. Like chopping into wood, from what I've seen, and they're fast. Gods, they're fast! We're all dead, Gruntle. Bauchelain and Korbal Broach ain't got much left – did you see them sweat mending the carriage? They're wrung dry, those two.'

'Keruli is a mage as well,' Gruntle said. 'Well, more likely a priest.'

'Let's hope his god's cocked an eye on us, then.'

And what are the chances of that?

With the sun's light pooling crimson on the horizon behind them, they made camp. Stonny guided the horses and oxen into a makeshift, rope-lined kraal to one side of the carriages – a position that would give them a chance to flee inland if it came to that.

A kind of resignation descended within the growing gloom as a meal was prepared over a small fire, Harllo electing himself cook. Neither Keruli nor the two sorcerers emerged from their respective carriages to join the small group.

Moths gathered around the smokeless flames. Sipping mulled wine, Gruntle watched their fluttering, mindless plunges into oblivion with a faintly bitter amusement.

Darkness closed in, the scatter of stars overhead sharpening. With the supper done, Hetan rose. 'Harllo, come with me now. Quickly.'

'My lady?' the man enquired.

Gruntle sprayed a mouthful of wine. Choking, coughing, with Stonny pounding on his back, it was a while before he managed to recover. Through watering eyes, he grinned at Harllo. 'You heard the lady.'

He watched his friend's eyes slowly grow wide.

Impatient, Hetan stepped forward and gripped Harllo by one arm. She pulled him to his feet, then dragged him out into the darkness.

Staring after them, Stonny frowned. 'What's all that about?'

Not a single man spoke up.

She swung a glare on Gruntle. After a moment, she hissed with understanding. 'What an outrage!'

'My dear,' the captain laughed, 'after Saltoan, that's a little rich coming from you.'

'Don't you "dear" me, Gruntle! What are the rest of us supposed to do – sit here and listen to gross grunting and groaning from that hump of grasses over there? Disgusting!'

'Really, Stonny. In the circumstances, it makes perfect sense——'

'It's not that, you idiot! That woman chose Harllo! Gods, I'm going to be sick! Harllo! Look around this fire – there's you, and let's face it, a certain type of uncultured, trashy woman couldn't resist you. And Buke, tall and weathered with a tortured soul – surely worth a snakefight or three. But Harllo? That tangled-haired ape?'

'He's got big hands,' Gruntle murmured. 'So Hetan observed last... uh, last night.'
Stonny stared, then leaned forward. ‘She had you last night! Didn’t she? That loose, grease-smeared savage had you! I can see the truth in your smug face, Gruntle, so don’t deny it!’

‘Well, you just heard her – how could any warm-blooded man resist?’

‘Fine, then!’ she snapped, rising. ‘Buke, on your feet, damn you.’

He flinched back. ‘No – I couldn’t – I, uh, no, I’m sorry, Stonny—’

Snarling, she whirled on the two silent Barghast.

Cafal smiled. ‘Choose Netok. He’s yet—’

‘Fine!’ She gestured.

The youth rose unsteadily.

‘Big hands,’ Gruntle observed.

‘Shut up, Gruntle.’

‘Head in the other direction, please,’ he continued. ‘You wouldn’t want to stumble over anything ... unsightly.’

‘Damn right in that. Let’s go, Netok.’

They walked off, the Barghast trailing like a pup on a leash.

The captain swung to Buke. ‘You fool.’

The man just shook his head, staring down at the fire.

Emancipor Reese reached for the tin pot holding the spiced wine. ‘Two more nights,’ he muttered. ‘Typical.’

Gruntle stared at the old man for a moment, then grinned. ‘We ain’t dead yet – who knows, maybe Oponn’s smiling down on you.’

‘That’d make a change,’ Reese grumbled.

‘How in Hood’s name did you get tied up with your two masters, anyway?’

‘Long story,’ he muttered, sipping at his wine. ‘Too long to tell, really. My wife, you see ... Well, the posting offered travel. ...’

‘Are you suggesting you chose the lesser of two evils?’

‘Heavens forfend, sir.’

‘Ah, you’ve regrets now, then.’

‘I didn’t say that, neither.’

A sudden yowl from the darkness startled everyone.

‘Which one made that sound, I wonder?’ Gruntle mused.

‘None,’ Reese said. ‘My cat’s come back.’

A carriage door opened. Moments later Bauchelain’s black-clad form appeared. ‘Our sticksnare returns... hastily. I suggest you call in the others and prepare your weapons. Tactically, attempt to hamstring these hunters, and stay low when you close – they prefer horizontal cuts. Emancipor, if you would kindly join us. Captain Gruntle, perhaps you might inform your master, though no doubt he is already aware.’

Suddenly chilled, Gruntle rose. ‘We’ll be lucky to see anything, dammit.’
'That will not be an issue,' Bauchelain replied. 'Korbal, dear friend,' he called out behind him, 'a broad circle of light, if you please.'

The area was suddenly bathed in a soft, golden glow, reaching out thirty or more paces on all sides.

The cat yowled again and Gruntle caught sight of a tawny flash, darting back out into the darkness. Hetan and Harllo approached from one side, hastily tucking in clothing. Stonny and Netok arrived as well. The captain managed a strained grin. 'Not enough time, I take it,' he said to her.

Stonny grimaced. 'You should be more forgiving – it was the lad's first try.'

'Oh, right.'

'A damned shame, too,' she added, pulling on her duelling gloves. 'He had potential, despite the grease.'

The three Barghast had gathered now, Cafal jabbing a row of lances into the stony earth whilst Hetan busied herself tying a thick cord to join the three of them. Fetishes of feather and bone hung from knots in the cord, and Gruntle judged that the span between each warrior would be five or six arm-lengths. When the other two were done, Netok handed them double-bladed axes. All three set the weapons down at their feet and collected a lance each. Hetan leading, they began a soft, rumbling chant.

'Captain.'

Gruntle pulled his gaze from the Barghast and found Master Keruli at his side. The man's hands were folded on his lap, his silk cape shimmering like water. 'The protection I can offer is limited. Stay close to me, you and Harllo and Stonny. Do not allow yourselves to be drawn forward. Concentrate on defence.'

Unsheathing his cutlasses, Gruntle nodded. Harllo moved to the captain's left, his two-handed sword held steady before him. Stonny stood to Gruntle's right, rapier and sticker readied.

He feared for her the most. Her weapons were too light for what was coming – he recalled the chop-marks on Bauchelain's carriage. This would be brutal strength at play here, not finesse. 'Stay back a step, Stonny,' he said.

'Don't be stupid.'

'I'm not talking chivalry, Stonny. Poking wire-thin holes won't hurt an undead.'

'We'll just see, won't we?'

'Stay close to the master – guard him. That's an order, Stonny.'

'I hear you,' she growled.

Gruntle faced Keruli again. 'Sir, who is your god? If you call upon him or her, what should we expect?'

The round-faced man frowned slightly. 'Expect? I am afraid I have no idea, Captain. My – uh – god's powers are newly awakened from thousands of years of sleep. My god is Elder.'

Gruntle stared. *Elder? Weren't the Elder gods abandoned because of their ferocity? What might be unleashed here? Queen of Dreams defend us.*

He watched as Keruli drew forth a thin-bladed dagger and cut deep into his left palm. Blood dripped into the grass at his feet. The air suddenly smelled like a slaughterhouse.

A small, man-shaped collection of sticks and twigs and twine scurried into the circle of light, trailing sorcery like smoke. *The sticksnared shaman.*

Gruntle felt the earth shuddering to fast approaching steps, a low, relentless drumming like warhorses. *No, more like giants. Upright, five pairs, maybe more. They were coming from the east.*

Ghostly shapes loomed into sight, then faded again. The tremors in the earth slowed, scattered, as the
creatures spread out.

The Barghast chant ended abruptly. Gruntle glanced in their direction. The three warriors faced east, lances ready. Coils of fog rose around their legs, thickening. In moments Hetan and her brothers would be completely enveloped.

Silence.

The familiar leather-bound grips of the heavy cutlasses felt slick in Gruntle's hands. He could feel the thud of his heart in his chest. Sweat gathered, dripped from chin and lips. He strained to see into the darkness beyond the sphere of light. Nothing. The soldier's moment, now, before the battle begins – who would choose such a life? You stand with others, all facing the same threat, all feeling so very alone. In the cold embrace of fear, that sense that all that you are might end in moments. Gods, I've no envy for a soldier's life—

Flat, wide, fang-bristling faces – sickly pale like snake bellies – emerged from the darkness. Eyes empty pits, the heads seemed to hover for a moment, as if suspended, at a height twice that of a man. Huge black-pocked iron swords slid into the light. The blades were fused to the creatures' wrists – no hands were visible – and Gruntle knew that a single blow from one of those swords could cut through a man's thigh effortlessly.

Reptilian, striding on hind legs like giant wingless birds and leaning forward with the counterweight of long, tapering tails, the undead apparitions wore strangely mottled armour: across the shoulders, on the chest to either side of the jutting sternum, and high on the hips. Skull-cap helmets, low and long, protected head and nape, with sweeping cheek-guards meeting over the snout to join and bend sharply to form a bridge-guard.

At Gruntle's side Keruli hissed. 'K'Chain Che'Malle. K'ell Hunters, these ones. Firstborn of every brood. The Matron's own children. Fading memories even to the Elder gods, this knowledge. Now, in my heart, I feel dismay.'

'What in Hood's name are they waiting for?' the captain growled.

'Uneasy – the swirling cloud that is Barghast sorcery. An unknown to their master.'

Disbelieving, the captain asked, 'The Pannion Seer commands these—'

The five hunters attacked. Heads darting forward, blades rising, they were a blur. Three struck for the Barghast, plunging towards that thick, twisting fog. The other two charged Bauchelain and Korbal Broach.

Moments before reaching the cloud, three lances flashed out, all striking the lead hunter. Sorcery ripped through the beast's withered, lifeless flesh with a sound like spikes driven into – then through – tree trunks. Dark grey muscle tissue, bronze-hued bone and swaths of burning hide flew in all directions. The hunter's head wobbled atop a shattered neck. The K'Chain Che'Malle staggered, then collapsed, even as its two kin swept round it and vanished into the sorcerous cloud. Iron on iron rang explosively from within.

Before Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, the other two hunters were engulfed in roiling, black waves of sorcery before they had taken two strides. The magic lacerated their bodies, splashed rotting, acidic stains that devoured their hides. The beasts drove through without pause, to be met by the two mages – both wearing ankle-length coats of black chain, both wielding hand-and-a-half swords that trailed streamers of smoke.

'Ware behind us!' Harllo suddenly screamed.

Gruntle spun.

To see a sixth hunter darting through screaming, bolting horses, charging directly for Keruli. Unlike the other K'Chain Che'Malle, this creature's hide was covered in intricate markings, and bore a dorsal ridge of steel spikes running down its spine.

Gruntle threw a shoulder against Keruli, sending the man sprawling. Ducking low, he threw up both cutlasses in time to catch a horizontal slash from one of the hunter's massive blades. The Gadrobi steel rang deafeningly, the impact bolting like shocks up the captain's arms. Gruntle heard more than felt his left wrist snap, the broken ends of the bones grinding and twisting impossibly before suddenly senseless hands released
the cutlasses – wheeling, spinning away. The hunter's second blade should have cut him in half. Instead, it clashed against Harllo's two-handed sword. Both weapons shattered. Harllo lurched away, his chest and face spraying blood from a savage hail of iron shards.

A taloned, three-toed foot struck Gruntle on an upward track. Grunting, the captain was thrown into the air. Pain exploded in his skull as he collided with the hunter's jaw, snapping the creature's head up with a bone-breaking, crunching sound.

Stunned, the breath driven from his lungs, Gruntle fell to the ground in a heap. An enormous weight pinned him, talons puncturing armour to pierce flesh. The three toes clenched around his chest, snapping bones, and he felt himself dragged forward. The scales of his armour clicked and clattered, dropping away as he was pulled along through dust and gravel. Twisted buckles and clasps dug into the earth. Blind, limbs flopping, Gruntle felt the talons digging ever deeper. He coughed and his mouth filled with frothy blood. The world darkened.

He felt the talons shudder, as if resonating from some massive blow. Another followed, then another. The claws spasmed. Then he was lifted into the air again, sent flying. Striking the ground, rolling, crashing up against the shattered spokes of a carriage wheel.

He felt himself dying, knew himself dying. He forced his eyes open, desperate for one last look upon the world – something, anything to drive away this overwhelming sense of confused sadness. Could it not have been sudden? Instant? Why this lingering, bemused draining away? Gods, even the pain is gone – why not awareness itself? Why torture me with the knowing of what I am about to surrender?

Someone was shrieking, the sound one of dying, and Gruntle understood it at once. Oh yes, scream your defiance, your terror and your rage – scream at that web even as it closes about you. Waves of sound out into the mortal world, one last time— The shrieks fell away, and now there was silence, save for the stuttering heart in Gruntle's chest.

He knew his eyes were open, yet he could see nothing. Either Korbal Broach's spell of light had failed, or the captain had found his own darkness.

Stumbling, that heart. Slowing, fading like a pale horse riding away down a road. Farther, fainter, fainter . . .
BOOK TWO

HEARTHSTONE
Midnight comes often in the dusk of my life, when I look back upon all that I have survived. The deaths of so many for whom I cared and loved in my heart, have expunged all sense of glory from my thoughts. To have escaped those random fates has lost all triumph.

I know you have seen me, friend, my lined face and silent regard, the cold calcretions that slow my embittered pace, as I walk down the last years, clothed in darkness as are all old men, haunted by memories . . .

*The Road Before You*

Jhorum of Capustan
CHAPTER SEVEN

And all who would walk the fields
when the Boar of Summer strides
in drum-beat hooves,
and the Iron Forest converges
to its fated, inevitable clash – all,
all are as children, as children once more.

Fener’s Reve
Destriant Dellem (b?)

Born on a sea dark as spiced wine, the wind moaned its way across the seaside killing ground, over and around the East Watch on its low, brick-strewn hill, where faint torchlight glimmered from the fortress's battened shutters. The wind's voice rose in pitch as it rolled up against the city's mortarless walls, flinging salty spray against its rounded, weathered stone. Rising then, the night's breath reached the battlements and swept between the merlons and along the platforms, then down into Capustan's curving, undulating streets, where not a soul stirred.

From the corner tower parapet looming above the ancient barracks, Karnadas stood facing the storm, alone, his boar-maned cloak whipping in the savage gusts. Though the parapet's killing arc guarded the southeast approach, from his position he could just make out, five hundred paces to the north along the wall, the object of his fiercest attention.

The brooding, cliff-like palace of Prince Jelarkan was like no other building in Capustan. Windowless, the grey-stoned structure towered in a chaotic confusion of planes, angles, overhangs and seemingly pointless ledges. It rose well above the flanking coast-facing wall, and in his mind's eye the mercenary watched huge boulders arcing towards it from the killing field beyond, crashing into its sides, sending the whole edifice down into ruin.

Unworthy of you. Where resides the comforting knowledge of history's vast, cyclical sweep, the ebb and flow of wars and of peace? Peace is the time of waiting for war. A time of preparation, or a time of wilful ignorance, blind, blinkered and prattling behind secure walls.

Within the palace, the Mortal Sword Brukhalian was mired in yet another meeting with the prince and a half-dozen representatives of the Mask Council. The Grey Swords' commander forbore such tangled marathons with what seemed to Karnadas superhuman patience. I would never have suffered this spider-bitten dance, not this long, not night after night, weeks on end. Still, it's remarkable what can be achieved even as the debates rage on, and on. How many of the Mortal Sword's – and Prince Jelarkan's – proposals have already been implemented, whilst the wrangling continues unending and those masked bastards utter their lists of objections in all ignorance. It's too late, you fools – we've already done what we could . . . to save your damned city.

In his mind's eye rose the fur-painted, articulated mask of the one priest on the Council he and the company should have been able to count on as an ally. Rath’Fener spoke for the Boar of Summer – the Grey Swords' own patron god. But political ambition consumes you, as it does your rivals in the Council. You kneel before summer's bloody tusk, yet . . . is it naught but a lie?

The wind howled, the only answer to Karnadas's silent question. Lightning lit the clouds churning over the distant bay. Rath’Fener was a priest of the Sceptred Rank, a veteran of temple politics and thus at the pinnacle of what a mortal could achieve within Fener's sanctified walls. But the Boar of Summer is not a civilized god. Ranks and orders and ivory-clasped gowns . . . secular pomp, petty plays of arrogance in the pursuit of mundane power. No, I must not impugn Rath’Fener with questions of his faith – he serves our god in his own way.
The Boar of Summer was the voice of war. Dark and grisly, as ancient as humanity itself. The song of battle – the screams of the dying and the vengeful, the discordant, hacking music of iron weapons, of shields resounding to blows, of hissing arrows and quarrels... And forgive us all, the voice grows to a roar. It is not the time to hide behind temple walls. Not the time for foolish politics. We serve Fener by striding the soaked, steaming earth, weapons bared in quicksilver promise. We are the clash and clangour, the bellows of rage, pain and terror...

Rath’Fener was not the only priest of the Boar in this city to have achieved a Sceptred Rank. The difference was this: while Rath’Fener possessed such an ambition – to kneel before the boar cloak and humbly assume the ancient title of Destriant, vacant for so long – Karnadas had already achieved it.

Karnadas could put Rath’Fener in his place with a simple unveiling of his own position in the mortal hierarchy. In his place? I could depose the bastard with a gesture. But Brukhalian had forbidden him that sweet revelation. Nor could the Mortal Sword be swayed. The time for such a move was not propitious, he’d said, its yield as yet of too low a currency. Patience, Karnadas, that time will come...

Not an easy thing to accept...

'Is this a welcome night, Destriant?'

'Ah, Itkovian, I did not see you there in the gloom. 'Tis the Boar's storm, this night. So, how long have you stood there, Shield Anvil? How long, in your cold, closed-in fashion, have you stared upon your High Priest? Black-mannered Itkovian, will you ever unsheathe your true self?

There was no way to read the man's expression in the darkness. 'Moments only, Destriant.'

'Does sleep elude you, sir?'

'Not when I seek it.'

Looking upon the Shield Anvil's blue chain surcoat beneath the grey rain-cape, the wrist-length cuffed gauntlets now slick and black with rain, Karnadas slowly nodded. 'I had not realized it was so close to dawn. Do you anticipate being gone for long?'

Itkovian shrugged. 'No, assuming they have indeed crossed in strength. I am restricted to leading but two wings in any case. Should we come upon little more than scouting parties, however, then the first blows against the Domin shall be made.'

'At last,' the Destriant said, grimacing as yet another gust of wind roiled over the battlement.

There was silence for a while.

Then Karnadas cleared his throat. 'What then, may I ask, has brought you up here, Shield Anvil?'

'The Mortal Sword has returned from the latest gathering. He wishes to speak with you.'

'And he has sat patiently waiting whilst we chatted?'

'I would imagine so, Destriant.'

The two Grey Swords turned to the tower's spiral stairs. They descended the slick, limned steps amidst streams trickling down the stone walls to either side. By the third tier down they could see their breaths. Until the arrival of the company, these barracks had been left virtually uninhabited for close to a century. The chill that had seeped into the thick-walled old fortress keep defied every effort to dispel it. Among the major structures in Capustan, it predated the Daru Keep – now re-named the Thrall and home to the Mask Council – and every other building with the exception of Prince Jelarkan's Palace. And that palace was not raised by human hands, most certainly not. I’d swear that on Fener’s bristly hump.

Reaching ground level, Itkovian pushed open the squealing door that led directly into the central Round Hall. Alone in the massive, barely furnished chamber stood the Mortal Sword Brukhalian, motionless before the
hearth and almost spectral despite his formidable height and build. His back was to the two newcomers, his long, wavy black hair unbound and down to just above his belted hips.

'Rath'Trake believes,' the commander rumbled without turning, 'there are unwelcome intruders on the plains west of the city. Demonic apparitions.'

Karnadas unclasped his cloak and shook the water from it. 'Rath'Trake, you said. I admit I do not understand the Tiger's sudden claim to true godhood. That a cult of a First Hero should have succeeded in shouldering its way into a council of temples—'

Brukhalian slowly turned, his soft brown eyes fixing on the Destriant. 'An unworthy rivalry, sir. The Season of Summer is home to more than one voice of war, or would you now challenge the fierce spirits of the Barghast and the Rhivi as well?'

'First Heroes are not gods,' Karnadas growled, rubbing at his face as the cold, wind-blasted numbness faded. 'They're not even tribal spirits, sir. Have any of the other priests supported Rath'Trake's claim?'

'No.'

'I thought as—'

'Of course,' Brukhalian went on, 'they also are not convinced that the Pannion Domin intends to lay siege to Capustan.'

Karnadas clamped his mouth shut. Point token, Mortal Sword.

Brukhalian's gaze flicked to Itkovian. 'Are your wings unfurled, Shield Anvil?'

'They are, sir.'

'It would be foolish, do you not think, sir,' the Mortal Sword said, 'to discard such warnings during your patrol?'

'I discard nothing, sir. We shall be vigilant.'

'As you always are, Shield Anvil. You may take charge of your wings, now, sir. The Twin Tusks guard you.'

Itkovian bowed, then strode from the room.

'And now, dear priest,' Brukhalian said. 'Are you certain of this ... invitation of yours?'

Karnadas shook his head. 'No, I am not. I can discern nothing of its sender's identity, nor even if its stance is true to ours or inimical.'

'Yet it awaits a reply still?'

'Yes, Mortal Sword, it does.'

'Then let us make one. Now.'

Karnadas's eyes widened slightly. 'Sir, perhaps then we should call in a Mane, in case we invite an enemy into our midst?'

'Destriant, you forget. I am Fener's own weapon.'

'Aye, but will that be enough? 'As you say, sir.' Karnadas strode to a cleared space in the chamber. He folded back the sodden sleeves of his shirt, then made a slight gesture with his left hand. A small, pulsing orb of light took form in front of the priest. 'This fashioning is in our language,' he said, studying the manifestation again. 'The language of Fener's Reve, intimating a certain knowledge of our company and its immortal benefactor. There is a message intended in such knowing.'

'Which you have yet to ascertain.'
A scowl flickered for a moment in the Destriant's weathered face. 'I have narrowed the list of possibilities, Mortal Sword. Such knowledge suggests arrogance in the sender, or, indeed, it offers us a hint of brotherhood.'

'Release the invitation, sir.'

'As you command.' He gestured again. The orb brightened, then began growing, its light thinning, the sphere growing translucent. Karnadas stepped back to give it space, fighting down his alarm at the sheer power behind this communication. 'Sir, there are souls within this. Not two or three – a dozen, maybe more – yet they are bound within one. I have not seen its like before.'

A figure, sitting cross-legged, slowly took form within the orb, dark-skinned, lean, wearing light leather armour. The man's face showed an expression of mild surprise. In the background, the two Grey Swords could see the interior walls of a small tent. A brazier sat before the man, giving his dark eyes a lurid glow.

'Address him,' Brukhalian commanded.

'In what language, sir? Our native Elin?'

The figure cocked his head at the quiet exchange. 'That's an awkward dialect,' he said in Daru, 'with Daru the obvious mother. Can you understand me?'

Karnadas nodded. 'Aye, close enough to Capan.'

The man straightened. 'Capan? I've reached through, then! You are in Capustan, excellent. Are you the city's rulers, then?'

The Destriant frowned. 'You do not know us? Your ... communication suggested a certain knowledge of our Reve . . .'

'Ah, yes, well, that particular weaving of my warrens has a way of reflecting those who stumble on it – though only among priests, of course, the target it was intended to reach. I assume you are of Capustan's temple council? What's that title again – Mask Council, yes?'

'No,' Brukhalian rumbled, 'we are not.'

'Go on, please, I am truly intrigued now.'

'Pleased to hear it, sir;' the Mortal Sword replied, stepping forward. 'Your invitation has been answered by Destriant Karnadas – who stands beside me – at my request. I command the Grey Swords—'

'Mercenaries! Hood's breath! If I'd wanted to contact a bunch of over-priced sword-hackers—'

'Sir.' Brukhalian's voice was hard but low. 'We are an army of the Boar of Summer. Sworn to Fener. Each soldier among us has chosen this path. Schooled in the sacred scriptures, blessed by the Destriant's hand in the Tusked One's name. Aye, we are a company of ... sword-hackers. We are also our own temple, our acolytes numbering well over seven thousand – and the number grows with each day.'

'All right, all right, sir, I understand now. Wait – you say you're growing? The city's given you leave to accept new followers?'

Brukhalian smiled. 'Capustan is but half armed, sir. Remnants of its tribal origins remain, and peculiar ones they are. Women are forbidden from the art of war. The Boar of Summer, however, acknowledges no such arbitrary exclusions—'

'And you're getting away with it?' the man laughed.

'Our new acolytes number but twelve hundred to date. Since many second and third born daughters are cast out onto the city's streets, none among the rulers have as yet noticed the diminishment of those numbers. Now, I have granted you enough in the way of introduction. Who, sir, are you?'

'How rude of me. I am Adaephon Ben Delat. To make things simpler, call me Quick Ben—'
'You are from Darujhistan?' Karnadas asked.

'Hood, no, I mean, no, I am not. I am with ... uh, Caladan Brood.'

'We have heard that name since coming north,' Brukhalian said. 'A warlord who leads an army against an invading empire.'

'Well, that invading empire has . . . withdrawn its interests. In any case, we are seeking to get a message through to Capustan's rulers ...'

'If only it were that simple,' Karnadas muttered.

The Mortal Sword was nodding. 'Then you must choose, sir. The Mask Council and the city's Prince Jelarkan are balanced upon the claim. There are countless factions among the council itself, and some discord has resulted. The Grey Swords answer to the prince. Our task is simple – to make the taking of Capustan by the Pannion Domin too costly. The Seer's expansion will stop at the city's walls and go no further. Thus, you can deliver your warlord's message to me and hence to the prince. Or you can resume your attempts to contact the Mask Council.'

'We suspected it'd get complicated,' Quick Ben sighed. 'We know next to nothing of your company. Or, rather, knew next to little. With this contact I am no longer so ignorant.' The man's eyes swung to Karnadas. 'Destriant. In Fener's Reve that means Arch-Priest, doesn't it? But only in the martial arena – the temple of hallowed ground that is the field of battle. Does Fener's representative in the Mask Council acknowledge that you outrank him or her, as a tiger does a cat?'

Karnadas grimaced. 'He does not know my true title, sir. There are reasons for that. I am impressed by your knowledge of Fener's priesthood. No, more than impressed. I am stunned.'

The man seemed to flinch. 'Well, yes. Thank you.' He turned to study Brukhalian. 'You're the god's Mortal Sword.' He paused then, and it was as if the full significance of that title only now struck home, for his eyes slowly widened. 'Uh, all right. I think the warlord would endorse my decision to deliver his message to you. In fact, I have no doubt at all. Good.' He drew a breath, then resumed. 'Caladan Brood leads an army to the relief of Capustan. The siege – as I'm sure you well understand – is not only inevitable, it is imminent. Now, our challenge is getting there in time—'

'Sir,' Brukhalian interrupted, frowning, 'how large is Caladan Brood's army? Understand, we will be facing perhaps sixty thousand Pannions – veterans one and all. Does he grasp the maelstrom he so generously wishes to enter on our behalf ?'

'Well, we don't have the numbers to match. But we will be' – Quick Ben grinned – 'bringing a few surprises with us. Now, Destriant – we need to reconvene. I need to bring the warlord and his officers in on this. Can I suggest we resume this conversation in a bell's time?'

'Perhaps it would be best to postpone it until the dead of night, sir,' Brukhalian said. 'My daylight hours are rather full – and public. As are Prince Jelarkan's.'

Quick Ben nodded. 'Two bells before next dawn, then.' He glanced around all of a sudden. 'I'll need a bigger tent ...'

A moment later he faded from view. The sphere contracted once more, then slowly vanished at a wave from Karnadas. The Destriant turned to Brukhalian. 'This was unexpected.'

The Mortal Sword grunted. 'We must be certain to condition the prince, sir. Perhaps this warlord's army can harry the besieging forces slightly, but it will probably achieve little else. We must keep Jelarkan's vision realistic ... assuming we tell him.'

_We'll not win this war. Aye. No false hopes here._

Brukhalian asked, 'What think you of this Quick Ben?'
‘A man of many veils, sir. An ex-priest of Fener, perhaps. His knowledge was too precise.’

‘Many souls, within one, you said.’

Karnadas shivered. ‘I must have been mistaken,’ he said. ‘Perhaps the ritual required the assistance of other mages, and it was these that I sensed.’

Brukhalian studied his priest long and hard at that, but said nothing. He turned away after a moment. ‘You look exhausted, sir. Get some sleep.’

Karnadas slowly bowed.

As the spell faded, Quick Ben sighed, glanced to his right. ‘Well?’

Seated against the tent’s wall on that side, Whiskeyjack leaned forward to refill their goblets with Gredfallan ale. ‘They’ll fight,’ the bearded man said, ‘for a while at least. That commander looks a tough sword-hacker, but it might be all show and no iron – he must be a shrewd enough man of business to know the value of appearances. What was that you called him?’

‘Mortal Sword. Not likely – once, long ago, that title was for real. Long before the Deck of Dragons acknowledged the place of Knights of the High Houses, Fener’s cult had its own. They’ve got the serious titles down with exactness. Destriant . . . Hood’s breath, there hasn’t been a real Destriant in the cult for a thousand years. The titles are for show, Whiskeyjack—’

‘Indeed,’ the commander cut in, ‘then why keep it a secret from the Fener priest on the Mask Council?’

‘Uh. Well... Oh, it’s simple. That priest would know it for a lie, of course. There, easy answer to your question.’

‘Easy answer, as you say. So, are easy answers always right answers, Quick?’

Ignoring the question, the wizard drained his goblet. ‘In any case, I’d count the Grey Swords as best among the bunch over there, but that’s not saying much.’

‘Were they fooled by the "accidental" contact?’

‘I think so. I’d shaped the spell to reflect the company’s own nature – whether greedy and rapacious, or honourable or whatever. I admit, though, I didn’t expect it to find pious faith. Still, the spell was intended to be malleable, and so it was.’

Whiskeyjack climbed to his feet, wincing as he put his weight down on his bad leg. ‘I’d better track down Brood and Dujek, then.’

‘At the head of the column, is my guess,’ Quick Ben said.

‘You’re sharp tonight,’ the commander noted as he made his way out.

A moment later, when Whiskeyjack’s sarcasm finally seeped into Quick Ben’s thoughts, he scowled.

On the other side of the street, opposite the barracks gate and behind an ancient bronze fence, was a cemetery that had once belonged to one of Capustan’s founding tribes. The sun-fired columns of mud with their spiral incisions – each one containing an upright corpse – rose like the boles of a crowded forest in the cemetery’s heart, surrounded on all sides by the more mundane Daru stone urns. The city’s history was a tortured, bizarre tale, and it had been Itkovian’s task among the company to glean its depths. The Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords was a position that demanded both scholarly pursuits and military prowess. While many would hold the two disciplines as distinct, the truth was in fact the opposite.

From histories and philosophies and religions came an understanding of human motivation, and motivation lay at the heart of tactics and strategy. Just as people moved in patterns, so too did their thoughts. A Shield
Anvil must predict, anticipate, and this applied to the potential actions of allies as well as enemies.

Before the arrival of Daru peoples from the west, the tribes that had founded Capustan had only a generation before been nomadic. And their dead are left standing. Free to wander in their unseen spirit world. That restless mobility resided still in the minds of the Capan, and since the Daru communities held to their own, it was scarcely diluted despite the now dozens of generations who had lived and died in this one place.

Yet much of Capustan's early history remained mysterious, and Itkovian found himself pondering what little he could piece together of those times, as he led the two wings of riders down the wide, cobbled street towards Jelarkan's Concourse, and beyond it to the south-facing Main Gate.

The rain was abating, the dawn's steel smear pushing through the heavy clouds to the east, the wind falling off into fitful gusts.

The districts making up the city were called Camps, and each Camp was a distinct, self-contained settlement, usually circular, with a private open ground at the central hub. The wide, uneven spaces between each Camp formed Capustan's streets. This pattern changed only in the area surrounding the old Daru Keep – now the Thrall and home to the Mask Council – called the Temple District, which represented the sole Daru-style imposition of a gridwork layout of streets.

The Camps, Itkovian suspected, had once been precisely that. Tribal encampments, tightly bound in ties of kinship. Positioned on the banks of the Catlin River among sea-fearing peoples, this site had become a focus for trade, encouraging sedentary behaviour. The result was one of the oddest-looking cities Itkovian had ever seen. Wide, open concourses and avenues defined by curving walls; random clay stands of burial pillars; well pools surrounded by sandpits; and, moving through Capustan's winding spaces, Daru and Capan citizens, the former holding to the disparate styles and ornamentation of their heritage – no two dressed alike – whilst the latter, kin-bound, wore the bright colours of their families, creating a flow in the streets that sharply contrasted with the plain, unpainted architecture. The beauty of Capustan lies in its people, not in its buildings... Even the Daru temples had bowed to the local, modest style of architecture. The effect was that of ceaseless movement, dominating its fixed, simple surroundings. The Capan tribes celebrated themselves, colours in a colourless world.

The only unknowns in Itkovian's scenario were the old keep that the Grey Swords now occupied, and Jelarkan's Palace. The old keep had been built before the coming of both the Capan and the Daru, by unknown hands, and it had been constructed almost in the shadow of the palace.

Jelarkan's fortress was a structure unlike anything Itkovian had ever seen before. It predated all else, its severe architecture thoroughly alien and strangely unwelcoming. No doubt the royal line of Capustan had chosen to occupy it for its imposing prominence rather than any particular notions of its defensive capacities. The stone walls were perilously thin, and its absence of windows or flat rooftops made those within it blind to all that occurred on the outside. Worse, there was but one entrance – the main approach, a wide ramp leading into a courtyard. Previous princes had raised guard houses to either side of the entrance, and a walkway along the courtyard's walls. Actual additions to the palace itself had a habit of falling down – the palace's stone facings refused to take mortar, for some reason, and the walls were not deemed strong enough to assume additional burdens of a substantial nature. In all, a curious edifice.

Passing out through the crowded Main Gate – harsh black iron and dark leather amidst streams of saturated colours – the troop swung right, rode a short distance down the south caravan road, then left it and its traffic as soon as they reached open plain, riding due west, past the few goat, cattle and sheep farms and their low stone walls breaking up the landscape, out onto unoccupied prairie.

As they moved further inland, the overcast above them began to clear, until by the midday break – fourteen leagues from Capustan – the sky above them was an unbroken blue. The meal was brief, conducted with few words among the thirty soldiers. They had crossed no-one's trail as yet, which, given it was nearing the height of caravan season, was unusual.

As the Grey Swords completed repacking their kits, the Shield Anvil addressed them for the first time since leaving the barracks. Raptor formation at slow canter. Outrider Sidlis twenty lengths to point. Everyone track-
hunting.'

One soldier, a young woman acolyte and the only recruit in the company, asked, 'What kind of tracks are we looking for, sir?'

Ignoring the impropriety, Itkovian replied. 'Any kind, soldier. Wings mount up.'

He watched as the soldiers swung into their saddles in perfect unison, barring the recruit who struggled a moment before settling and closing up the reins.

Few words were offered at this early stage of training – the recruit either would quickly follow the example set by the experienced soldiers, or would not stay long in the company. She had been taught to ride, well enough not to fall off her horse at a canter, and was wearing her weapons and armour to get used to their weight. Schooling in the art of wielding those weapons would come later. If the wings found themselves in a skirmish, two veterans would guard the recruit at all times.

At the moment, the young woman's master was her horse. The chestnut gelding knew its place in the crooked wing shape of the raptor formation. If trouble came, it would also know enough to pull its rider away from danger.

It was enough that she had been chosen to accompany the patrol. *Train the soldier in the real world* was one of the company's tenets.

Spread out into the formation, with Itkovian as the raptor's head, the troop rode on at a slow canter. A league, then another as the heat slowly became oppressive.

The sudden slowing of the north wing pulled the others round as if invisible ropes bound every animal together. A trail had been found. Itkovian glanced ahead to see Outrider Sidlis slow her horse, wheel it round, confirming that both she and her mount had sensed the shift in motion behind them. She held position, watching.

The Shield Anvil slowed his horse as he approached his right-flanking riders.

'Report.'

'Recruit caught the trail first, sir,' the wing's spokesman said. 'The tip of a spiral. The pattern of discovery that followed suggests a northwest direction. Something upright, on two legs, sir. Large. Three-toed and taloned.'

'Just the one set?'

'Yes, sir.'

'How old?'

'Passed this way this morning, sir.'

A second glance at Sidlis brought her riding back towards the troop.

'Relieve the outrider, Nakalian. We'll pick up this trail and pursue.'

'Sir,' the spokesman acknowledged. He hesitated, then said, 'Shield Anvil, the span between the steps is ... vast. The creature was moving with speed.'

Itkovian met the soldier's eyes. 'How fast, sir? A canter? Gallop?'

'Hard to know for certain. I'd judge twice a canter, sir.'

*We have, it seems, found our demonic apparition.* 'Archers on the tips. All others barring Torun, Farakalian and the recruit, lances to hand. Named soldiers, coils out.'
Nakalian now in the lead, the wings moved out once again, the riders at the very ends with arrows fitted to their short, recurved bows. Torun and Farakalian rode to either side of the Shield Anvil, lasso and rope coils in hand.

The sun crawled across the sky. Nakalian held them to the trail without much difficulty, the tracks now a straight, direct line northwest. Itkovian had opportunity to see the imprints in the hard earth himself. A huge animal indeed, to have driven such deep impressions. Given its obvious speed, the Shield Anvil suspected they would never catch up with the creature.

Unless, of course, Itkovian silently added as he watched Nakalian suddenly rein in at the top of a low rise ahead, the beast decided to stop and wait for us.

The troop slowed, all eyes on the soldier on point. Nakalian's attention remained fixed on something only he could see. He had drawn his lance but was not readying for a charge. His horse shied nervously beneath him, and as Itkovian and the others neared, the Shield Anvil could see the animal's fear.

They reached the rise.

A basin stretched out before them, the grasses trampled and scattered in a wide swathe – the recent passing of a herd of wild bhederin – cutting diagonally across the plain. Towards the centre, at a distance of at least two hundred paces, stood a grey-skinned creature, two-legged, long-tailed, its snout two rows of jagged fangs. Broad-bladed swords flashed from the ends of its arms. Motionless, its head, torso and tail almost horizontal as it balanced on its two legs, the creature was watching them.

Itkovian's eyes narrowed to slits.

'I judge,' Nakalian said at his side, 'five heartbeats to cover the distance between us, Shield Anvil.'

'Yet it makes no move.'

'With that speed, sir, it needn't bother.'

Until it elects to, at which point it will be upon us. We'd best test this apparition's abilities. 'Let us choose our own timing, sir,' Itkovian said. 'Lancers – hit the beast low and leave your weapons in, foul its stride if you can. Archers, go for the eyes and neck. One down the throat as well if the opportunity presents itself. A staggered pass, random evasion once you've planted your weapons, then draw swords. Torun and Farakalian' – he drew his longsword – 'you're with me. Very well, canter to gallop at fifty, sooner if the beast reacts.'

The wings rode forward, down the gentle slope, lances levelling.

The creature continued to watch them, unmoving. With a hundred paces remaining between them, it slowly raised its blades, head dropping enough for the riders to see its ridged shoulders behind what was clearly some kind of helmet.

At seventy paces the creature swung round to face them, swords out to the sides, tail twitching.

Out on the tips the archers rose high in their stirrups, drew taut on the strings of their squat, powerful bows, held them motionless for a long moment, then loosed.

The arrows converged on the creature's head. Barbed heads plunged into its black eye sockets. Seemingly indifferent to the arrows buried deep, the beast took a step forward.

Fifty paces. Again the bowstrings thrummed. Shafts sprouted on either side of the neck. The archers angled their mounts away to maintain distance in their pass. The lancers' horses stretched their necks, and the closing charge had begun.

Blinded, yet not blind. I see no blood. Fener, reveal to me the nature of this demon. A command to evade—

The creature darted forward with unbelievable speed. At once, it was among the Grey Swords. Lances skewered it from all sides, then the huge blades flashed. Screams. Blood flying in gouts. Itkovian saw the rump
of a horse plunge down in front of him, saw the soldier's right leg, foot still in the stirrup, falling outward. Without comprehension, he watched the rump – legs kicking spasmodically – twist round, revealing that the front half of the horse was gone. Severed spine, curved rows of rib stubs, intestines tumbling out, blood spraying from red flesh.

His own horse leapt high to clear the animal wreckage.

Crimson rain splashed the Shield Anvil's face as the creature's massive jaws – studded with arrows – snapped out at him. He leaned to his left, barely avoiding the meat-strewn fangs, and swung a wild backhand slash with his longsword as he rode past. The blade clashed against armour.

In mid-leap, his horse shrieked as something clipped it from behind. Plunging down on its forelimbs and still screaming, it managed a stagger forward before its rump sank down behind Itkovian. Knowing that something had gone desperately wrong with the beast's rocking, horrible stumble, he pulled free his heart-knife, leaned forward and opened the animal's jugular with a single slash. Then, kicking free of the stirrups, the Shield Anvil pitched forward and to the left even as he yanked the dying horse's head to the right.

They struck the ground, rolled apart.

Completing his tumble at a crouch, Itkovian spared a glance at his horse, to see the animal kicking in the air. The two hind legs ended just above the fetlocks. Both hooves had been sliced off. The dead animal quickly stilled.

The bodies of mounts and soldiers lay on both sides of the creature, which was now slowly turning to face Itkovian. Blood and gore painted its long, leathery arms. A woman's red-streaked brown hair had snagged in thick tufts between the beast's smeared fangs.

Then Itkovian saw the lassos. Both hung loose, one around the creature's neck, the other high on its right leg.

Earth thumped as the demon took a step towards the Shield Anvil. Itkovian raised his longsword.

As it lifted a three-toed foot for another stride, the two ropes snapped taut, neck to the left, leg to the right. The creature was thrown upward by the savage, perfectly timed yanks to opposite sides. Leg tore away from hip in a dry, ripping snap, even as the head parted from the neck with an identical sickly sound.

Torso and head struck the earth with heavy, bone-breaking thumps.

No movement. The beast was dead.

Suddenly trembling, Itkovian slowly straightened.

Torun had taken three riders with him. Farakalian had done the same. Ropes wound around each saddlehorn, the force behind the sudden, explosive tightening – four warhorses to each side – had managed what weapons could not.

The pair of archers rode up to the Shield Anvil. One reached down an arm. 'Quickly, sir, the stirrup's clear.'

Unquestioningly, Itkovian clasped the wrist and swung himself up behind the rider. And saw what approached.

Four more demons, four hundred paces away and closing with the speed of boulders tumbling down a mountainside.

'We'll not outrun them.'

'Yes, sir.'

'So we split up,' Itkovian said.

The rider kicked his mount into a gallop. 'Yes, sir. We're the slowest – Torun and Farakalian will engage – give us time—'
The horse swerved suddenly beneath them. Caught unprepared, the Shield Anvil's head snapped back, and he tumbled from the saddle. He hit the hard-packed soil, the air bursting from his lungs, then rolled, stunned, to come to a stop against a pair of legs hard as iron.

Blinking, gasping, Itkovian found himself staring up at a squat, fur-clad corpse. The dark-brown, withered face beneath the antlered head-dress tilted downward. Shadowed sockets studied him.

*Gods, what a day.*

'Your soldiers approach,' the apparition rasped in Elin. 'From this engagement ... you are relieved.'

The archer was still struggling with his startled horse, cursing, then he hissed in surprise.

The Shield Anvil frowned up at the undead figure. 'We are?'

'Against undead,' the corpse said, 'arises an army in kind.'

Distantly, Itkovian heard the sounds of battle – no screams, simply the clash of weapons, relentless, ever growing. With a groan, he rolled onto his side. A headache was building in the back of his skull, waves of nausea rippling through him. Gritting his teeth, he sat up.

'Ten survivors,' the figure above him mused. 'You did well... for mortals.'

Itkovian stared across the basin. An army of corpses identical to the one beside him surrounded the demons, of which only two remained standing. The battle around those two creatures was horrible to witness. Pieces of the undead warriors flew in all directions, but still they kept coming, huge flint swords chopping into the demons, carving them down where they stood. A half-dozen heartbeats later, the fight was over.

The Shield Anvil judged that at least sixty of the fur-clad warriors had been destroyed. The others continued chopping on the felled beasts, swinging ever lower as the remaining pieces grew ever smaller. Even as he watched, dust swirled from the hillsides in every direction – more of the undead warriors with their weapons of stone. An army, motionless beneath the sun.

'We did not know that K'Chain Che'Malle had returned to this land,' the hide-wrapped corpse said.

Itkovian's remaining soldiers approached, tense, driven into watchful silence by the conjurations rising on all sides.

'Who,' Itkovian asked dully, 'are you?'

'I am the Bonecaster Pran Chole, of the Kron T'lan Imass. We are come to the Gathering. And, it seems, to a war. I think, mortal, you have need of us.'

The Shield Anvil looked upon his ten surviving soldiers. The recruit was among them, but not her two guardians. *Twenty. Soldiers and horses. Twenty ... gone.* He scanned the faces now arrayed before him, and slowly nodded. 'Aye, Pran Chole, we have need.'

The recruit's face was the hue of bleached parchment. She sat on the ground, eyes unfocused, spattered with the blood of one or both of the soldiers who had given their lives protecting her.

Itkovian stood beside her, saying nothing. The brutality of the engagement may well have broken the Capan recruit, he suspected. Active service was intended to hone, not destroy. The Shield Anvil's underestimation of the enemy had made of this young woman's future a world of ashes. Two blindingly sudden deaths would haunt her for the rest of her days. And there was nothing Itkovian could do, or say, to ease the pain.

'Shield Anvil.'

He looked down at her, surprised that she would speak, wondering at the hardness of her voice. 'Recruit?'

She was looking round, eyes thinning as she studied the legions of undead warriors who stood in ragged
ranks, unmoving, on all sides. 'There are thousands.'

_Spectral figures, risen to stand above the plain's tawny grasses, row on row. As if the earth herself had thrust them clear of her flesh._ 'Aye. I'd judge well over ten thousand. T'lan Imass. Tales of these warriors had reached us' – _tales I found hard to countenance_ – 'but this represents our first encounter, and a timely one at that.'

'Do we return to Capustan now?'

Itkovian shook his head. 'Not all of us. Not immediately. There are more of these K'Chain Che'Malle on this plain. Pran Chole – the unarmed one, some kind of high priest or shaman – has suggested a joint exercise, and I have approved. I will lead eight of the troop west.'

'Bait.'

He raised a brow. 'Correct. The T'lan Imass travel unseen, and will therefore surround us at all times. Were they to remain visible in this hunt, the K'Chain Che'Malle would probably avoid them, at least until they have gathered in such numbers as to challenge the entire army. Better they were cut down in twos and threes. Recruit, I am attaching an escort of one soldier to you for an immediate return to Capustan. A report must needs be made to the Mortal Sword. Accompanying the two of you, unseen, will be a select squad of T'lan Imass. Emissaries. I have been assured that no K'Chain Che'Malle are present between here and the city.'

She slowly rose. 'Sir, a single rider would do as well. You return me to Capustan to spare me . . . from what? From seeing K'Chain Che'Malle cut to pieces by these T'lan Imass? Shield Anvil, there is no mercy or compassion in your decision.'

'It seems,' Itkovian said, staring out upon the vast army arrayed around them, 'you are not lost to us, after all. The Boar of Summer despises blind obedience. You will ride with us, sir.'

'Thank you, Shield Anvil.'

'Recruit, I trust you have not deluded yourself into believing that witnessing the destruction of more K'Chain Che'Malle will silence the cries within you. Soldiers are issued armour for their flesh and bones, but they must fashion their own for their souls. Piece by piece.'

She looked down at the blood spattered across her uniform. 'It has begun.'

Itkovian was silent for a moment, studying the recruit at his side. 'The Capan are a foolish people, to deny freedom to their women. The truth of that is before me.'

She shrugged. 'I am not unique.'

'Attend to your horse, soldier. And direct Sidlis to join me.'

'Sir.'

He watched her walk towards the waiting horses and the surviving soldiers of the wings, all of whom had gathered around their mounts to check girth straps, fittings and equipment. She joined their ranks, spoke with Sidlis, who nodded and approached the Shield Anvil.

Pran Chole strode up at the same time. 'Itkovian, our choices have been made. Kron's emissaries have been assembled and await your messenger.'

'Understood.'

Sidlis arrived. 'Capustan, Shield Anvil?' she asked.

'With an unseen escort. Report directly to the Mortal Sword and the Destriant. In private. The T'lan Imass emissaries are to speak with the Grey Swords and none other, for the moment at least.'

'Sir.'
'Mortals,' Pran Chole addressed them tonelessly, 'Kron has commanded that I inform you of certain details. These K'Chain Che'Malle are what was once known as K'ell Hunters. Chosen children of a matriarch, bred to battle. However, they are undead, and that which controls them hides well its identity — somewhere to the south, we believe. The K'ell Hunters were freed from tombs situated in the Place of the Rent, called Morn. We do not know if present maps of this land mass know the place by these ancient names—'

'Morn,' Itkovian nodded. 'South of the Lamatath Plain, on the west coast and directly north of the island wherein dwell the Seguleh. Our company is from Elingarth, which borders the Lamatath Plain to the east. While we know of no-one who has visited Morn, the name has been copied from the oldest maps and so remains. The general understanding is that nothing is there. Nothing at all.'

The Bonecaster shrugged. 'The barrows are much worn down, I would imagine. It has been a long time since we last visited the Rent. The K'ell Hunters may well be under the command of their matriarch, for we believe she has finally worked her way free from her own imprisonment. This, then, is the enemy you face.'

Frowning, the Shield Anvil shook his head and said, 'The threat from the south comes from an empire called the Pannion Domin, ruled by the Seer — a mortal man. The reports of these K'Chain Che'Malle are recent developments, whilst the expansion of the Pannion Domin has been under way for some years now.' He drew breath to say more, then fell silent, realizing that over ten thousand withered, undead faces were now turned towards him. His mouth dried to parchment, his heart suddenly pounding.

'Itkovian,' Pran Chole rasped, 'this word "Pannion". Has it a particular meaning among the natives?'

He shook his head, not trusting himself to speak.

'Pannion,' the Bonecaster said. 'A Jaghut word. A Jaghut name.'

As the afternoon waned, Toc the Younger sat by the fire, his lone eye studying the huge, sleeping wolf at his side. Baaljagg — what had Tool called her? An ay — had a face longer and narrower than the timber wolves the scout recalled seeing in Blackdog Forest, hundreds of leagues to the north. At the shoulder, the creature beside him had two, maybe three hands on those formidable northern wolves. Sloping brow, small ears, with canines to challenge those of a lion or a plains bear. Broadly muscled, the animal nevertheless had a build suggesting both speed and endurance. A swift kill or a league-devouring pursuit, Baaljagg looked capable of both.

The wolf opened one eye to look upon him.

'You're supposed to be extinct,' Toc murmured. 'Vanished from the world for a hundred thousand years. What are you doing here?'

The ay was the scout's only company, for the moment. Lady Envy had elected to make a detour through her warren, northwestward a hundred and twenty leagues to the city of Callows, to replenish her supplies. Supplies of what? Bath oil? He was unconvinced of the justification, but even his suspicious nature yielded him no clue as to her real reasons. She had taken the dog, Garath, with her, as well as Mok. Safe enough to leave Senu and Thurule, I suppose. Tool dropped them both, after all. Still, what was important enough to make Envy break her own rule of a minimum of three servants?

Tool had vanished into a dusty swirl a half-bell earlier, off on another hunt. The remaining two Seguleh weren't in a generous mood, not deigning to engage the unranked Malazan in conversation. They stood off to one side. Watching the sunset? Relaxing at ramrod attention?

He wondered what was happening far to the north. Dujek had chosen to march on the Pannion Domin. A new war, against an unknown foe. Onearm's Host was Toc's family, or at least what passed for family for a child born to an army. The only world he knew, after all. A family pursued by jackals of attrition. What kind of war were they heading into? Vast, sweeping battles, or the crawling pace of contested forests, jagged ranges and sieges? He fought back another surge of impatience, a tide that had been building within him day after day on this endless plain, building and threatening to escape the barriers he'd raised in his mind.

Damn you, Hemlock, for sending me so far away. All right, so that warren was chaotic — so was the puppet.
that used it on me. But why did it spit me out at Morn? And where did all those months go, anyway? He had
begun to mistrust his belief in happenstance, and the crumbling of that belief left him feeling on shaky ground.
To Mom and its wounded warren . . . to Morn, where a renegade T'lan Imass lay in the black dust, waiting –
not for me, he said, but for Lady Envy. Not any old renegade T'lan Imass, either. One I've met before. The only
one I've met before. And then there's Lady Envy herself, and her damned Seguleh servants and four-legged
companions – uh, don't go there, Toc . . .

Anyway. Now we're travelling together. North, to where each of us wants to be. What luck. What happy
coincidence!

Toc disliked the notion of being used, of being manipulated. He'd seen what that had cost his friend, Captain
Paran. Paran was tougher than me -- I saw that from the start. He'd take the hits, blink, then just keep going.
He'd some kind of hidden armour, something inside him that kept him sane.

Not me, alas. Things get tough, and I'm liable to curl up and start whimpering.

He glanced over at the two Seguleh. It seemed they were as loth to talk to each other as they were to anyone
else. Strong, silent types. I hate those. I didn't before. I do, now.

So . . . here I am, in the middle of nowhere, and the only truly sane creature in my company is an extinct
wolf. His gaze returned once more to Baaljagg. 'And where's your family, beastie?' he asked softly, meeting the
ay's soft, brown gaze.

The answer came, a sudden explosion of swirling colours directly behind the socket of his lost eye – colours
that settled into an image. Kin assailing three musk oxen, hunters and hunted mired deep in mud, trapped,
doomed to die. The point of view was low, from just beyond the sinkhole, circling, ever circling. Whimpering
filled Toc's mind. Desperate love unanswered. Panic, filling the cold air.

A pup's confusion.

Fleeing. Wandering mudflats and sandbanks, across a dying sea.

Hunger.

Then, standing before her, a figure. Cowled, swathed in roughly woven black wool, a hand – wrapped in
leather straps, down to the very fingers – reaching out. Warmth. Welcome. A palpable compassion, a single
touch to the creature's lowered forehead. The touch, Toc realized, of an Elder God. And a voice: You are the
last, now. The very last, and there will be need for you. In time . . .

Thus, I promise that I shall bring to you ... a lost spirit. Tom from its flesh. A suitable one, of course. For that
reason, my search may be a long one. Patience, little one . . . and in the meantime, this gift...

The pup closed her eyes, sank into instant sleep – and found herself no longer alone. Loping across vast
tundras, in the company of her own kind. An eternity of loving dreams, secured with joy, a gift made bitter only
by waking hours, waking years, centuries, millennia spent . . . alone.

Baaljagg, unchallenged among the dreamworld's ay, ruling mother of countless children in a timeless land.
No lack of quarry, no lean times. Upright figures on distant horizons, seen but rarely, and never approached.
Cousins to come across every now and then. Forest-dwelling agkor, white bendal, yellow' haired ay'tog of the
far south – names that had sunk their meaning into Baaljagg's immortal mind . . . eternal whisperings from
those ay that had joined the T'lan Imass, there, then, at the time of the Gathering. A whole other kind of
immortality . . .

Wakeful, solitary Baaljagg's eyes had seen more of the world than could be fathomed. Finally, however the
gift had come, the torn soul delivered to her own, where they merged, eventually became one. And in this, yet
another layer of loss and pain. The beast now sought ... something. Something like ... redress . . .

What do you ask of me, wolf? No, not of me – you ask not of me, do you? You ask of my companion, the
undead warrior. Onos T'oolan. It was him you awaited, whilst you shared company with Lady Envy. And
Garath? Ah, another mystery . . . for another time . . .
Toc blinked, his head jerking back as the link snapped. Baaljagg slept at his side. Dazed, trembling, he looked around in the gloom.

A dozen paces away, Tool stood facing him, a brace of hares dangling from one shoulder. "Oh, Beru fend. See? Soft inside. Far too soft for this world and its layered histories, its endless tragedies. What?" Toc asked, his voice rasping. "What is it this wolf wants of you, T'lan Imass?"

The warrior cocked his head. "An end to her loneliness, mortal."

"Have you – have you given answer?"

Tool turned away, dropping the hares to the ground. His voice when he spoke shocked the scout with its raw mournfulness. "I can do nothing for her."

The cold, lifeless tone was gone, and for the first time Toc saw something of what hid behind that deathly, desiccated visage. "I've never heard you speak in pain before, Tool. I didn't think—"

"You heard wrong," the T'lan Imass said, his tone once again devoid of inflection. "Have you completed the fletching for your arrows, Toc the Younger?"

"Aye, like you showed me. They're done, twelve of the ugliest-looking arrows I've ever had the pleasure of owning. Thank you, Tool. It's outrageous, but I am proud to own them."

Tool shrugged. "They will serve you well."

"I hope you're right." He rose with a grunt. "I'll do the meal, then."

"That is Senu's task."

Toc squinted at the T'lan Imass. "Not you, as well? They're Seguleh, Tool, not servants. While Lady Envy isn't here, I will treat them as travelling companions, and be honoured by their company. He glanced over to find the two warriors staring at him. "Even if they won't talk to me."

He took the hares from the T'lan Imass, crouched down beside the hearth. "Tell me, Tool," he said as he began skinning the first of the creatures, "when you're out there hunting ... any sign of other travellers? Are we completely alone on this Lamatath Plain?"

"I have seen no evidence of traders or other humans, Toc the Younger. Bhederin herds, antelope, wolves, coyotes, fox, hares and the occasional plains bear. Birds of prey and birds that scavenge. Various snakes, lizards—"

"A veritable menagerie," Toc muttered. "Then how is it that every time I scan the horizons, I see nothing? Nothing. No beasts, no birds, even."

"The plain is vast," Tool replied. "Also, there are the effects of the Tellann warren which surrounds me – though that is much weakened at the moment. Someone has drawn on my life-force, almost to exhaustion. Ask me no questions regarding this. My Tellann powers none the less discourage mortal beasts. Creatures are given to avoidance when able. We are, however, being trailed by a pack of ay'-tog – yellow-haired wolves. But they yet remain shy. Curiosity may overcome that, eventually."

Toc's gaze returned to Baaljagg. "Ancient memories."

"Memories of ice." The T'lan Imass's cavern eyes were fixed on the Malazan. "By this and your earlier words, I conclude that something has occurred – a binding of souls – between you and the ay. How?"

"I'm not aware of any binding of souls," Toc answered, still staring at the sleeping wolf. "I was granted ... visions. We shared remembrances, I think. How? I don't know. There were emotions within it, Tool, enough to make one despair. After a moment he returned to cleaning the scrawny creature beneath his hands. "Every gift is edged."
Toc grimaced as he gutted the animal. 'Edged. I suppose so. I'm beginning to suspect the truth of the legends – lose an eye to receive the gift of true vision.'

'How did you lose your eye, Toc the Younger?'

'A sizzling chunk from Moon's Spawn – that deathly rain when the Enfilade was in full swing.'

'Stone.'

Toc nodded. 'Stone.' Then he stopped, looked up.

'Obelisk,' Tool said. 'In the ancient Deck of Holds, it was known as Menhir. Touched by stone, mortal – Chen're oral lich'fayle – there, on your brow. I give you a new name. Aral Fayle.'

'I don't recall asking for a new name, Tool.'

'Names are not for the asking, mortal. Names are earned.'

'Huh, sounds like the Bridgeburners.'

'An ancient tradition, Aral Fayle.'

_Hood's breath._ 'Fine!' he snapped. 'Only I can't see that I've earned anything—'

'You were sent into a Warren of Chaos, mortal. You survived – in itself an unlikely event – and travelled the slow vortex towards the Rent. Then, when Morn's portal should have taken you, it instead cast you out. Stone has taken one of your eyes. And the ay here has chosen you in the sharing of her soul. Baaljagg has seen in you a rare worthiness, Aral Fayle—'

'I still don't want any new names! Hood's breath!' He was sweating beneath his worn, dust-caked armour. He searched desperately for a way to change the subject, to shift the conversation away from himself. 'What's yours mean, anyway? Onos T'oolan – what's that from?'

'Onos is "clanless man". T' is "broken". Ool is "veined" while lan is "flint" and in combination T'oolan is "flawed flint".'

Toc stared at the T'lan Imass for a long moment. 'Flawed flint.'

'There are layers of meaning.'

'I'd guessed.'

'From a single core are struck blades, each finding its own use. If veins or knots of crystal lie hidden within the heart of the core, the shaping of the blades cannot be predicted. Each blow to the core breaks off useless pieces – hinge-fractured, step-fractured. Useless. Thus it was with the family in which I was born. Struck wrong, each and all.'

'Tool, I see no flaws in you.'

'In pure flint all the sands are aligned. All face in the same direction. There is unity of purpose. The hand that shapes such flint can be confident. I was of Tarad's clan. Tarad's reliance in me was misplaced. Tarad's clan no longer exists. At the Gathering, Logros was chosen to command the clans native to the First Empire. He had the expectation that my sister, a Bonecaster, would be counted among his servants. She defied the ritual, and so the Logros T'lan Imass were weakened. The First Empire fell. My two brothers, T'ber Tendara and Han'ith lath, led hunters to the north and never returned. They too failed. I was chosen First Sword, yet I have abandoned Logros T'lan Imass. I travel alone, Aral Fayle, and thus am committing the greatest crime known among my people.'

'Wait a moment,' Toc objected. 'You said you're heading to a second Gathering – you're _returning_ to your people ...'
The undead warrior did not respond, head slowly turning to gaze northward.

Baaljagg rose, stretched, then padded to Tool's side. The massive creature sat, matching the T'lan Imass's silent regard.

A sudden chill whispered through Toc the Younger. Hood's breath, what are we headed into? He glanced at Senu and Thurule. The Seguleh seemed to be watching him. 'Hungry, I gather. I see your bridling impatience. If you like, I could—'

Rage.

Cold, deadly.

Unhuman.

Toc was suddenly elsewhere, seeing through a beast's eyes – but not the ay, not this time. And not images from long ago, but from this moment; behind which tumbled a cascade of memories. A moment later, all sense of himself was swallowed, his identity swept away before the storm of another creature's thoughts.

It has been so long since life found shape . . . with words, with awareness.

And now, too late.

Muscles twitched, leaked blood from beneath his slashed, torn hide. So much blood, soaking the ground under his flesh, smearing the grasses in a crawling track up the hill's slope.

Crawling, a journey of return. To find oneself, now, at the very end. And memories awakened ...

The final days – so long ago, now – had been chaotic. The ritual had unravelled, unexpectedly, unpredictably. Madness gripped the Soletaken. Madness splintered the more powerful of his kin, broke one into many, the burgeoning power wild, blood-hungry, birthing the D'ivers. The Empire was tearing itself apart.

But that was long ago, so very long ago ...

I am Treach – one of many names. Trake, the Tiger of Summer, the Talons of War. Silent Hunter. I was there at the end, one of the few survivors once the T'lan Imass were done with us. Brutal, merciful slaughter. They had no choice – I see that now, though none of us were prepared to forgive. Not then. The wounds were too fresh.

Gods, we tore a warren to pieces on that distant continent. Turned the eastlands into molten stone that cooled and became something that defied sorcery. The T'lan Imass sacrificed thousands to cut away the cancer we had become. It was the end, the end of all that promise, all that bright glory. The end of the First Empire. Hubris, to have claimed a name that rightly belonged to the T'lan Imass...

We fled, a handful of survivors. Ryllandaras, old friend – we fell out, clashed, then clashed again on another continent. He had gone the farthest, found a way to control the gifts – Soletaken and D’ivers both. White Jackal. Ay’tog. Agkor. And my other companion, Messremb – where has he gone? A kind soul, twisted by madness, yet so loyal, ever loyal . . .

Ascending. Fierce arrival – the First Heroes. Dark, savage.

I remember a vast sweep of grasses beneath a sky deepening to dusk. A wolf, its single eye like a smear of moonlight, on a distant ridgeline. This strangely singular memory, sharp as talons, returning to me now. Why?

I padded this earth for thousands of years, sunk deep into the beast, human memories fading, fading, gone. And yet . . . this vision of the wolf, awakening all within me . . .

I am Treach. Memories returning in full flood, even as my body grows cold, so very cold.

He'd tracked the mysterious beasts for days, driven by relentless curiosity. A scent unknown to him, a
swirling wake of death and old blood. Fearless, he'd thought only of delivering destruction, as he had done without challenge for so long. The White Jackal had vanished into the mists centuries past, dead, or if not dead, then as good as. Treach had driven him from a ledge, sent him spinning and writhing down into the fathomless crevasse. No enemies worthy of the name since then. The tiger's arrogance was legendary – it had not been difficult, embracing such assurity.

The four K'Chain Che'Malle hunters had circled back, awaited him with cold intent.

_I tore into them. Slashed flesh, shattered bones. I dragged one down, fangs deep in its lifeless neck. Another moment, another heartbeat, and there would have been but three._

So close a thing . . .

Treach lay dying from a dozen mortal wounds. Indeed, he should have been dead already, yet he clung on, with blind, bestial determination, fuelled by rage. The four K'Chain Che'Malle had left him, contemptuously, knowing he would not rise again and immune to mercy.

Prone on the grasses, the Tiger of Summer had watched with dulled eyes as the creatures padded away, noted with satisfaction as an arm on one of them, dangling from the thinnest strip of skin, finally parted and fell to the ground – to be left behind with utter indifference.

Then, as the undead hunters reached the crest of a nearby hill, his eyes had flashed. A sleek, long black shape flowed from the grasses, was among his slayers. Power flowed like black water. The first K'Chain Che'Malle withered beneath the onslaught.

The clash descended beyond the crest, beyond Treach's line of sight, yet, dimly heard past the deafening thunder of his waning life, the battle continued. He began dragging himself forward, inch by inch.

Within moments, all sounds from the other side of the hill fell away, yet Treach struggled on, his blood a slick trail behind him, his amber eyes fixed on the crest, his will to live reduced to something bestial, something that refused to recognize an end to its life.

_I have seen this. Antelope. Bhederin. The wilful denial, the pointless struggle, efforts to escape, even as throat gushes blood to fill my mouth. Limbs kicking in the illusion of running, of fleeing, even as I begin feeding. I have seen this, and now understand it._

_The tiger is humbled by memories of prey._

He forgot the reason for the struggle to reach the crest, knew only that he must achieve it, a final ascent, to see what lay beyond.

_What lay beyond. Yes. A sun low on the horizon. The endless sweep of unbroken, untamed prairie. A final vision of wildness, before I slink through Hood's cursed gates._

She appeared before him, sleek and muscled and smooth-skinned. A woman, small yet not frail, the fur of a panther on her shoulders, her long black hair unkempt yet gleaming in the day's dying light. Almond-shaped eyes, amber like his own. Heart-shaped face, robustly featured.

_Coarse queen, why does this sight of you break my heart?_

She approached, settled down to lift his massive head, rest it against her lap. Small hands stroked the blood and dried froth from around his eyes. 'They are destroyed,' she said in the ancient language, the language of the First Empire. 'Not so difficult – you left them with little, Silent Hunter. Indeed, they veritably flew apart at my softest touch.'

_Liar._

She smiled. 'I have crossed your wake before, Treach, yet would not approach – recalling your rage when we destroyed your empire, so long ago.'
"It has long cooled, Imass. You did only what was necessary. You mended the wounds—

'The Imass cannot take credit for that. Others were involved in the task of repairing the shattered warren. We did nothing but slay your kind – those whom we could find, that is. It is our singular skill.'

*Killing.*

'Yes. Killing.'

*I cannot return to my human form. I cannot find it within myself.*

'It has been too long, Treach.'

*Now, I die.*

'Yes. I have no skills in healing.'

Within his mind, he smiled. *No, only killing.*

'Only killing.'

*Then an end to my suffering, please.*

'That is the man speaking. The beast would never ask such a thing. Where is your defiance, Treach? Where is your cunning?'

*Do you mock me?*

'No. I am here. As are you. Tell me, who then is this other presence?*

*Other?*

'Who has unchained your memories, Treach? Who has returned you to yourself? For centuries you were a beast, with a beast's mind. Once that place is reached, there is no return. Yet . . .'

*Yet I am here.*

'When your life fades from this world, Treach, I suspect you will find yourself, not before Hood's gates, but . . . elsewhere. I can offer nothing of certainty. But I have sensed the stirrings. An Elder God is active once again, perhaps the most ancient one of all. Subtle moves are being made. Select mortals have been chosen, and are being shaped. Why? What does this Elder God seek? I know not, but I believe it is in answer to a grave – and vast – threat. I believe the game that has begun will take a long time in its playing out.'

*A new war?*

'Are you not the Tiger of Summer? A war in which, this Elder God has judged, you will be needed.'

Wry amusement flooded Treach's mind. *I have never been needed, Imass.*

'Changes have come. Upon us all, it seems.'

*Ah, then we shall meet again? I would wish it. I would see you, once more, as the midnight panther.*

She laughed, low in her throat. 'And so the beast awakens. Farewell, Treach.'

She had, in that last moment, seen what he only now felt. Darkness closed around him, narrowed his world. Vision ... from two eyes... to one.

One. Looking across a stretch of grasses as night fell, watching the massive Soletaken tiger pause warily above the dead bull ranag upon which it had been feeding. Seeing the twin flares of its cold, challenging glare. All ... so long ago, now . . .
Then nothing.

A gloved hand slapped him hard. Groggily, Toc the Younger pried open his lone eye, found himself staring up at Senu's painted mask.

'Uh...'

'An odd time to fall asleep,' the Seguleh said tonelessly, then straightened and moved away.

The air was sweet with the smell of roasting meat. Groaning, Toc rolled over, then slowly sat up. Echoes rolled through him, ineffable sadness, half-formed regrets, and the long exhalation of a final breath. Gods, no more visions. Please. He struggled to clear his head, looked around. Tool and Baaljagg had not moved from their stance of before: both staring northward, motionless and – Toc eventually realized – taut with tension. And he thought he knew why.

'She's not far off,' he said. 'Coming fast.' With the night, flowing as the sun flees. Deadly majesty; ancient, so very ancient, eyes.

Tool turned. 'What have you seen, Aral Fayle? To where did you journey?'

The Malazan clambered weakly upright. 'Beru fend, I'm hungry. Hungry enough to eat that antelope raw.' He paused, drew a deep breath. 'What have I seen? I was witness, T'lan Imass, to the death of Treach. Trake, as he's known round here, the Tiger of Summer. Where? North of here. Not far. And no, I don't know why.'

Tool was silent for a moment, then he simply nodded and said, 'Chen're oral lich'fayle. The Menhir, heart of memory.' He swung round again as Baaljagg rose suddenly, hackles rising.

The panther that Toc knew was coming finally appeared, more than twice a man's height in length, eyes almost level with Toc's own, her sleek fur blue-black and shimmering. A scent of spice swept forward like an exhaled breath, and the creature began sembling, the shift an uncertain blurring, a folding in of darkness itself. Then a small woman stood before them, her eyes on Tool. 'Hello, brother.'

The T'lan Imass slowly nodded. 'Sister.'

'You've not aged well,' she noted, lithely stepping forward.

Baaljagg backed away.

'You have.'

Her smile transformed bold features into a thing of beauty. 'Generous of you, Onos. You have a mortal ay for a companion, I see.'

'As mortal as you, Kilava Onass.'

'Indeed? Predictably shy of my kind, of course. None the less, an admirable beast.' She held out a hand.

Baaljagg edged closer.

'Imass,' she murmured. 'Yes, but flesh and blood. Like you. Do you remember, now?'

The huge wolf ducked her head and padded up to Kilava, leaned a shoulder against that of the woman, who pressed her face into the animal's mane, drew deep the scent, then sighed. 'This is an unexpected gift,' she whispered.

'More than that,' Toc the Younger said.

He twisted inside as she looked up at him to reveal the raw sensuality in her eyes, a thing so clearly natural that he knew in an instant that he was no more the focus of it than anyone else upon whom she turned her gaze. The Imass as they once were, before the Ritual. As they would have remained, if, like her, they had refused its
power. A moment later, those eyes narrowed.

Toc nodded.

'I saw you,' she said, 'looking out from Treach's eyes—'

'Both eyes?'

She smiled. 'No. Only one – the one you no longer have, mortal. I would know what the Elder God has planned ... for us.'

He shook his head. 'I don't know. I can't recall ever meeting him, alas. Not even a whisper in my ear.'

'Brother Onos, who is this mortal?'

'I have named him Aral Fayle, sister.'

'And you have given him weapons of stone.'

'I have. Unintended.'

'By you, perhaps ...'

'I serve no god,' Tool growled.

Her eyes flashed. 'And I do? These steps are not our own, Onos! Who would dare manipulate us? An Immass Bonecaster and the First Sword of the T'lan Immass – prodded this way and that. He risks our wrath—'

'Enough,' Tool sighed. 'You and I are not of a kind, sister. We have never walked in step. I travel to the Second Gathering.'

Her sneer was decidedly unpleasant. 'Think you I did not hear the summons?'

'Made by whom? Do you know, Kilava?'

'No, nor do I care. I shall not attend.'

Tool cocked his head. 'Then why are you here?'

'That is my business.'

She seeks . . . redress. The realization flooded Toc's mind, and he knew that the knowledge was not his, but an Elder God's. Who now spoke directly, in a voice that trickled like sand into the Malazan's thoughts. To right an old wrong, heal an old scar. You shall cross paths again. It is, however, of little consequence. It is the final meeting that concerns me, and that will be years away in all likelihood. Ah, but I reveal unworthy impatience. Mortal, the children of the Pannion Seer are suffering. You must find a way to release them. It is difficult – a risk beyond imagining – but I must send you into the Seer's embrace. I do not think you will forgive me.

Struggling, Toc pushed his question forward in his mind. Release them. Why?

An odd question, mortal. I speak of compassion. There are gifts unimagined in such efforts. A man who dreams has shown me this, and indeed, you shall soon see for yourself. Such gifts . . .

'Compassion,' Toc said, mentally jarred by the Elder God's sudden departure. He blinked, saw that Tool and Kilava were staring at him. The woman's face had paled.

'My sister,' the First Sword said, 'knows nothing of compassion.'

Toc stared at the undead warrior, trying to retrieve what had been spoken last – before the ... visitation. He could not recall.

'Brother Onos, you should have realized it by now,' Kilava slowly said. 'All things change.' Studying Toc
once more, the woman smiled, but it was a smile of sorrow. 'I leave now—'

'Kilava.' Tool stepped forward, a faint clash of bones and skin. 'The ritual that sundered you from your kin, the breaking of blood-ties – this Second Gathering, perhaps ...'

Her expression softened. 'Dear brother, the summoner cares nothing for me. My ancient crime will not be undone. Moreover, I suspect that what will await you at the Second Gathering will not be as you imagine. But I... I thank you, Onos T’oolan, for the kind thought.'

'I said ... we do not ... travel in step,' the undead warrior whispered, struggling with each word. 'I was angry, sister – but it is an old anger. Kilava—'

'Old anger, yes. But you were right, none the less. We have never walked in step with each other. Our past ever dogs our trail. Perhaps some day we will mend our shared wounds, brother. This meeting has given me . . . hope.' She briefly laid a hand on Baaljagg's head, then turned away.

Toc watched her vanish into the dusk's shroud.

Another clattering of bones within leather skin made him swing round. To see Tool on his knees, head hung. There could be no tears from a corpse, yet ...

Toc hesitated, then strode to the undead warrior. 'There was untruth in your words, Tool,' he said.

Swords hissed out and the Malazan spun to see Senu and Thurule advancing on him.

Tool snapped out a hand. 'Stop! Sheathe your weapons, Seguleh. I am immune to insults – even those delivered by one I would call a friend.'

'Not an insult,' Toc said levelly, turning back to the T’lan Imass. 'An observation. What did you call it? The breaking of blood-ties.' He laid a hand on Tool's shoulder. 'It's clear to me, for what that's worth, that the breaking failed. The blood-ties remain. Perhaps you could take heart in that, Onos T’oolan.'

The head tilted up, withered sockets revealed beneath the bone shelf of the helm.

_Gods, I look and see nothing. He looks and sees . . . what?_ Toc the Younger struggled to think of what to do, what to say next. As the moment stretched, he shrugged, offered his hand.

To his amazement, Tool grasped it.

And was lifted upright, though the Malazan grunted with the effort, his every muscle protesting. _Hood take me, that's the heaviest sack of bones I've . . . never mind._

Senu broke the silence, his tone firm. 'Stoneblade and Stonearrow, attend. The meal awaits us.'

_Now, how in Hood's name did I earn all this? Onos T'oolan. And respect from a Seguleh, no less . . . In a night of wonders, that one surely takes the crown._

'I have truly known but two mortal humans,' Tool said at his side. 'Both underestimated themselves, the first one fatally so. This night, friend Aral Fayle, I shall endeavour to tell you of the fall of Adjunct Lorn.'

'A moral to the tale, no doubt,' Toc commented wryly.

'Indeed.'

'And here I was planning to spend the night tossing bones with Senu and Thurule.'

Senu snapped, 'Come and eat, Stonearrow!'

_Uh oh, I think I just overstepped the familiarity thing._

Blood had filled the gutters, not long past. Sun and absence of rain had preserved the turgid flow as dust-dulled
black, deep enough to hide the hump of the cobbles lying underneath, the mortal river reaching down to the silty waters of the bay.

No-one in Callows had been spared. She had come upon the heaped pyres on her approach down the inland road, and judged the slaughter at perhaps thirty thousand.

Garath ranged ahead, slipping beneath the arch of the gate. She followed at a slower pace.

The city had been beautiful, once. Copper-sheathed domes, minarets, poetically winding streets overlooked by ornate balconies riotous with flowering plants. The lack of hands to nourish the precious plants had turned the gardens brown and grey. Leaves crackled underfoot as Lady Envy walked down the central avenue.

A trader city, a merchants' paradise. The masts of countless ships were visible in the harbour ahead, all motionless, indicating that the crafts had been holed and sat one and all in the mud of the bay.

Ten days, no more, since the slaughter. She could smell Hood's breath, a sigh at unexpected bounty, a faint ripple of unease at what it signified. You are troubled, dear Hood. This bodes ill, indeed ...

Garath led her unerringly, as she knew he would. An ancient, almost forgotten alleyway, the cobbles heaved, cracked and covered in decades of rubbish. Into a small, sagging house, its foundation stones of a far sharper cut than those that rested upon them. Within, a single room with a reed-matted floor of thick, wooden boards. A desultory scatter of poorly made furniture, bronze cooking plate over a brick-housed hearth, rotting foodstuffs. A child's toy wagon off to one side.

The dog circled in the centre of the small room.

Lady Envy approached, kicked aside the reed mats. No trapdoor. The inhabitants had had no idea of what lay beneath their home. She unveiled her warren, passed a hand over the floorboards, watched them dissolve into dust, creating a circular hole. A damp, salty breath wafted from its darkness.

Garath padded to the edge, then dropped out of sight. She heard the clatter of claws some distance below.

With a sigh, Lady Envy followed.

No stairs, and the pavestones of the floor were a long time in halting her warren-slowed fall. Vision enhanced, she looked around, then sniffed. The temple was all of this one chamber, squalid, once low-ceilinged though the beams of that roof had long since vanished. There was no raised altarstone, but she knew that for this particular ascendant, the entire floor of cut stone served that sacred function. Back in the days of blood ... 'I can imagine what awakened this place to you,' she said, eyes on Garath, who had lain down and was moments from sleep. 'All that blood, seeping down, dripping, dripping onto your altar. I admit, I prefer your abode in Darujhistan. Far grander, almost worthy of complementing my esteemed presence. But this . . .' Her nose wrinkled.

Garath, eyes closed, twitched.

Welcome, Lady Envy.

'Your summons was uncharacteristically distraught, K'ruul. Is this the work of the Matron and her undead hunters? If so, then calling me here was unnecessary. I am well aware of their efficacy.'

Crippled and chained he may be, Lady Envy, but this particular god is never so obvious. His game displays a master's sleight of hand. Nothing is as he would have us believe, and his use of unwitting servants is as brutal as his treatment of enemies. Consider, after all, the Pannion Seer. No, for Callows, death came from the sea. A warren-twisted fleet. Cold-eyed, unhuman killers. Seeking, ever seeking, they now ply the world's oceans.

'Seeing what, dare I ask?'

A worthy challenge, no less.

'And do these dreadful seaborne murderers have a name?'
One enemy at a time, Lady Envy. You must cultivate patience.

She crossed her arms. 'You sought me out, K'rul, and you can be certain that I had not anticipated that you and I would ever meet again. The Elder Gods are gone, and good riddance, as far as I'm concerned – and that includes my father, Draconus. Were we companions two hundred thousand years ago, you and I? I think not, though the memories are admittedly vague. Not enemies, true enough. But friends? Allies? Most certainly not. Yet here you have come. I have gathered your own unwitting servants, as you asked. Have you any idea the demands on my energies to hold those three Seguleh in check?'

Ah, yes, and where is the Third now?

'Stretched senseless half a league from the city. It was vital to get him away from that T'lan Imass – the gods know, I didn't drag him along for the company. You're missing my point, K'rul. The Seguleh will not be controlled. Indeed, I wonder who humours whom when it comes to those three frightful warriors. Mok will challenge Tool. Mark my words, and while a part of me thrills at the thought – to witness such a clash! None the less, the destruction of one or the other will ill suit your plans, I imagine. The First Sword was almost defeated by Thurule, you know. Mok will chop him into kindling—'

K'rul's soft laughter filled her head. Hopefully, not before Mok and his brothers have carved their way into the Pannion Seer's throne room. Besides, Onos Toolan is far more subtle of thought than you might imagine, Lady Envy. Let them battle, if Mok so chooses. I suspect, however, that the Third may well surprise you with his . . . constraint.

'Constraint? Tell me, K'rul, did you think the Seguleh First would send someone as highly ranked as the Third to lead his punitive army?'

Admittedly, no. For this task, of splitting the Seer's forces into two fronts, I had expected perhaps three or four hundred Eleventh Level initiates. Sufficient to inconvenience the Seer enough to draw an army or two away from the approaching Malazans. Yet, with the Second missing, and with Mok's growing prowess, no doubt the First had his reasons.

'One final question, then. Why am I doing you these favours, anyway?'

As petulant as ever, I see. Very well. You chose to turn your back on the need, when last it arose. Disappointing, that, yet enough did indeed attend to manage the Chaining – although at a cost that your presence would have diminished. But, even chained, the Crippled God will not rest. He exists in endless, tormenting pain, shattered, broken within and without, yet he has turned that into a strength. The fuel for his rage, his hunger for vengeance—

'The fools who pulled him down are long dead, K'rul. Vengeance is just an excuse. The Crippled God is driven by ambition. Lust for power is the core of his rotten, shrivelled heart.'

Perhaps, perhaps not. Time will tell, as the mortals say. In any case, you defied the summons at the Chaining, Lady Envy. I will not brook your indifference a second time.

'You?' She sneered. 'Are you my master, K'rul? Since when—'

Visions flooded her mind, staggering her. Darkness. Then chaos, wild, unfocused power, a universe devoid of sense, of control, of meaning. Entities flung through the maelstrom. Lost, terrified by the birth of light. A sudden sharpening — pain as of wrists opened, the heat spilling forth — a savage imposition of order, the heart from which blood flowed in even, steady streams. Twin chambers to that heart – Kuradal Galain, the Warren of Mother Dark – and Starvald Demelain, the Warren of . . . Dragons. And the blood – the power – now sweeping in currents through veins, through arteries, branching out through all existence, and the thought that came to her then stole all warmth from her flesh. Those veins, those arteries, they are the warrens. Who created this? Who?'

Dear Lady, K'rul replied, you have your answer, and I will be damned if I am going to countenance your impertinence. You are a sorceress. By Light's Wild Mane, your power feeds on the very blood of my eternal soul, and I will have your obedience in this!
Lady Envy staggered another step, suddenly released by the visions, disoriented, her heart thudding in her chest. She drew in a sharp breath. 'Who knows the ... the truth, K'rul? That, in striding through the warrens, we travel through your very flesh. That, when we draw upon the power of the warrens, we draw your very blood? Who knows?'

She felt a casual shrug in his reply.

*Anomander Rake, Draconus, Osric, a handful of others. And now you. Forgive me, Lady Envy, I have no wish to be a tyrant. My presence within the warrens has ever been passive – you are free to do as you choose, as is every other creature who swims my immortal blood. I have but one excuse, if you will. This Crippled God, this stranger from an unknown realm . . . Lady Envy, I am frightened.*

A chill stole through her as the words sank into her mind.

K'rul continued after a moment. *We have lost allies in our foolishness. Dassem Ultor, who was broken by Hood's taking of his daughter at the Time of the Chaining – this was a devastating blow. Dassem Ultor, the First Sword reborn —*

'Do you think,' she asked slowly, 'that Hood would have taken her for the Chaining, had I answered the summons? Am I, she wondered, to blame for Dassem Ultor's loss?'

*Hood alone could answer that question, Lady Envy. And he'd likely lie, in any case. Dassem, his Champion – Dessembrae – had grown to rival his power. There is little value in worrying such questions, beyond the obvious lesson that inaction is a deadly choice. Consider: from Dassem's fall, a mortal empire now totters on the edge of chaos. From Dassem's fall, the Shadow Throne found a new occupant. From Dassem's fall . . . ah, well, the tumbling dominoes are almost countless. It is done.*

'What is it you wish of me, now, K'rul?'

*There was need. To show you the vastness of the threat. This Pannion Domin is but a fragment of the whole, yet you must lead my chosen into its very heart.*

'And once there? Am I a match for the power that resides there?'

*Perhaps, but that is a path it may prove unwise to take, Lady Envy. I shall trust in your judgement, and in that of others, unwitting and otherwise. Indeed, you may well choose to cut the knot that is at the heart of the Domin. Or, you may find a way to loosen it, to free all that has been bound for three hundred thousand years.*

'Very well, we shall play it as it comes. What joy! I can leave now? I so long to return to the others, to Toc the Younger in particular. He's a darling, isn't he?'

*Take great care of him, Lady. The scarred and the flawed are what the Crippled God seeks in his servants. I shall endeavour to keep Toc's soul from the Chained One's grasp, but, please, maintain your guard. Also . . . there is something else to that man, something . . . wild. We shall have to await its awakening before understanding comes to us, however. Oh, one last thing...*

'Yes?'

*Your party nears the Domin's territory. When you return to them, you must not attempt your warren in an effort to hasten your journey.*

'Why?*

*Within the Pannion Domin, Lady, my blood is poisoned. It is a poison you can defeat, but Toc the Younger cannot.*

Garath awoke, rose and stretched before her. K'rul was gone.

'Oh my,' Lady Envy whispered, suddenly soaked in sweat. 'Poisoned. By the Abyss ... I need a bath. Come, Garath, let us go collect the Third. Shall I awaken him with a kiss?'
The dog glanced over at her.

'Twin scars on his mask, and the imprint of painted lips! Would he be the Fourth, then, or the Fifth? How do they count lips, do you think? One upper, one lower, or both together? Let's find out.'

Dust and the dark swirl of sorcery rose beyond the hills directly ahead.

'Shield Anvil,' Farakalian said, 'have our allies already sprung a trap?'

Itkovian frowned. 'I do not know. No doubt we shall discover the truth when they elect to reappear and inform us.'

'Well,' the soldier muttered, 'that is a fight before us. An ugly one, by the looks of the magic unleashed.'

'I'll not argue that observation, sir,' the Shield Anvil replied. 'Riders, re-form as inverted crescent, hands to weapons. Slow trot to first line-of-sight.'

The decimated wing fell into formation, rode on.

They were close to the trader road, now, Itkovian judged. If a caravan had been hit by some of these K'Chain Che'Malle, the outcome was foregone. A caravan with an attendant mage or two might well make a fight of it, and from the brimstone stench that now wafted towards them, the latter circumstance seemed the likeliest.

As they approached a rise, a row of T'lan Imass emerged to stand along its crest, backs to Itkovian and his riders. The Shield Anvil counted a dozen. Perhaps the rest were busy with the battle – still beyond his line of sight. He saw the Bonecaster Pran Chole and angled his new horse in the undead shaman's direction.

They reached the rise. The sorcerous detonations had ceased, all sounds of battle fading away.

The trader road ran below. Two carriages had made up the caravan, one much larger than the other. Both had been destroyed, ripped apart. Splintered wood, plush padding and clothes lay strewn on all sides. On a low hill off to the right lay three figures, the ground blackened around them. None moved. Eight more bodies were visible around the wagons, only two conscious – black-chain-armoured men slowly regaining their feet.

These details registered only briefly on the Shield Anvil's senses. Wandering among the dismembered corpses of five K'Chain Che'Malle hunters were hundreds of huge, gaunt wolves – with pitted eyes that were a match to those of the T'lan Imass.

Studying the silent, terrifying creatures, Itkovian spoke to Pran Chole. 'Are these ... yours, sir?'

The Bonecaster at his side shrugged. 'Gone from our company for a time. T'lan Ay often accompany us, but are not bound to us . . . beyond the Ritual itself. He was silent for a long moment, then continued, 'We had thought them lost. But it seems that they too have heard the summons. Three thousand years since our eyes last rested upon the T'lan Ay.'

Itkovian finally looked down on the undead shaman. 'Is that a hint of pleasure in your voice, Pran Chole?'

'Yes. And sorrow.'

'Why sorrow? From the looks of it, these T'lan Ay took not a single loss against these K'Chain Che'Malle. Four, five hundred . . . against five. Swift destruction.'

The Bonecaster nodded. 'Their kind are skilled at defeating large beasts. My sorrow arises from a flawed mercy, mortal. At the First Gathering, our misplaced love for the ay – these few that remained – led us onto a cruel path. We chose to include them in the Ritual. Our selfish needs were a curse. All that made the flesh and blood ay honourable, proud creatures was taken away. Now, like us, they are husks, plagued by dead memories.'

'Even undead, they have majesty,' Itkovian acknowledged. 'As with you.'
'Majesty in the T'lan Ay, yes. Among the T'lan Imass? No, mortal. None.'

'We differ in opinion, then, Pran Chole.' Itkovian turned to address his soldiers. 'Check the fallen.'

The Shield Anvil rode down to the two chain-clad men, who now stood together beside the remnants of the larger of the two carriages. Their ringed armour was in tatters. Blood leaked from them, forming sodden pools at their feet. Something about the two men made Itkovian uneasy, but he pushed the emotion away.

The bearded one swung to face the Shield Anvil as he reined in before them. 'I bid you welcome, warrior,' he said, his accent strange to Itkovian's ears. 'Extraordinary events, just past.'

Despite his inner discipline, his unease deepened. None the less, he managed an even tone as he said, 'Indeed, sir. I am astonished, given the attention the K'ell Hunters evidently showed you two, that you are still standing.'

'We are resilient individuals, in truth.' His flat gaze scanned the ground beyond the Shield Anvil. 'Alas, our companions were found lacking in such resources.'

Farakalian, having conferred with the soldiers crouched among the fallen, now rode towards Itkovian.

'Shield Anvil. Of the three Barghast on the hill, one lies dead. The other two are injured, but will survive with proper ministration. Of the rest, only one breathes no more. An array of injuries to attend to. Two may yet die, sir. None of the survivors has yet regained consciousness. Indeed, each seems in unusually deep sleep.'

Itkovian glanced at the bearded man. 'Do you know more of this unnatural sleep, sir?'

'I am afraid not.' He faced Farakalian. 'Sir, among the survivors, can you include a tall, lean, somewhat elderly man, and a shorter, much older one?'

'I can. The former, however, hovers at the gates.'

'We'd not lose him, if at all possible.'

Itkovian spoke, 'Soldiers of the Grey Swords are skilled in the art of healing, sir. They shall endeavour to the best of their abilities, and no more can be asked of them.'

'Of course. I am ... distraught.'

'Understood.' The Shield Anvil addressed Farakalian: 'Draw on the Destriant's power if necessary.'

'Yes, sir.'

He watched the man ride off.

'Warrior,' the bearded man said, 'I am named Bauchelain, and my companion here is Korbal Broach. I must ask, these undead servants of yours – four-footed and otherwise—'

'Not servants, Bauchelain. Allies. These are T'lan Imass. The wolves, T'lan Ay.'

'T'lan Imass,' the one named Korbal Broach whispered in a reedy thin voice, his eyes suddenly bright as he stared at the figures on the ridge. 'Undead, born of the greatest necromantic ritual there has ever been! I would speak with them!' He swung to Bauchelain. 'May I? Please?'

'As you wish,' Bauchelain replied with an indifferent shrug.

'A moment,' Itkovian said. 'You both bear wounds that require attending to.'

'No need, Shield Anvil, though I thank you for your concern. We heal ... swiftly. Please, concentrate on our companions. Now, that is odd – our beasts of burden and sundry horses are untouched – do you see? Fortunate indeed, once I complete my repairs to our carriage.'

Itkovian studied the wreckage to which Bauchelain now swung his attention.
Repairs? 'Sir, we return to Capustan immediately. There will be no time to spare effecting ... repairs ... to your carriage.'

'I shall not be long, I assure you.'

A shout from the ridge pulled the Shield Anvil round, in time to see Korbal Broach flying backwards from a backhanded blow – delivered by the Bonecaster Pran Chole. The man struck the slope, rolled down to its base.

Bauchelain sighed. 'He lacks manners, alas,' he said, eyes on his companion, who was slowly regaining his feet. 'The price of a sheltered, nay, isolated childhood. I hope the T'lan Imass are not too offended. Tell me, Shield Anvil, do these undead warriors hold grudges?'

'Itkovian allowed himself a private smile. You can ask that of the next Jaghut we happen across. 'I wouldn't know, sir.'

From the ruins of the smaller carriage, three wide travois were cobbled together. The T'lan Imass fashioned leather harnesses for the undead ay chosen to pull them. The caravan's collection of horses went under the care of Farakalian and the recruit.

Itkovian watched Korbal Broach lead the oxen back to the rebuilt carriage. The Shield Anvil found his gaze avoiding the contraption; the details in the mending made his skin crawl. Bauchelain had elected to use the various bones of the dismembered K'Chain Che'Malle hunters in the reconstruction. Sorcerously melded into the carriage's frame, the bones formed a bizarre skeleton, which Bauchelain then covered with swathes of grey, pebbled skin. The effect was horrific.

Yet no more so than the carriage's owners, I suspect . . .

Pran Chole appeared at the Shield Anvil's side. 'Our preparations are complete, soldier.'

Itkovian nodded, then said in a low voice, 'Bonecaster, what do you make of these two sorcerers?'

'The unmanned one is insane, yet the other is the greater threat. They are not welcome company, Shield Anvil.'

'Unmanned?' Itkovian's eyes narrowed on Korbal Broach. 'A eunuch. Yes, of course. They are necromancers?'

'Yes. The unmanned one plies the chaos on the edge of Hood's realm. The other has more arcane interests – a summoner, of formidable power.'

'We cannot abandon them, none the less.'

'As you wish.' The Bonecaster hesitated, then said, 'Shield Anvil, the injured mortals are, one and all, dreaming.'

'Dreaming?'

'A familiar flavour,' the T'lan Imass said. 'They are being ... protected. I look forward to their awakening, in particular the priest. Your soldiers displayed considerable skill in healing.'

'Our Destriant is High Denul – we are able to draw on his power in times of need, though I imagine his mood is dark at the moment. Exhausted, knowing that healing has occurred, but little else. Karnadas dislikes uncertainty. As does the Mortal Sword, Brukhalian.' He gathered his reins, straightened in the saddle. 'The eunuch has completed his task. We may now proceed. We shall ride through the night, sir, greeting the dawn at Capustan's gates.'

'And the presence of the T'lan Imass and T'lan Ay?' Pran Chole enquired.

'Hidden, if you please. Excepting those ay pulling the travois. They shall lead their charges through the city and into the compound in our barracks.'
'And you have reason for this, Shield Anvil?'

Itkovian nodded.

The sun low at their backs, the entourage set off.

Hands folded on his lap, the Destriant looked upon Prince Jelarkan with deep sympathy. No, more than that, given the man's obvious exhaustion ... empathy. Karnadas's head pounding behind his eyes. His Denul warren felt hollow, coated with ash. Were he to have left his hands on the tabletop, their tremble would have been obvious.

Behind him, the Mortal Sword paced.

Itkovian and two wings rode the plain to the west, and something had happened. Concern echoed in every restless step at the Destriant's back.

The prince of Capustan's eyes were squeezed shut, fingers kneading his temples beneath the circlet of cold-hammered copper that was his crown. Twenty-two years old, his lined, drawn face could have belonged to a man of forty. His shaved pate revealed the scatter of moles that marked his royal line, as if he had been sprayed in blood that had since dried and grown dark. After a long sigh, the prince spoke. 'The Mask Council will not be swayed, Mortal Sword. They insist that their Gidrath occupy the outlying strongpoints.'

'Those fortifications will become isolated once the siege begins, Prince,' Brukhalian rumbled.

'I know. We both know. Isolated, dismantled, every soldier within slaughtered ... then raped. The priests fancy themselves master strategists in warfare. A religious war, after all. The temples' own elite warriors must strike the first blows.'

'No doubt they will,' Brukhalian said. 'And little else.'

'And little else. Perhaps corridors, a series of sorties to effect a withdrawal—'

'Costing yet more lives, Prince, and likely to fail. My soldiers will not be party to suicide. And please, do not attempt to impose your will on me in this. We are contracted to hold the city. In our judgement, the best means of doing so are with maintaining the walls. The redoubts have always been a liability – they will serve the enemy better than they will serve us, as headquarters, defensible rallying positions. The Gidrath will be handing them fortifications in the killing ground. Once siege weapons are stationed there, we shall suffer ceaseless bombardment.'

'The Mask Council does not expect the strongpoints to fall, Mortal Sword. Nailed to that particular belief, all your stated fears are irrelevant, as far as they are concerned.'

There was silence, apart from Brukhalian's uncharacteristic pacing. The prince looked up finally, brown eyes following the Mortal Sword's catlike padding. Jelarkan frowned, then sighed and pushed himself to his feet. 'I need leverage, Mortal Sword. Find it for me, and quickly.' He swung about and strode to the chamber's doors, where waited his two bodyguards.

As soon as the massive doors closed behind the prince, Brukhalian spun to Karnadas. 'Do they continue to draw on your powers, sir?'

The Destriant shook his head. 'Not for some time, now. Since shortly after the prince's unexpected visit. In any case, sir, they have taken all I possess, and it will be days before I fully recover.'

Brukhalian released a long, slow breath. 'Well, the risk of a skirmish was recognized. From this, we must conclude that the Pannion has sent forces across the river. The question is, how many?'

'Sufficient to maul two wings, it seems.'

'Then Itkovian should have avoided engagement.'
Karnadas studied the Mortal Sword. 'Unworthy, sir. The Shield Anvil understands caution. If avoidance was possible, he would have done so.'

'Aye,' Brukhalian growled. 'I know.'

Voices at the compound's outer gates reached through to the two men. Hooves clapped on the cobbles.

Sudden tension filled the chamber, yet neither man spoke.

The doors swung open and they turned to see Itkovian's outrider, Sidlis. The soldier took two steps into the room, then halted and tilted her head. 'Mortal Sword. Destriant. I bring word from the Shield Anvil.'

'You have seen battle, sir,' Brukhalian murmured.

'We have. A moment, sirs.' Sidlis swung about and softly shut the doors. She faced the commander and priest. 'Demonic servants of the Pannion Seer are present on the plain,' she said. 'We came upon one and closed with it. The tactics employed should have sufficed, and the damage we delivered was severe and flawlessly executed. The beast, however, was undead – an animated corpse, and this discovery came too late for disengagement. It was virtually impervious to the wounds we delivered. Nevertheless, we succeeded in destroying the demon, though at great cost.'

'Outrider Sidlis,' Karnadas said, 'the battle you describe must have occurred some time past – else you would not be here – yet the demands on my powers of healing have but just ended.'

Sidlis frowned. 'The survivors of the engagement did not require a drawing of your powers, sir. If I may, I will complete the tale, and perhaps further clarification will become ... available.'

Raising an eyebrow at the awkward reply, Brukhalian rumbled, 'Proceed.'

'Upon the destruction of the demon, we regrouped, only to find that four additional demons had arrived.'

The Destriant winced. How, then, are any of you left breathing?

'At that moment, to our fortune,' Sidlis continued, 'unexpected allies arrived. The undead demons were one and all swiftly destroyed. The issue of said alliance of course needs formalization. For the moment, it is the recognition of a common enemy that yielded the combined efforts – which I believe continue at this moment, with the Shield Anvil and the troop riding in the company of our propitious companions, their intent to extend the hunt for more of these fell demons.'

'Given the Destriant's exhaustion,' the Mortal Sword said, 'they found them, it seems.'

Sidlis nodded.

'There is more, sir?' Karnadas asked.

'Sir. Accompanying me are emissaries from these potential allies. The Shield Anvil judged that such negotiation as may follow be solely between the Grey Swords and our guests; and that any decision of revelation, to the prince or to the Mask Council, should only follow considered counsel among yourselves, sirs.'

Brukhalian grunted his agreement. 'The emissaries await in the compound?'

The answer to his question rose in swirls of dust to the outrider's left. Three desiccated, fur-clad figures shimmered into being, rising up from the stone floor. Rotted furs and leathers, skin polished deep brown, massive shoulders and long, muscle-twisted arms.

The Destriant staggered back out of his chair, eyes wide.

Brukhalian had not moved. His eyes narrowed on the three apparitions.

The air suddenly smelled of thawed mud.
'They call themselves the Kron T'lan Imass,' Sidlis said calmly. 'The Shield Anvil judged their warriors to number perhaps fourteen thousand.'

'T'lan Imass,' Karnadas whispered. 'This is a most disturbing ... convergence.'

'If I may make introductions,' Sidlis continued, 'these are Bonecasters – shamans. The one to the far left, upon whose shoulders is the fur of a snow bear, is Bek Okhan. Next to him, in the white wolf fur, is Bendal Home. The Bonecaster at my side, in the skin of a plains bear, is Okral Lorn. I specify the nature of the furs as it relates directly to their ... Soletaken forms. Or so they have informed me.'

The one named Bendal Home stepped forward. 'I bring greeting from Kron of Kron T'lan Imass, mortal,' he said in a soft, smooth whisper. 'Further, I have recent news from the clans escorting your Shield Anvil and his soldiers. Additional K'Chain Che'Malle K'ell Hunters were found, engaged in an attack on a cavaran. These hunters have been despatched. Your soldiers have administered to the wounds of the caravan survivors. All are now returning to Capustan. No further engagements are anticipated, and their arrival will coincide with the dawn.'

Trembling, Karnadas once more sat down in his chair. He struggled to speak past a suddenly parched throat. 'K'Chain Che'Malle? Animated?'

'Thank you, Sidlis,' Brukhalian said. 'You may now depart.' He faced Bendal Home. 'Do I understand correctly that Kron seeks an alliance against the Pannion Domin, and these ... K'Chain Che'Malle?'

The Bonecaster cocked his head, his long, pale hair dangling loose from beneath the wolf-skull helmet. 'Such a battle is not our primary task. We have come to this land in answer to a summons. The presence of K'Chain Che'Malle was unexpected – and unacceptable. Further, we are curious as to the identity of the one named Pannion – we suspect he is not the mortal human you believe him to be. Kron has judged that our involvement in your conflict is required for the present. There is a caveat, however. The one who has summoned us approaches. With her arrival, the Second Gathering of the T'lan Imass will commence. At this time, our disposition will be for her to decide. Furthermore, it may well be that we become ... of less value to you ... upon completion of the Gathering.'

Brukhalian slowly turned to Karnadas. 'Sir? You have questions for the one named Bendal Home?'

'So many that I do not know where to begin, Mortal Sword. Bonecaster, what is this "Gathering" that you speak of?'

'That is a matter for the T'lan Imass, mortal.'

'I see. Well, that shuts the door on one line of inquiry, and its attendant multitude of questions. Regards the Pannion Seer – he is indeed a mortal human. I have seen him myself, and there is no scent of illusion to his flesh and bone. He is an old man, and nothing more.'

'And who stands in his shadow?' the Bonecaster named Bek Okhan rasped.

The Destriant blinked. 'No-one, as far as I can tell.'

The three T'lan Imass said nothing, yet Karnadas suspected a silent exchange among them, and perhaps with their distant kin as well.

'Mortal Sword,' the priest said in a low voice, 'do we inform the prince of this? What of the Mask Council?'

'Further counsel is indeed required before that decision can be made, sir,' Brukhalian replied. 'At the very least, we shall await the return of the Shield Anvil. Furthermore, there is the issue of additional communications this night, is there not?'

_Fener's blessing, I'd forgotten. 'Indeed there is.' Quick Ben . . . by the cloven hoof, we have allies stepping out of every closet . . ._

Bendal Home spoke. 'Mortal Sword Brukhalian, your soldier Itkovian has decided that their public arrival
into the city – with the company of the caravan's wounded – will include six of the T'lan Ay that now accompany our kin.'

'T'lan Ay?' Karnadas asked. 'Not a name I've heard before.'

'Wolves from the times of ice, long ago. Like us, undead.'

Brukhalian smiled.

A moment later, Karnadas also smiled. 'The prince asked for ... leverage, did he not, Mortal Sword?'

'He shall have it, sir.'

'So he shall.'

'If you have further need of us this evening,' Bendal Home said to Brukhalian, 'simply call upon us.'

'Thank you, sirs.'

The three T'lan Imass fell into clouds of dust.

'I take it,' the Destriant murmured, 'we need not offer our guests accommodation.'

'Evidently not. Walk with me, sir, we have much to discuss and scant time.'

Karnadas rose. 'No sleep this night.'

'None, alas.'

Two bells before dawn, Brukhalian stood alone in his private chamber. Exhaustion hung on him like a rain-
sodden cloak, yet he would not yield to it. The Shield Anvil and his troop were soon to arrive, and the Mortal
Sword was determined to await them – a commander could do no less.

A single lantern defied the gloom in the chamber, throwing lurid shadows before it. The centre hearth
remained a grey smudge of dead coals and ashes. The air was bitter cold, and it was this alone that kept
Brukhalian wakeful.

The sorcerous meeting with Quick Ben and Caladan Brood had proved, beneath its surface courtesies,
strained – it was clear to both the Mortal Sword and Karnadas that their distant allies were holding back. The
uncertainties plaguing their final intentions, and their guardedness, though understandable in the circumstances,
left the two Grey Swords uncomfortable. Relief of Capustan was not, it seemed, their primary goal. An attempt
would be made, but the Mortal Sword began to suspect it would be characterized by feints and minor
skirmishes – late arriving at best – rather than a direct confrontation. This led Brukhalian to suspect that
Caladan Brood's vaunted army, worn down by years of war with this Malazan Empire, had either lost the will
to fight, or was so badly mauled that its combat effectiveness was virtually gone.

None the less, he could still think of ways in which to make these approaching allies useful. Often, the
perception of threat was sufficient . . . if we can hurt the Septarch badly enough to make him lose his nerve
upon the imminent arrival of Brood's relieving army. Or, if the defence crumbled, then an avenue of withdrawal
for the Grey Swords was possible. The question then would be, at what point could the Mortal Sword
honourably conclude that the contract's objectives no longer obtained? The death of Prince Jelarkan? Collapse
of wall defences? Loss of a section of the city?

He sensed the air suddenly tear behind him, the sound like the faintest whisper as of parting fabric. A breath
of lifeless wind flowed around him. The Mortal Sword slowly turned.

A tall, gauntly armoured figured was visible within the warren's grey-smeared portal. A face of pallid, lined
skin over taut bones, eyes set deep within ridged sockets and brow, the glimmer of tusks protruding above the
lower lip. The figure's mouth curved into a faint, mocking smile. 'Fener's Mortal Sword,' he said in the
language of the Elin, his voice low and soft, 'I bring you greetings from Hood, Lord of Death.'
Brukhalian grunted, said nothing.

'Warrior,' the apparition continued after a moment, 'your reaction to my arrival seems almost ... laconic. Are you truly as calm as you would have me believe?'

'I am Fener's Mortal Sword,' Brukhalian replied.

'Yes,' the Jaghut drawled, 'I know. I, on the other hand, am Hood's Herald, once known as Gethol. The tale that lies behind my present ... servitude, is more than worthy of an epic poem. Or three. Are you not curious?'

'No.'

The face fell into exaggerated despondency, then the eyes flashed. 'How unimaginative of you, Mortal Sword. Very well, hear then, without comforting preamble, the words of my lord. While none would deny Hood's eternal hunger, and indeed his anticipation for the siege to come, certain complexities of the greater scheme lead my lord to venture an invitation to Fener's mortal soldiers——'

'Then you should be addressing the Tusked One himself, sir,' Brukhalian rumbled.

'Ah, alas, this has proved no longer possible, Mortal Sword. Fener's attention is elsewhere. In fact, your lord has been drawn, with great reluctance, to the very edge of his realm.' The Herald's unhuman eyes narrowed. 'Fener is in great peril. The loss of your patron's power is imminent. The time has come, Hood has decided, for compassionate gestures, for expressions of the true brotherhood that exists between your lord and mine.'

'What does Hood propose, sir?'

'This city is doomed, Mortal Sword. Yet your formidable army need not join in the inevitable crush at Hood's gate. Such a sacrifice would be pointless, and indeed a great loss. The Pannion Domin is no more than a single, rather minor, element in a far vaster war – a war in which all the gods shall partake ... allied one and all ... against an enemy who seeks nothing less than the annihilation of all rivals. Thus, Hood offers you his warren, a means of extrication for you and your soldiers. Yet you must choose quickly, for the warren's path here cannot survive the arrival of the Pannion's forces.'

'What you offer, sir, demands the breaking of our contract.'

The Herald's laugh was contemptuous. 'As I most vehemently told Hood, you humans are a truly pathetic lot. A contract? Scratchings on vellum? My lord's offer is not a thing to be negotiated.'

'And in accepting Hood's warren,' Brukhalian said quietly, 'the face of our patron changes, yes? Fener's ... inaccessibility ... has made him a liability. And so Hood acts quickly, eager to strip the Boar of Summer's mortal servants, preferably intact, to thereafter serve him and him alone.'

'Foolish man,' Gethol sneered. 'Fener shall be the first casualty in the war with the Crippled God. The Boar shall fall – and none can save him. The patronage of Hood is not casually offered, mortal, to just anyone. To be so honoured——'

'Honoured?' Brukhalian cut in, his voice the slide of iron on stone, his eyes flickering with a strange light. 'Allow me, on Fener's behalf,' he said in a low whisper, 'to comment on the question of honour.' The Mortal Sword's broadsword hissed in a blur from its scabbard, the blade cleaving upward to strike the Herald across the face. Bone snapped, dark blood sprayed.

Gethol reared back a step, withered hands rising to his shattered features.

Brukhalian lowered his weapon, his eyes burning with a deep rage. 'Come forward again, Herald, and I shall resume my commentary.'

'I do not,' Gethol rasped through torn lips, 'appreciate your ... tone. It falls to me to answer in kind, not on Hood's behalf. Not any more. No, this reply shall be mine and mine alone.' A longsword appeared in each gauntleted hand, the blades shimmering like liquid gold. The Herald's eyes glittered like mirrors to the weapons. He took a step forward.
Then stopped, swords lifting into a defensive position.

A soft voice spoke behind Brukhalian. 'We greet you, Jaghut.'

The Mortal Sword turned to see the three T'lan Imass, each one strangely insubstantial, as if moments from assuming new forms, new shapes. Moments, Brukhalian realized, from veering into their Soletaken beasts. The air filled with a stale stench of spice.

'Not your concern, this fight,' Gethol hissed.

'The fight with this mortal?' Bek Okhan asked. 'No. However, Jaghut, you are.'

'I am Hood's Herald – do you dare challenge a servant of the lord of death?'

The T'lan Imass's desiccated lips peeled back. 'Why would we hesitate, Jaghut? Now ask of your lord, does he dare challenge us?'

Gethol grunted as something dragged him bodily back, the warren snapping shut, swallowing him. The air swirled briefly in the wake of the portal's sudden vanishing, then settled.

'Evidently not,' Bek Okhan said.

Sighing, Brukhalian sheathed his sword and faced the T'lan Imass Bonecasters. 'Your arrival has left me disappointed, sirs.'

'We understand this, Mortal Sword. You were doubtless well matched. Yet our hunt for this Jaghut demanded our ... interruption. His talent for escaping us is undiminished, it seems, even to the point of bending a knee in the service of a god. Your defiance of Hood makes you a worthwhile companion.'

Brukhalian grimaced. 'If only to improve your chances of closing with this Jaghut, I take it.'

'Indeed.'

'So we are understood in this.'

'Yes. It seems we are.'

He stared at the three creatures for a moment, then turned away. 'I think we can assume the Herald will not be returning to us this evening. Forgive my curtness, sirs, but I wish solitude once again.'

The T'lan Imass each bowed, then disappeared.

Brukhalian walked to the hearth, drawing his sword once more. He set the blunt end amongst the cold embers, slowly stirred the ashes. Flames licked into life, the coals burgeoning a glowing red. The spatters and streaks of Jaghut blood on the blade sizzled black, then burned away to nothing.

He stared down at the hearth for a long time, and despite the unveiled power of the sanctified sword, the Mortal Sword saw before him nothing but ashes.

Up from the darkness, a clawing, gasping struggle. Explosive blooms of pain, like a wall of fire rising behind his eyes, the shivering echoes of wounds, a tearing and puncturing of flesh – his own flesh.

A low groan escaped him, startled him into an awareness – he lay propped at an angle, taut skins stretched beneath him. There had been motion, a rocking and bumping and scraping, but that had ceased. He opened his eyes, found himself in shadow. A stone wall reared to his left, within reach. The air smelled of horses and dust and, much closer, blood and sweat.

Morning sunlight bathed the compound to his right, glimmered off the blurred figures moving about there. Soldiers, horses, impossibly huge, lean wolves.
Boots crunched on gravel and the shadow over him deepened. Blinking, Gruntle looked up.

Stonny's face was drawn, spattered with dried blood, her hair hanging in thick, snarled ropes. She laid a hand on his chest. 'We've reached Capustan,' she said in a ragged voice.

He managed a nod.

'Gruntle—'

Pain filled her eyes, and he felt a chill sweep over him.

'Gruntle ... Harllo's dead. They – they left him, buried under rocks. They left him. And Netok – Netok, that dear boy . . . so wide-eyed, so innocent. I gave him his manhood, Gruntle, I did that, at least. Dead – we lost them both.' She reeled away then, out of the range of his vision, though he heard her rushed footsteps, dwindling.

Another face appeared, a stranger's, a young woman, helmed, her expression gentle. 'We are safe now, sir,' she said, her accent Capan. 'You have been force-healed. I grieve for your losses. We all do – the Grey Swords, that is. Rest assured, sir, you were avenged against the demons ...'

Gruntle stopped listening, his eyes pulling away, fixing on the clear blue sky directly overhead. *I saw you, Harllo. You bastard. Throwing yourself in that creature's path, between us. I saw, damn you.*

A corpse beneath rocks, a face in the darkness, smeared in dust, that would never again smile.

A new voice. 'Captain.'

Gruntle turned his head, forced words through the clench of his throat. 'It's done, Keruli,' he said. 'You've been delivered. It's done. Damn you to Hood, get out of my sight.'

The priest bowed his head, withdrew through the haze of Gruntle's anger; withdrew, then was gone.
CHAPTER EIGHT

The harder the world, the fiercer the honour.

Gethol looked around. The endless hills, the formless sky, the cool, dead air. The bones. The Jaghut's undamaged eyebrow lifted. 'None the less, I appreciate the joke, Hood. Ha ha. Here you have tossed me. Ha ha. And now, I have leave to crawl free. Free from your service. So be it.'

The Jaghut opened his warren, stared into the portal that formed before him, his path into the cold, almost airless realm of Omtose Phellack. 'I know you, now, Hood. I know who – what – you are. Delicious irony, the mirror of your face. Do you in turn, I now wonder, know me?'

He strode into the warren. The familiar gelid embrace eased his pain, the fire of his nerves. The steep, jagged walls of ice to either side bathed him in blue-green light. He paused, tested the air. No stench of Imass, no signs of intrusion, yet the power he sensed around him was weakened, damaged by millennia of breaches, the effrontery of T'lan. Like the Jaghut themselves, Omtose Phellack was dying. A slow, wasting death.

'Aah, my friend,' he whispered, 'we are almost done. You and I, spiralling down into ... oblivion. A simple truth. Shall I unleash my rage? No. After all, my rage is not enough. It never was.'

He walked on, through the frozen memories that had begun to rot, there, within his reach, ever narrowing, ever closing in on the Jaghut.

The fissure was unexpected, a deep cleft slashing diagonally across his path. A soft, warm breath flowed from it, sweet with decay and disease. The ice lining its edges was bruised and pocked, riven with dark veins. Halting before it, Gethol quested with his senses. He hissed in recognition. 'You have not been idle, have you? What is this invitation you set before me? I am of this world, whilst you, stranger, are not.'

He moved to step past it, his torn lips twisting into a snarl. Then stopped, head slowly turning. 'I am no longer Hood's Herald,' he whispered. 'Dismissed. A flawed service. Unacceptable. What would you say to me, Chained One?'

There would be no answer, until the decision was made, until the journey's end.

Gethol entered the fissure.

The Crippled God had fashioned a small tent around his place of chaining, the Jaghut saw with some amusement. Broken, shattered, oozing with wounds that never healed, here then was the true face of vanity. Gethol halted before the entrance. He raised his voice. 'Dispense with the shroud – I shall not crawl to you."

The tent shimmered, then dissolved, revealing a robed, hooded, shapeless figure sitting on damp clay. A brazier lifted veils of smoke between them, and a mangled hand reached out to fan the sweet tendrils into the
hood-shadowed face. ‘A most,’ the Chained One said in a wheeze, ‘a most devastating kiss. Your sudden lust for
vengeance was ... felt, Jaghut. Your temper endangered Hood's meticulous plans, you see that, do you not? It
was this that so ... disappointed the Lord of Death. His Herald must be obedient. His Herald must possess no
personal desires, no ambitions. Not a worthy ... employer ... for one such as you.’

Gethol glanced around. ‘There is heat beneath me. We chained you to Burn's flesh, anchored you to her
bones – and you have poisoned her.’

‘I have. A festering thorn in her side ... that shall one day kill her. And with Burn's death, this world shall die.
Her heart cold, lifeless, will cease its life-giving bounty. These chains must be broken, Jaghut.’

Gethol laughed. ‘All worlds die. I shall not prove the weak link, Crippled God. I was here for the Chaining,
after all.’

‘Ah,’ the creature hissed, ‘but you are the weak link. You ever were. You thought you could earn Hood's
trust, and you failed. Not the first failure, either, as we both know. When your brother Gothos called upon you
___’

‘Enough! Who is the vulnerable one here?’

‘We both are, Jaghut. We both are.’ The god raised his hand again, waved it slowly between them.
Lacquered, wooden cards appeared, suspended in the air, their painted images facing Gethol. ‘Behold,’ the
Crippled God whispered, ‘the House of Chains ...’

The Jaghut's lone functioning eye narrowed. ‘What – what have you done?’

‘No longer an outsider, Gethol. I would ... join the game. And look more carefully. The role of Herald is ...
vacant.’

Gethol grunted. ‘More than just the Herald ...’

‘Indeed, these are early days. Who, I wonder, will earn the right of King in my House? Unlike Hood, you see,
I welcome personal ambition. Welcome independent thought. Even acts of vengeance.’

‘The Deck of Dragons will resist you, Chained One. Your House will be ... assailed.’

‘It was ever thus. You speak of the Deck as an entity, but its maker is dust, as we both know. There is no-one
who can control it. Witness the resurrection of the House of Shadows. A worthy precedent. Gethol, I have need
of you. I embrace your ... flaws. None among my House of Chains shall be whole, in flesh or in spirit. Look
upon me, look upon this broken, shattered figure – my House reflects what you see before you. Now cast your
gaze upon the world beyond, the nightmare of pain and failure that is the mortal realm. Very soon, Gethol, my
followers shall be legion. Do you doubt that? Do you?’

The Jaghut was silent for a long time, then he growled, ‘The House of Chains has found its Herald. What
would you have me do?’

‘I've lost my mind,’ Murillio muttered, but he threw the bones none the less. The carved phalanges bounced and
rolled, then came to a stop.

‘The Lord's Push, dear friend, alas for you but not for worthy self!’ Kruppe cried, reaching out to gather the
bones. ‘And now Kruppe doubles the bid on a clear skid – ah, exquisite rhyme exquisitely delivered – ho!’ The
bones bounced, settled with unmarked sides facing up. ‘Ha! Riches tumble upon Kruppe’s ample lap! Gather
them up, formidable wizard!’

Shaking his head, Quick Ben collected the finger bones. ‘I've seen every cheat possible – the bad and the
superb – but Kruppe, you continue to evade my sharpest eye.’

‘Cheat? Gods forbid! What hapless victims are witness to on this night of nights is naught but cosmic
sympathy for worthy Kruppe!’
'Cosmic sympathy?' Murillio snorted. 'What in Hood's name is that?'

'Euphemism for cheating,' Coll grumbled. 'Make your call, Quick, I'm eager to lose still more of my hard-earned coin.'

'It's this table,' Murillio said. 'It skews everything, and somehow Kruppe's found the pattern – don't deny it, you block of cheesy lard.'

'Kruppe denies all things patently deniable, dearest companions. No pattern has yet formed, by way of sincerest assurance, for the principal in question has fled from his appointed role. Said flight naught but an illusion, of course, though the enforced delay in self-recognition may well have direst consequences. Fortunate for one and all, Kruppe is here with cogent regard—'

'Whatever,' Quick Ben cut in. 'Dark heart where it matters most and skull in the corner.'

'Bold wager, mysterious mage. Kruppe challenges treble with a true hand and not a nudge askew!'

The wizard snorted. 'Never seen one of those, ever. Not ever. Not once.' He sent the bones skidding across the table.

The polished finger bones came to a stop, arrayed in a spread hand, all the symbols and patterns revealing perfect alignment.

'And now, wondering wizard, you have! Kruppe's coffers overflow!'

Quick Ben stared at the skeletal hand on the table's battered surface.

'What's the point of this?' Coll sighed. 'Kruppe wins every cast. Not subtle, little man – a good cheat makes sure there's losses thrown in every now and then.'

'Thus Kruppe's true innocence is displayed! A cheat of successive victories would be madness indeed – no, this sympathy is true and well beyond Kruppe's control.'

'How did you do that?' Quick Ben whispered.

Kruppe removed a mottled silk handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped his brow. 'Warrens suddenly abound, licking the air with invisible flames, aaai! Kruppe withers beneath such scrutiny – mercy, Kruppe begs you, malicious mage!'

Quick Ben leaned back, glanced over to where Whiskeyjack sat apart from the others, his back to the tent wall, his eyes half closed. 'There's something there – I swear it – but I can't pin him down. He's slippery – gods, he's slippery!'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'Give it up,' he advised, grinning. 'You won't catch him, I suspect.'

The mage swung on Kruppe. 'You are not what you seem—'

'Oh but he is,' Coll interjected. 'Look at him. Greasy, slimy, slick like one giant hairy ball of buttered eel. Kruppe is precisely as he seems, trust me. Look at the sudden sweat on his brow, the boiled lobster face, the bugged-out eyes – look at him squirm! That's Kruppe, every inch of him!'

'Abashed, is Kruppe! Cruel scrutiny! Kruppe crumbles beneath such unwarranted attention!'

They watched as the man wrung out the handkerchief, their eyes widening at the torrent of oily water that poured from it to pool on the tabletop.

Whiskeyjack barked a laugh. 'He has you all in his belt-pouch, even now! Squirm, is it? Sweat? All an illusion.'

'Kruppe buckles under such perceptive observations! He wilts, melts, dissolves into a blubbery fool!' He paused, then leaned forward and gathered in his winnings. 'Kruppe is thirsty. Does any wine remain in that
smudged jug, he wonders? Yet more than that, Kruppe wonders what has brought Korlat to the tent's entrance here in the dead of night, with one and all exhausted by yet another day of interminable marching?

The flap was drawn back and the Tiste Andii woman stepped into the lantern light. Her violet eyes found Whiskeyjack. 'Commander, my lord requests the pleasure of your company.'

Whiskeyjack raised his brows. 'Now? Very well, I accept the invitation.' He rose slowly, favouring his bad leg.

'I'll figure you out yet,' Quick Ben said, glaring at Kruppe.

'Kruppe denies the existence of elusive complexity regarding self, worrisome wizard. Simplicity is Kruppe's mistress – in joyful conspiracy with his dear wife, Truth, of course. Long and loyal in allegiance, this happy threesome—'

He was still talking as Whiskeyjack left the tent and walked with Korlat towards the Tiste Andii encampment. After a few minutes, the commander glanced at the woman beside him. 'I would have thought your lord would have departed by now – he's not been seen for days.'

'He will remain in our company for a time,' Korlat said. 'Anomander Rake has little patience for staff meetings and the like. Crone keeps him informed of developments.'

'Then I am curious – what would he have of me?'

She smiled slightly. 'That is for my lord to reveal, Commander.'

Whiskeyjack fell silent.

The Knight of Dark's tent was indistinguishable from all the other tents of the Tiste Andii, unguarded and a little more than halfway down a row, weakly lit from within by a single lantern. Korlat halted before the flap. 'My escort is done. You may enter, Commander.'

He found Anomander Rake seated in a leather-backed folding camp chair, his long legs stretched out before him. An empty matching chair was opposite, and set to one side within reach of both was a small table on which sat a carafe of wine and two goblets.

'Thank you for coming,' the Knight of Dark said. 'Please, make yourself comfortable.'

Whiskeyjack settled into the chair.

Rake leaned forward and filled the two goblets, passed one over to the commander who accepted it gratefully. 'With the proper perspective,' the Tiste Andii said, 'even a mortal life can seem long. Fulfilling. What I contemplate at the moment is the nature of happenstance. Men and women who, for a time, find themselves walking in step, on parallel paths. Whose lives brush close, howsoever briefly, and are so changed by the chance contact.'

Whiskeyjack studied the man opposite him through half-closed eyes. 'I don't view change as particularly threatening, Lord.'

'Rake will suffice. To your point, I agree . . . more often than not. There is tension among the command, of which I am sure you are fully aware.'

The Malazan nodded.

Rake's veiled eyes sharpened on Whiskeyjack's for a moment, then casually slid away once more. 'Concerns. Long-bridled ambitions now straining. Rivalries old and new. The situation has the effect of ... separating. Each and every one of us, from all the others. Yet, if we abide, the calm return of instinct makes itself heard once more, whispering of . . . hope.' The extraordinary eyes found the commander once again, a contact just as brief as the first.

Whiskeyjack drew a slow, silent breath. 'The nature of this hope'
'My instincts – at the instant when lives brush close, no matter how momentary – inform me who is worthy of trust. Ganoes Paran, for example. We first met on this plain, not too far from where we are now camped. A tool of Oponn, moments from death within the jaws of Shadowthrone’s Hounds. A mortal, his every loss written plain, there in his eyes. Living or dying, his fate meant nothing to me. Yet . . .'

'You liked him."

Rake smiled, sipped wine. 'Aye, an accurate summation."

There was silence, then, that stretched as the two men sat facing each other. After a long while, Whiskeyjack slowly straightened in his chair, a quiet realization stealing through him. 'I imagine,' he finally said, studying the wine in his goblet, 'Quick Ben has you curious."

Anomander Rake cocked his head. 'Naturally,' he replied, revealing faint surprise and questioning in his tone. 'I first met him in Seven Cities ... the Holy Desert Raraku, to be more precise,' Whiskeyjack said, leaning forward to refill both goblets, then settling back before continuing. 'It’s something of a long tale, so I hope you can be patient."

Rake half smiled his reply. 'Good. I think it will be worth it.' Whiskeyjack’s gaze wandered, found the lantern hanging from a pole, settled on its dim, flaring gold flame. 'Quick Ben. Adaephon Delat, a middling wizard in the employ of one of the Seven Holy Protectors during an abortive rebellion that originated in Aren. Delat and eleven other mages made up the Protector’s cadre. Our besieging army’s own sorcerers were more than their match – Bellurdan, Nightchill, Tayschrenn, A’Karonys, Tesormalandis, Stumpy – a formidable gathering known for their brutal execution of the Emperor’s will. Well, the city the Protector was holed up in was breached, the walls sundered, slaughter in the streets, the madness of battle gripped us all. Dassem struck down the Holy Protector – Dassem and his band of followers he called his First Sword – they chewed their way through the enemy ranks. The Protector’s cadre, seeing the death of their master and the shattering of the army, fled. Dassem ordered my company in pursuit, out into the desert. Our guide was a local, a man recently recruited into our own Claw ...'
‘Indeed?’ the commander drawled. He leaned forward in his saddle, studied the corpse. ‘Apart from the fact that she looks like she died a hundred years ago, what do you find odd, Kalam?’

The man’s face twisted in a scowl.

A soldier chuckled behind Whiskeyjack.

‘Will that funny man come forward, please,’ the commander called out without turning.

A rider joined him. Thin, young, an ornate, oversized Seven Cities helmet on his head. ‘Sir!’ the soldier said.

Whiskeyjack stared at him. ‘Gods, man, lose that helm – you’ll cook your brains. And the fiddle – the damned thing’s broken anyway.’

‘The helmet’s lined with cold-sand, sir.’

‘With what?’

‘Cold-sand. Looks like shaved filings, sir, but you could throw a handful into a fire and it won’t get hot. Strangest thing, sir.’

The commander’s eyes narrowed on the helmet. ‘By the Abyss, the Holy Protector wore that!’

The man nodded solemnly. ‘And when Dassem’s sword clipped it, it went flying, sir. Right into my arms.’

‘And the fiddle followed?’

The soldier’s eyes thinned suspiciously. ‘No, sir. The fiddle’s mine. Bought it in Malaz City, planned on learning how to play it.’

‘So who put a fist through it, soldier?’

‘That would be Hedge, sir – that man over there beside Picker.’

‘He can’t play the damn thing!’ the soldier in question shouted over.

‘Well I can’t now, can I? It’s broke. But once the war’s done I’ll get it fixed, won’t I?’

Whiskeyjack sighed. ‘Return to your position, sir Fiddler, and not another sound from you, understood?’

‘One thing, sir. I got a bad feeling. . . about. . . about all of this.’

‘You’re not alone in that, soldier.’

‘Well, uh, it’s just that—’

‘Commander!’ the soldier named Hedge called out, nudging his mount forward. ‘The lad’s hunches, sir, they ain’t missed yet. He told Sergeant Nubber not to drink from that jug, but Nubber did anyway, and now he’s dead, sir.’

‘Poisoned?’


‘Gods,’ Whiskeyjack breathed. ‘Enough.’ He faced Kalam again. ‘Ride on.’

The man nodded, climbed back in his saddle.

Eleven mages on foot, without supplies, fleeing across a lifeless desert, the hunt should have been completed quickly. Late in the afternoon they came upon another body, as shrivelled as the first one; then, with the sun spreading crimson on the west horizon, a third corpse was found on the trail. Directly ahead,
distant, rose the bleached, jagged teeth of limestone cliffs, tinted red with the sunset. The trail of the surviving wizards, Kalam informed the commander, led towards them.

The horses were exhausted, as were the soldiers. Water was becoming a concern. Whiskeyjack called a halt, and camp was prepared.

After the meal, and with soldiers stationed at pickets, the commander joined Kalam Mekhar at the hearth.

The assassin tossed another brick of dung onto the flames, then checked the water in the battered pot suspended by a tripod over the fire. 'The herbs in this tea will lessen the loss of water come the morrow,' the Seven Cities native rumbled. 'I'm lucky to have it – it's rare and getting rarer. Makes your piss thick as soup, but short. You'll still sweat, but you need that—'

'I know,' Whiskeyjack interjected. 'We've been on this damned continent long enough to learn a few things, Clawleader.'

The man glanced over at the settling soldiers. 'I keep forgetting that, Commander. You're all so . . . young.'

'As young as you, Kalam Mekhar.'

'And what have I seen of the world, sir? Scant little. Bodyguard to a Holy Falah in Aren—'

'Bodyguard? Why mince words? You were his private assassin.'

'My journey has just begun, is what I was trying to say, sir. You – your soldiers – what you've seen, what you've been through . . .' He shook his head. 'It's all there, in your eyes.'

Whiskeyjack studied the man, the silence stretching.

Kalam removed the pot and poured out two cups of the medicinal-smelling brew, handed one up to the commander. 'We'll catch up with them tomorrow.'

'Indeed. We've ridden steady the day through, twice the pace of a soldier's jog. How much distance have we closed with these damned mages? A bell's worth? Two? No more than two. They're using warrens . . .'

The assassin, frowning, slowly shook his head. 'Then I would have lost the trail, sir. Once they entered a warren, all signs of them would have vanished.'

'Yes. Yet the footprints lead on, unbroken. Why is that?'

Kalam squinted into the fire. 'I don't know, sir.'

Whiskeyjack drained the bitter tea, dropped the tin cup to the ground beside the assassin, then strode away.

Day followed day, the pursuit taking them through the battered ravines, gorges and arroyos of the hills. More bodies were discovered, desiccated figures that Kalam identified one after another: Renisha, a sorcerer of High Meanas; Keluger, a Septime Priest of D'riss, the Worm of Autumn; Narkal, the warrior-mage, sworn to Fener and aspirant to the god's Mortal Sword; Ullan, the Soletaken priestess of Soliel.

Deprivation took its toll on the hunters. Horses died, were butchered and eaten. The surviving beasts thinned, grew gaunt. Had not the mages' trail led Kalam and the others unerringly to one hidden spring after another, everyone would have died, there in Raraku's relentless wasteland.

Set'alahd Crool, a Jhag half-blood who'd once driven Dassem Ultor back a half-dozen steps in furious counterattack, his sword ablaze with the blessing of some unknown ascendant; Etra, a mistress of the Rashan warren; Birith' erah, mage of the Serc warren who could pull storms down from the sky; Gellid, witch of the Tennes warren . . .

And now but one remained, ever ahead, elusive, his presence revealed only by the light footprints he left behind.
The hunters were embraced in silence, now. Raraku's silence. Tempered, honed, annealed under the sun. The horses beneath them were their match, lean and defiant, tireless and wild-eyed.

Whiskeyjack was slow to understand what he saw in Kalam's face when the assassin looked upon him and his soldiers, slow to grasp that the killer's narrowed eyes held disbelief, awe, and more than a little fear. Yet Kalam himself had changed. He'd not travelled far from the land he called home, yet an entire world had passed beneath him.

Raraku had taken them all.

Up a steep, rocky channel, through an eroded fissure, the limestone walls stained and pitted, and out into a natural amphitheatre, and there, seated cross-legged on a boulder on the clearing's opposite side, waited the last mage.

He wore little more than rags, was emaciated, his dark skin cracked and peeling, his eyes glittering hard and brittle as obsidian.

Kalam's reining in looked to be a tortured effort. He managed to turn his horse round, met Whiskeyjack's eyes. 'Adaephon Delat, a mage of Meanas,' he said in a bone-dry rasp, his split lips twisting into a grin. 'He was never much, sir. I doubt he'll be able to muster a defence.'

Whiskeyjack said nothing. He angled his mount past the assassin, approached the wizard.

'One question,' the wizard asked, his voice barely a whisper yet carrying clearly across the amphitheatre.

'What?'

'Who in Hood's name are you?'

Whiskeyjack raised a brow. 'Does it matter?'

'We have crossed Raraku entire,' the wizard said. 'Other side of these cliffs is the trail leading down to G'danisban. You chased me across the Holy Desert... gods, no man is worth that. Not even me!'

'There were eleven others in your company, wizard.'

Adaephon Delat shrugged. 'I was the youngest – the healthiest – by far. Yet now, finally, even my body has given up. I can go no further.' His dark eyes reached past Whiskeyjack. 'Commander, your soldiers...'

'What of them?'

'They are more... and less. No longer what they once were. Raraku, sir, has burned the bridges of their pasts, one and all – it's all gone.' He met Whiskeyjack's eyes in wonder. 'And they are yours. Heart and soul. They are yours.'

'More than you realize,' Whiskeyjack said. He raised his voice. 'Hedge, Fiddler, are we in place?'

'Aye!' two voices chorused.

Whiskeyjack saw the wizard's sudden tension. After a moment, the commander twisted in his saddle. Kalam sat stiffly on his horse a dozen paces back, sweat streaming down his brow. Flanking him and slightly behind were Fiddler and Hedge, both with their crossbows trained on the assassin. Smiling, Whiskeyjack faced Adaephon Delat once again.

'You two have played an extraordinary game. Fiddler sniffed out the secret communications – the scuffed stone-faces, the postures of the bodies, the curled fingers – one, three, two, whatever was needed to complete the cipher – we could have cut this to a close a week past, but by then I'd grown... curious. Eleven mages. Once the first one revealed her arcane knowledge to you – knowledge she was unable to use – it was just a matter of bargaining. What choice did the others possess? Death by Raraku's hand, or mine. Or... a kind of salvation. But was it, after all? Do their souls clamour within you, now, Adaephon Delat? Screaming to escape their new prison? But I am left wondering, none the less. This game – you and Kalam – to what end?'
The illusion of deprivation slowly faded from the wizard, revealing a fit, hale young man. He managed a strained smile. 'The clamour has . . . subsided somewhat. Even the ghost of a life is better than Hood's embrace, Commander. We've achieved a . . . balance, you could say.'

And you a host of powers unimagined.'

'Formidable, granted, but I've no desire to use them now. The game we played, Whiskeyjack? Only one of survival. At first. We didn't think you'd make it, to be perfectly honest. We thought Raraku would come to claim you – I suppose she did, in a way, though not in a way I would have anticipated. What you and your soldiers have become . . .' He shook his head.

'What we have become,' Whiskeyjack said, 'you have shared. You and Kalam.'

The wizard slowly nodded. 'Hence this fateful meeting. Sir, Kalam and I, we'll follow you, now. If you would have us.'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'The Emperor will take you from me.'

'Only if you tell him, Commander.'

'And Kalam?' Whiskeyjack glanced back at the assassin.

'The Claw will be . . . displeased,' the man rumbled. Then he smiled. 'Too bad for Surly.'

Grimacing, Whiskeyjack twisted further to survey his soldiers. The array of faces could have been carved from stone. A company, culled from the army's cast-offs, now a bright, hard core. 'Gods,' he whispered under his breath, 'what have we made here?'

The first blood-letting engagement of the Bridgeburners was the retaking of G'danisban – a mage, an assassin, and seventy soldiers who swept into a rebel stronghold of four hundred desert warriors and crushed them in a single night.

The lantern's light had burned low, but the tent's walls revealed the dawn's gentle birth. The sounds of a camp awakening and preparing for the march slowly rose to fill the silence that followed Whiskeyjack's tale.

Anomander Rake sighed. 'Soul-shifting.'

'Aye.'

'I have heard of shifting one soul – sending it into a vessel prepared for it. But to shift eleven souls – eleven mages – into the already-occupied body of a twelfth ...' He shook his head in disbelief. 'Brazen, indeed. I see now why Quick Ben requested I probe him no further.' His eyes lifted. 'Yet here, this night, you unveil him. I did not ask—'

'To have asked, Lord, would have been a presumption,' Whiskeyjack said.

'Then you understood me.'

'Instinct,' the Malazan smiled. 'I trust mine as well, Anomander Rake.'

The Tiste Andii rose from the chair.

Whiskeyjack followed suit.

'I was impressed,' Rake said, 'when you stood ready to defend the child Silverfox.'

'And I was in turn impressed when you reined yourself in.'

'Yes,' the Knight of Dark muttered, eyes suddenly averted and a faint frown marring his brow. 'The mystery of the cherub . . .'
'Excuse me?'

The Tiste Andii smiled. 'I was recalling my first meeting with the one named Kruppe.'

'I am afraid, Lord, that Kruppe is one mystery for whom I can offer nothing in way of revelation. Indeed, I think that effort will likely defeat us all.'

'You may be right in that, Whiskeyjack.'

'Quick Ben leaves this morning, to join Paran and the Bridgeburners.'

Rake nodded. 'I shall endeavour to keep my distance, lest he grow nervous.' After a moment, the Tiste Andii held out his hand.

They locked wrists.

'A welcome evening just past,' Rake said.

Whiskeyjack grimaced. 'I'm not much for spinning entertaining tales. I appreciate your patience.'

'Perhaps I can redress the balance some other evening – I've a few stories of my own.'

'I'm sure you have,' Whiskeyjack managed.

They released their grips and the commander turned to the entrance.

Behind him, Rake spoke, 'One last thing. Silverfox need have nothing to fear from me. More, I will instruct Kallor accordingly.'

Whiskeyjack looked down at the ground for a moment. 'I thank you, Lord,' he breathed, then made his way out.

_Gods below, I have made a friend this night. When did I last stumble on such a gift? I cannot remember. Hood's breath, I cannot._

Standing at the tent entrance, Anomander Rake watched the old man limp away down the track.

A soft patter of taloned feet approached from behind. 'Master,' Crone muttered, 'was that wise?'

'What do you mean?' he asked distractedly.

'There is a price for making friends among such short-lived mortals – as you well can attest from your own typically tragic memories.'

'Careful, hag.'

'Do you deny the truth of my words, Lord?'

'One can find precious value in brevity.'

The Great Raven cocked her head. 'Honest observation? Dangerous admonition? Twisted and all too unhappy wisdom? I doubt you'll elaborate. You won't, will you? You'll leave me wondering, pecking endlessly in fretful obsession! You pig!'

'Do you smell carrion on the wind, my dear? I swear I do. Why not go find it. Now. This instant. And once you have filled your belly, find Kallor and bring him to me.'

With a snarl the Great Raven leapt outside, wings spreading explosively, heaving the huge bird skyward.

'Korlat,' Rake murmured. 'Attend me, please.' He swung back to the tent's interior. Moments later Korlat arrived. Rake remained facing the back wall.
'Lord?'

'I shall depart for a short time. I feel the need for Silannah's comfort.'

'She will welcome your return, Lord.'

'A few days' absence, no more than that.'

'Understood.'

Rake faced her. 'Extend your protection to Silverfox.'

'I am pleased by the instruction.'

'Unseen watchers on Kallor as well. Should he err, call upon me instantly, but do not hesitate in commanding the full force of the Tiste Andii down upon him. At the very least, I can be witness to the gathering of his pieces.'

'The full force, Lord? We have not done so in a long, long time. Do you believe it will be necessary in destroying Kallor?'

'I cannot be sure, Korlat. Why risk otherwise?'

'Very well. I shall begin the preparation for our warrens' joining.'

'I see that it troubles you none the less.'

'There are eleven hundred Tiste Andii, Lord.'

'I am aware of that, Korlat.'

'At the Chaining, there were but forty of us, yet we destroyed the Crippled God's entire realm – granted, a nascent realm. None the less, Lord. Eleven hundred ... we risk devastating this entire continent.'

'Rake's eyes grew veiled. 'I would advise some restraint in the unleashing, Korlat, should it prove necessary to collectively release Kurald Galain. Brood would not be pleased. I suspect that Kallor will do nothing precipitous, in any case. These are all but precautions.'

'Understood.'

He turned back to the tent's interior. 'That will be all, Korlat.'

The Mhybe dreamed. Once more – after so long – she found herself wandering the tundra, the lichen and moss crunching underfoot as a dry wind swept over her, smelling of dead ice. She walked without aches, heard no rattle deep in her chest as she breathed the crisp air. She had returned, she realized, to the place of her daughter's birth.

'Tellann's warren, a place not where, but when. The time of youth. For the world. For me.'

She lifted her arms, saw their amber smoothness, the tendons and roped veins of her hands almost undiscernible beneath plump flesh.

_I am young. I am as I should be._

Not a gift. No, this was torture. She knew she was dreaming; she knew what she would find when she awakened.

A small herd of some ancient, long-extinct beast rolled soft thunder through the hard earth beneath her moccasined feet, running parallel to the path she had chosen along a ridge, their humped backs appearing every now and then above the crest – a blurred flow of burnt umber. Something within her stirred, a quiet exultation
to answer the majesty of those creatures.

*Kin to the bhederin, only larger, with horns spreading out to the sides, massive, regal.*

Glancing down, she paused in her steps. Footprints crossed her path. Hide-wrapped feet had punched through the brittle lichen. Eight, nine individuals.

*Flesh and blood Imass? The Bonecaster Pran Chole and his companions? Who walks my dreamscape this time?*

Her eyes blinked open to musty darkness. Dull pain wrapped her thinned bones. Gnarled hands drew the furs close to her chin against the chill. She felt her eyes fill with water, blinked up at the swimming, sloped ceiling of the hide tent, and released a slow, agonized breath.

‘Spirits of the Rhivi,’ she whispered, ‘take me now, I beg you. An end to this life, please. Jaghan, Iruth, Mendalan, S'ren Tahl, Pahryd, Neprool, Manek, Ibindur – I name you all, take me, spirits of the Rhivi ...’

The rattle of her breath, the stubborn beat of her heart ... the spirits were deaf to her prayer. With a soft whimper, the Mhybe sat up, reached for her clothes.

She tottered out into misty light. The Rhivi camp was awakening around her. Off to one side she heard the low of the bhederin, felt the restless rumble through the ground, then the shouts of the tribe's youths returning from a night spent guarding the herd. Figures were emerging from the nearby tents, voices softly singing in ritual greeting of the dawn.

*Iruth met inal barku sen netral . . . ah'rhitan! Iruth met inal . . .*

The Mhybe did not sing. There was no joy within her for another day of life.

‘Dear lass, I have just the thing for you.’

She turned at the voice. The Daru Kruppe was waddling down the path towards her, clutching a small wooden box in his pudgy hands.

She managed a wry smile. ‘Forgive me if I hesitate at your gifts. Past experience ...’

‘Kruppe sees beyond the wrinkled veil, my dear. In all things. Thus, his midnight mistress is Faith – a loyal aide whose loving touch Kruppe deeply appreciates. Mercantile interests,' he continued, arriving to stand before her, his eyes on the box, 'yield happy, if unexpected gifts. Within this modest container awaits a treasure, which I offer to you, dear.’

‘I have no use for treasures, Kruppe, though I thank you.’

‘A history worth recounting, Kruppe assures you. In extending the tunnel network leading to and from the famed caverns of gaseous bounty beneath fair Darujhistan, hewn chambers were found here and there, the walls revealing each blow of countless antler picks, and upon said rippling surfaces glorious scenes from the distant past were found. Painted in spit and charcoal and haematite and blood and snot and Hood knows what else, but there was more. More indeed. Pedestals, carved in the fashion of rude altars, and upon these altars – these!’

He flipped back the lid of the box.

At first, the Mhybe thought she was looking upon a collection of flint blades, resting on strangely wrought bangles seemingly of the same fractious material. Then her eyes narrowed.

‘Aye,’ Kruppe whispered. ‘Fashioned as if they were indeed flint. But no, they are copper. Cold-hammered, the ore gouged raw from veins in rock, flattened beneath pounding stones. Layer upon layer. Shaped, worked, to mirror a heritage.’ His small eyes lifted, met the Mhybe's. ‘Kruppe sees the pain of your twisted bones, my dear, and he grieves. These copper objects are not tools, but ornaments, to be worn about the body – you will find the blades have clasps suitable for a hide thong. You will find wristlets and anklets, arm-torcs and ... uh, necklets. There is efficacy in such items ... to ease your aches. Copper, the first gift of the gods.'
Bemused at her own sentimentality, the Mhybe wiped the tears from her lined cheeks. 'I thank you, friend Kruppe. Our tribe retains the knowledge of copper's healing qualities. Alas, they are not proof against old age...'

The Daru's eyes flashed. 'Kruppe's story is not yet complete, lass. Scholars were brought down to those chambers, sharp minds devoted to the mysteries of antiquity. The altars, one for each each chamber... eight in all... individually aspected, the paintings displaying crude but undeniable images. Traditional representations. Eight caverns, each clearly identified. We know the hands that carved each of them – the artists identified themselves – and Darujhistan's finest seers confirmed the truth. We know, my dear, the names of those to whom these ornaments belonged.' He reached into the box and withdrew a blade. 'Jaghan.' He set it down and picked up an anklet. 'S'ren Tahl. And here, this small, childlike arrowhead... Manek, the Rhivi imp – a mocker, was he not? Kruppe feels an affinity with this trickster runt, Manek, oh yes. Manek, for all his games and deceits, has a vast heart, does he not? And here, this torc. Iruth, see its polish? The dawn's glow, captured here, in this beaten metal—'

'Impossible,' the Mhybe whispered. 'The spirits—'

'Were once flesh, my dear. Once mortal. That first band of Rhivi, perhaps? Faith,' he said with a wistful smile, 'is ever a welcoming mistress. Now, upon completing of morning ablutions, Kruppe expects to see said items adorning you. Through the days to come, through the nights yet to pass, Holy Vessel, hold fast to this faith.'

She could say nothing. Kruppe offered her the box. She took its weight in her hands.

'How did you know? This morning of mornings, awakening in the ashes of abandonment. Bereft of lifelong beliefs. How, my dear, deceptive man, did you know?

The Daru stepped back with a sigh. 'The rigours of delivery have left Kruppe exhausted and famished! Said box trembled these all too civilized appendages.'

She smiled. 'Rigours of delivery, Kruppe? I could tell you a thing or two.'

'No doubt, but do not despair of ever receiving just reward, lass.' He winked, then swung about and ambled off. A few paces away, Kruppe stopped and turned. 'Oh, Kruppe further informs that Faith has a twin, equally sweet, and that is Dreams. To discount such sweetness is to dismiss the truth of her gifts, lass.' He fluttered one hand in a wave then turned once more.

He walked on, and moments later was beyond her line of sight. So like Manek, indeed. You buried something there, didn't you, Kruppe! Faith and dreams. The dreams of hope and desire? Or the dreams of sleep? Whose path did I cross last night?

Eighty-five leagues to the northeast, Picker leaned back against the grassy slope, squinting as she watched the last of the quorls—tiny specks against a sea-blue sky—dwindle westward.

'If I have to sit another heartbeat on one a those,' a voice growled beside her, 'someone kill me now and I'll bless 'em for the mercy.'

The corporal closed her eyes. 'If you're giving leave to wring your neck, Antsy, I'll lay odds one of us will take you up on it before the day's done.'

'What an awful thing to say, Picker! What's made me so unpopular? I ain't done nothing to no-one never how, have I?'

'Give me a moment to figure out what you just said and I'll answer you honestly.'

'I didn't not make any sense, woman, and you know it.' He lowered his voice. 'Captain's fault, anyhow—'

'No it ain't, Sergeant, and that kinda muttering's damn unfair and could end up spitting poison right back in
your eye. This deal was cooked up by Whiskeyjack and Dujek. You feel like cursing someone, try them.'

'Curse Whiskeyjack and Onearm? Not a chance.'

'Then stop your grumbling.'

'Addressing your superior in that tone earns you the role of duffer today, Corporal. Maybe tomorrow, too, if I feel like it.'

'Gods,' she muttered, 'I do hate short men with big moustaches.'

'Gettin' all personal, are ya? Fine, y'can scrub the pots and plates tonight, too. And I got a real complicated meal in mind. Hare stuffed with figs—'

Picker sat up, eyes wide. 'You're not gonna make us eat Spindle's hairshirt? With figs?'

'Hare, you idiot! The four-legged things, live in holes, saw a brace of 'em in the foodpack. With figs, I said. Boiled. And ruberry sauce, with freshwater oysters—'

Picker sat back with a groan. 'I'll take the hairshirt, thanks.'

The journey had been gruelling, with few and all too brief rest-stops. Nor were the Black Moranth much in the way of company. Virtually silent, aloof and grim – Picker had yet to see one of the warriors shed his or her armour. They wore it like a chitinous second skin. Their commander, Twist, and his quorl were all that remained of the flight that had transported them to the foot of the Barghast Range. Captain Paran was saddled with the task of communicating with the Black Moranth commander – and Oponn's luck to him, too.

The quorls had taken them high, flying through the night, and the air had been frigid. Picker ached in every muscle. Eyes closed once more, she sat listening to the other Bridgeburners preparing the gear and food supplies for the journey to come. At her side, Antsy muttered under his breath a seemingly endless list of complaints.

Heavy boots approached, unfortunately coming to a halt directly in front of her, blocking out the morning sun. After a moment, Picker pried open one eye.

Captain Paran's attention, however, was on Antsy. 'Sergeant.'

Antsy's muttering ceased abruptly. 'Sir?'

'It appears that Quick Ben's been delayed. He will have to catch up with us, and your squad will provide his escort. The rest of us, with Trotts, will move out. Detoran's separated out the gear you'll need.'

'As you say, sir. We'll wait for the snake, then – how long should we give him afore we chase after you?'

'Spindle assures me the delay will be a short one. Expect Quick Ben some time today.'

'And if he don't show?'

'He'll show.'

'But if he don't?'

With a growl, Paran marched off.

Antsy swung a baffled expression on Picker. 'What if Quick Ben don't show?'

'You idiot, Antsy.'

'It's a legit question, dammit! What got him all huffy about it?'

'You got a brain in there somewhere, Sergeant, why not use it? If the mage don't show up, something's gone seriously wrong, and if that happens we're better off hightailing it – anywhere, so long as it's away. From
Antsy's red face paled. 'Why won't he make it? What's gone wrong? Picker—'

'Ain't nothing's gone wrong, Antsy! Hood's breath! Quick Ben will get here today – as sure as that sun just rose and is even now baking your brain! Look at your new squad members, Sergeant – Mallet, there, and Hedge – you're embarrassing the rest of us!'

Antsy snarled and clambered to his feet. 'What're you toads staring at? Get to work! You, Mallet, give Detoran a hand – I want those hearth-stones level! If the pot tips because they weren't, you'll be sorry and I ain't exaggerating neither. And you, Hedge, go find Spindle—'

The sapper pointed up the hill. 'He's right there, Sergeant. Checking out that upside-down tree.'

Hands on hips, Antsy pivoted, then slowly nodded. 'And it's no wonder. What kinda trees grow upside-down, anyway? A smart man can't help but be curious.'

'If you're so curious,' Picker muttered, 'why not go and look for yourself ?'

'Nah, what's the point? Go collect Spindle, then, Hedge. Double-time.'

'Double-time up a hill? Beru fend, Antsy, it's not like we're going anywhere!'

'You heard me, soldier.'

Scowling, the sapper began jogging up the slope. After a few strides, he slowed to a stagger. Picker grinned.

'Now where's Blend?' Antsy demanded.

'Right here beside you, sir.'

'Hood's breath! Stop doing that! Where you been skulking, anyway?'

'Nowhere,' she replied.

'Liar,' Picker said. 'Caught you sliding up outa the corner of my eye, Blend. You're mortal, after all.'

She shrugged. 'Heard an interesting conversation between Paran and Trotts. Turns out that Barghast bastard once had some kind of high rank in his own tribe. Something about all those tattoos. Anyway, turns out we're here to find the biggest local tribe – the White Faces – with the aim of enlisting their help. An alliance against the Pannion Domin.'

Picker snorted. 'Flown then dropped off at the foot of the Barghast Range, what else did you think we were up to?'

'Only there's a problem,' she continued laconically, examining her nails. 'Trotts will get us face to face without all of us getting skewered, but he might end up fighting a challenge or two. Personal combat. If he wins, we all live. If he gets himself killed ...'

Antsy's mouth hung open, his moustache twitching as if independently alive.

Picker groaned.

The sergeant spun. 'Corporal – find Trotts! Sit 'im down with that fancy whetstone of yours and get 'im to sharpen his weapons real good—'

'Oh, really, Antsy!'

'We gotta do something!'

'About what?' a new voice asked.
Antsy whirled again. ‘Spindle, thank the Queen! Trotts is going to get us all killed!’

The mage shrugged beneath his hairshirt. ‘That explains all those agitated spirits in this hill, then. They can smell him, I guess—’

‘Smell? Agitated? Hood's bones, we're all done for!’

Standing with the rest of the Bridgeburners, Paran's eyes narrowed on the squad at the foot of the barrow. ‘What's got Antsy all lit up?’ he wondered aloud.

Trotts bared his teeth. ‘Blend was here,’ he rumbled. ‘Heard everything.’

‘Oh, that's terrific news – why didn't you say anything?’

The Barghast shrugged his broad shoulders, was silent.

Grimacing, the captain strode over to the Black Moranth commander.

‘Is that quorl of yours rested enough, Twist? I want you high over us. I want to know when we've been spotted—’

The chitinous black helm swung to face him. ‘They are already aware, noble-born.’

‘Captain will do, Twist. I don't need reminding of my precious blood. Aware, are they? How, and just as important, how do you know they know?’

‘We stand on their land, Captain. The soul beneath us is the blood of their ancestors. Blood whispers. The Moranth hear.’

‘Surprised you can hear anything inside that helm of yours,’ Paran muttered, tired and irritated. ‘Never mind. I want you over us anyway.’

The commander slowly nodded.

The captain turned and surveyed his company. Veteran soldiers – virtually every one of them. Silent, frighteningly professional. He wondered what it would be like to see out through the eyes of any one of them, through the layers of the soul's exhaustion that Paran had barely begun to find within himself. Soldiers now and soldiers to the end of their days – none would dare leave to find peace. Solicitude and calm would unlock that safe prison of cold control – the only thing keeping them sane.

Whiskeyjack had said to Paran that, once this war was done, the Bridgeburners would be retired. Forcibly if necessary.

Armies possessed traditions, and these had less to do with discipline than with the fraught truths of the human spirit. Rituals at the beginning, shared among each and every recruit. And rituals at the end, a formal closure that was recognition – recognition in every way imaginable. They were necessary. Their gift was a kind of sanity, a means of coping. A soldier cannot be sent away without guidance, cannot be abandoned and left lost in something unrecognizable and indifferent to their lives. Remembrance and honouring the ineffable. Yet, when it's done, what is the once-soldier? What does he or she become? An entire future spent walking backward, eyes on the past – its horrors, its losses, its grief, its sheer heart-bursting living? The ritual is a turning round, a facing forward, a gentle and respectful hand like a guide on the shoulder.

Sorrow was a steady, faint susurration within Paran, a tide that neither ebbed nor flowed, yet threatened to drown him none the less.

And when the White Faces find us . . . each and every man and woman here could end up with slit throats, and Queen help me, I begin to wonder if it would be a mercy. Queen help me . . .

A swift flutter of wings and the quorl was airborne, the Black Moranth commander perched on the moulded saddle.
Paran watched them rise for a moment longer, his stomach churning, then turned to his company. ‘On your feet, Bridgeburners. Time to march.’

The dark, close air was filled with sickly mist. Quick Ben felt himself moving through it, his will struggling like a swimmer against a savage current. After a few more moments he withdrew his questing, slipped sideways into yet another warren.

It fared little better. Some kind of infection had seeped in from the physical world beyond, was corrupting every sorcerous path he attempted. Fighting nausea, he pushed himself forward.

This has the stench of the Crippled God ... yet the enemy whose lands we approach is the Pannion Seer. Granted, an obvious means of self-defence, sufficient to explain the coincidence. Then again, since when do I believe in coincidences? No, this comingling of scents hinted at a deeper truth. That bastard ascendant may well be chained, his body broken, but I can feel his hand – even here – twitching at invisible threads.

The faintest of smiles touched the wizard’s lips. A worthy challenge.

He shifted warrens once again, and found himself on the trail of ... something. A presence was ahead, leaving a cooled, strangely lifeless wake. Well, perhaps no surprise – I’m striding the edge of Hood’s own realm now, after all. None the less ... Unease pattered within him like sleet. He pushed his nervousness down. Hood’s warren was resisting the poison better than many others Quick Ben had attempted.

The ground beneath him was clay, damp and clammy, the cold reaching through the wizard’s moccasins. Faint, colourless light bled down from a formless sky that seemed no higher than a ceiling. The haze filling the air felt oily, thick enough on either side to make the path seem like a tunnel.

Quick Ben’s steps slowed. The clay ground was no longer smooth. Deep incisions crossed it, glyphs in columns and panels. Primitive writing, the wizard suspected, yet... He crouched and reached down. ‘Freshly cut ... or timeless.’ At a faint tingle from the contact he withdrew his hand. ‘Wards, maybe. Bindings.’

Stepping carefully to avoid the glyphs, Quick Ben padded forward.

He skirted a broad sinkhole filled with painted pebbles – offerings to Hood from some holy temple, no doubt – benedictions and prayers in a thousand languages from countless supplicants. And there they lie. Unnoticed, ignored or forgotten. Even clerks die, Hood – why not put them to good use cleaning all this up? Of all our traits to survive the passage of death, surely obsessiveness must be counted high among them.

The incisions grew thicker, more crowded, forcing the wizard to slow his pace yet further. It was becoming difficult to find a clear space on the clay for his feet. Binding sorceries – the whispered skeins of power made manifest, here on the floor of Hood’s realm.

A dozen paces ahead was a small, bedraggled object, surrounded in glyphs. Quick Ben’s frown deepened as he edged closer. Like the makings of fire . . . sticks and twisted grasses on a round, pale hearthstone.

Then he saw it tremble.

Ah, these binding spells belong to you, little one. Your soul, trapped. As I once did to that mage, Hairlock, someone’s done to you. Curious indeed. He moved as close as he could, then slowly crouched.

‘You’re looking a little worse for wear, friend,’ the wizard said.

The minuscule acorn head swivelled slightly, then flinched back. ‘Mortal!’ the creature hissed in the language of the Barghast. ‘The clans must be told! I can go no further – look, the wards pursued, the wards closed the web – I am trapped!’

‘So I see. You were of the White Faces, shaman?’

‘And so I remain!’
'Yet you escaped your barrow – you eluded the binding spells of your kin, for a while at least, in any case. Do you truly believe they will welcome your return, Old One?'

'I was dragged from my barrow, fool! You are journeying to the clans – I see the truth of that in your eyes. I shall tell you my tale, mortal, and so they know the truth of all that you tell them, I shall give you my true name —'

'A bold offer, Old One. What's to prevent me from twisting you to my will?'

The creature twitched, a snarl in its tone as it replied, 'You could be no worse than my last masters. I am Talamandas, born of the First Hearth in the Knotted Clan. The first child birthed on this land – do you know the significance of that, mortal?'

'I am afraid not, Talamandas.'

'My previous masters – those damned necromancers – had worked through, mortal, were mere moments from discovering my true name – worked through, I tell you, with brutal claws indifferent to pain. With my name they would have learned secrets that even my own people have long forgotten. Do you know the significance of the trees on our barrows? No, you do not. Indeed they hold the soul, keep it from wandering, but why?

'We came to this land from the seas, plying the vast waters in dugouts – the world was young, then, our blood thick with the secret truths of our past. Look upon the faces of the Barghast, mortal – no, look upon a Barghast skull stripped of skin and muscle ...'

'I've seen ... Barghast skulls,' Quick Ben said slowly.

'Ahh, and have you seen their like ... animate?'

The wizard scowled. 'No, but something similar, squatter – the features slightly more pronounced—'

'Slightly, aye, slightly. Squatter? No surprise, we never went hungry, for the sea provided. Yet more, Tartheno Toblakai were among us ...'

'You were T'lan Imass! Hood's breath! Then ... you and your kin must have defied the Ritual—'

'Defied? No. We simply failed to arrive in time – our pursuit of the Jaghut had forced us to venture onto the seas, to dwell among iceflows and on treeless islands. And in our isolation from kin, among the elder peoples – the Tartheno – we changed ... when our distant kin did not. Mortal, wherever land proved generous enough to grant us a birth, we buried our dugouts – for ever. From this was born the custom of the trees on our barrows – though none among my kind remembers. It has been so long ...'

'Tell me your tale, Talamandas. But first, answer me this. What would you do ... if I freed you of these bindings?'

'You cannot.'

'Not an answer.'

'Very well, though it be pointless. I would seek to set free the First Families – aye, we are spirits, and now worshipped by the living clans. But the ancient bindings have kept us as children in so many ways. Well meant, yet a curse none the less. We must be freed. To grow into true power—'

'To ascend into true gods,' Quick Ben whispered, his eyes wide as he stared down at the ragged figure of grasses and twigs.

'The Barghast refuse to change, the living think now as the living always did. Generation after generation. Our kind are dying out, mortal. We rot from within. For the ancestors are prevented from giving true guidance, prevented from maturing into their power – our power. To answer your question, mortal, I would save the living Barghast, if I could.'
’Tell me, Talamandas,’ Quick Ben asked with veiled eyes, ‘is survival a right, or a privilege?’

’The latter, mortal. The latter. And it must be earned. I wish for the chance. For all my people, I wish for the chance.’

The wizard slowly nodded. ’A worthy wish, Old One.’ He held out his hand, palm up, stared down at it. ’There’s salt in this clay, is there not? I smell it. Clay is usually airless, lifeless. Defiant of the tireless servants of the soil. But the salt, well...’ A writhing clump took shape on Quick Ben’s palm. ’Sometimes,’ he went on, ’the simplest of creatures can defeat the mightiest sorceries, in the simplest way imaginable.’ The worms – red like blood, thin, long and ridged with leg-like cilia along their lengths – twisted and heaved, fell in clumps to the glyph-strewn ground. ’These are native to a distant continent. They feed on salt, or so it seems – the mines on the dry sea beds of Setta are thick with these things, especially in the dry season. They can turn the hardest pan of clay into sand. To put it another way, they bring air to the airless.’ He dropped the clump onto the ground, watched as the worms spread out, began burrowing. ’And they breed faster than maggots. Ah, see those glyphs – there, on the edges? Their binding’s crumbling – can you feel the loosening?’

’Mortal, who are you?’

’In the eyes of the gods, Talamandas? Just a lowly salt-worm. I’ll hear your tale now, Old One...’
CHAPTER NINE

On the subcontinent of Stratem, beyond Korelri's south range, can be found a vast peninsula where even the
gods do not tread. Reaching to each coast, encompassing an area of thousands of square leagues, stretches a
vast plaza. Aye, dear readers, there is no other word for it. Fashion this in your mind: near-seamless flagstones,
unmarred by age and of grey, almost black, stone. Rippled lines of dark dust, minuscule dunes heaped by the
moaning winds, these are all that break the breathless monotony. Who laid such stones?

Should we give credence to Gothos's hoary tome, his glorious 'Folly'? Should we attach a dread name to the
makers of this plaza? If we must, then that name is K'Chain Che'Malle. Who, then, were the K'Chain
Che'Malle? An Elder Race, or so Gothos tells. Extinct even before the rise of the Jaghut, the T'lan Imass, the
Forkrul Assail.

Truth? Ah, if so, then these stones were laid down half a million – perhaps more – years ago. In the opinion
of this chronicler, what utter nonsense.

My Endless Travels
Esslee Monot (the Dubious)

'How do you measure a life, Toc the Younger? Please, darling, I would hear your thoughts. Deeds are the
crudest measure of all, wouldn't you say?'

He cast her a glower as they walked. 'You suggesting that good intentions are enough, Lady?'

Envy shrugged. 'Can no value be found in good intentions?'

'What, precisely, are you trying to justify? And to me, or yourself?'

She glared, then quickened her pace. 'You're no fun at all,' she sniffed as she pulled ahead, 'and
presumptuous as well. I'm going to talk with Tool – his moods don't swing!'

No, they just hang there, twisting in the wind.

Not entirely true, he realized after a moment. The T'lan Imass had showed the fullest measure of his
emotions a week past. With his sister's departure. None of us are immune to tortured hearts, I guess. He rested
a hand on Baaljagg's shoulder, squinted towards the distant ridgeline to the northeast, and the washed-out
mountains beyond.

The ridge marked the borders of the Pannion Domin. There was a city at the foot of those mountains, or so
the Lady had assured him. Bastion. An ominous name. And strangers aren't welcome . . . So why in Hood's
name are we heading there?

Onearm's Host had effectively declared war on the theocratic empire. Tool's knowledge of the details had
Toc wondering, but not doubting. Every description of the Pannion Domin simply added fuel to the likelihood
of Dujek taking ... umbrage. The old High Fist despised tyranny. Which is ironic, since the Emperor was a
tyrant . . . I think. Then again, maybe not. Despotic, sure, and mono-maniacal, even slightly insane ... He
scowled, glanced back to the three Seguleh trailing him. Glittering eyes within hard masks. Toc resumed his
study of the ridge ahead, shivering.

Something's awry, somewhere. Maybe right here. Since her return from Callows, with Mok in tow and his
mask sporting a crimson, thickly planted kiss – Hood's breath, does the man even know? If I was Senu or
Thurule, would I dare tell him? Since her return, yes, there's been a change. A skittery look in her eyes – just
the occasional flash, but I'm not mistaken. The stakes have been raised, and I'm in a game I don't even know. I
don't know the players ranged against me, either.
He blinked suddenly, finding Lady Envy walking alongside him once again. 'Tool say the wrong thing?' he asked.

Her nose wrinkled in distaste. 'Haven't you ever wondered what the undead think about, Toc the Younger?'

'No. That is, I don't ever recall musing on the subject, Lady.'

'They had gods, once, you know.'

He shot her a glance. 'Oh?'

'Well. Spirits, then. Earth and rock and tree and beast and sun and stars and antler and bone and blood—'

'Yes, yes, Lady, I grasp the theme.'

'Your interruptions are most rude, young man – are you typical of your generation? If so, then the world is indeed on a downward spiral into the Abyss. Spirits, I was saying. All extinct now. All nothing more than dust. The Imass have outlasted their own deities. Difficult to imagine, but they are godless in every sense, Toc the Younger. Faith ... now ashes. Answer me this, my dear, do you envisage your afterlife?'

He grunted. 'Hood's gate? In truth, I avoid thinking about it, Lady. What's the point? We die and our soul passes through. I suppose it's up to Hood or one of his minions to decide what to do with it, if anything.'

Her eyes flashed. 'If anything. Yes.'

A chill prickled Toc's skin.

'What would you do,' Lady Envy asked, 'with the knowledge that Hood does nothing with your soul? That it's left to wander, eternally lost, purposeless? That it exists without hope, without dreams?'

'Do you speak the truth, Lady? Is this knowledge you possess? Or are you simply baiting me?'

'I am baiting you, of course, my young love. How would I know anything of Hood's hoary realm? Then again, think of the physical manifestations of that warren – the cemeteries in your cities, the forlorn and forgotten barrows – not places conducive to festive occasions, yes? Think of all of Hood's host of holidays and celebrations. Swarming flies, blood-covered acolytes, cackling crows and faces stained with the ash from cremations – I don't know about you, but I don't see much fun going on, do you?'

'Can't we be having some other kind of conversation, Lady Envy? This one's hardly cheering me up.'

'I was simply musing on the T'lan Imass.'

You were? Oh . . . right. He sighed. 'They war with the Jaghut, Lady. That is their purpose, and it certainly seems sufficient to sustain them. I'd imagine they've little need for spirits or gods or faith, even. They exist to wage their war, and so long as a single Jaghut's still breathing on this world...'

'And are any? Still breathing, that is?'

'How should I know? Ask Tool.'

'I did.'

'And?'

'And ... he doesn't know.'

Toc stumbled a step, slowed, staring at her, then at the T'lan Imass striding ahead. 'He doesn't know?'

'Indeed, Toc the Younger. Now, what do you make of that?'

He could manage no reply.
'What if the war's ended? What next, for the T'lan Imass?'

He considered, then slowly said, 'A second Ritual of Gathering?'

'Mhmm...'

'An end? An end to the T'lan Imass? Hood's breath!'

'And not a single spirit waiting to embrace all those weary, so very weary souls ...'

An end, an end. Gods, she might be right. He stared at Tool's fur-clad back, and was almost overcome with a sense of loss. Vast, ineffable loss. 'You might be wrong, Lady.'

'I might,' she agreed affably. 'Do you hope that I am, Toc the Younger?'

He nodded.

'Why?' she asked.

Why? Unhuman creatures sworn to genocide. Brutal, deadly, implacable. Relentless beyond all reason. Toc nodded towards the T'lan Imass ahead of them. 'Because he's my friend, Lady Envy.'

They had not been speaking in low tones. At Toc's words, Tool's head turned, the shelf of the brow hiding the pits of eyes that seemed to fix on the Malazan for a moment. Then the head swung forward once more.

'The summoner of the Gathering,' Lady Envy slowly spoke, 'is among your Malazan punitive army, Toc the Younger. We shall converge within the Pannion Domin. Us, them, and the surviving clans of the T'lan Imass. There will be, without doubt, battles aplenty. The crushing of an empire is never easy. I should know, having crushed a few in my time.'

He stared at her, said nothing.

She smiled. 'Alas, they will approach from the north, whilst we approach from the south. Our journey ahead will be fraught indeed.'

'I admit I have been wondering,' Toc said. 'How, precisely, will we manage to cross a hostile, fanatic territory?'

'Simple, love, we shall carve our way through.'

_Gods, if I stay with these people, I am a dead man._

Lady Envy was still smiling, her eyes on Tool. 'Like a white-hot knife through ice, we thrust to the heart ... of a frozen, timeless soul.' Her voice rising slightly, she added, 'Or so we suspect, do we not, Onos Toolan?'

The T'lan Imass stopped.

Baaljagg pulled away from beneath Toc's hand, padded forward. The dog Garath followed.

The Malazan spun upon hearing three sets of swords slide from scabbards.

'Oh,' Lady Envy said. 'Something's coming.'

Toc unslung his bow and planted its butt to string it as he scanned the horizon ahead. 'I don't see anything ... but I'll take everyone's word for it.'

Moments later a K'Chain Che'Malle crested the ridge-line a hundred paces ahead, huge, slung forward and seeming to flow over the ground on two legs. Blades flashed at the ends of its arms.

Ay and dog flinched back.

Toc's recollection of such a creature – fraught with the pained memories of Trake's death – returned to him
with a jolt that shortened his breath.

'K'ell Hunter,' Tool said. 'Lifeless.' He had not yet reached for his stone sword. The T'lan Imass pivoted, faced the three Seguleh. A frozen moment stretched between them, then Tool nodded.

Senu on Mok's right, Thurule on his left and both brothers a step ahead of the Third, the Seguleh padded forward to meet the K'Chain Che'Malle.

'A gamble,' Lady Envy murmured.

'The time has come,' Tool said, 'to gauge their worth, Lady. Here, at the border to the Domin. We must know our ... knife's efficacy.'

Toc nocked an arrow. 'Something tells me I might as well throw twigs at it,' he muttered, recalling Trake's death.

'Wrong,' Tool said, 'yet there is no need to test the stone's power of your arrows.'

'Power, huh? Fine, but that's not the problem. I've only got one eye, Tool. I can't judge distances worth a damn. And that thing's fast.'

'Leave this one to the Seguleh,' the T'lan Imass said.

'As you say,' Toc replied, shrugging. His heart did not slow its hammering.

The K'Chain Che'Malle was blurred lightning as it plunged among the three brothers. The Seguleh were faster. Senu and Thurule had already moved past the creature, throwing savage, unerring blows behind them without turning, sliding effortlessly like snakes to avoid the hunter's whipping tail.

Mok, standing directly in front of the creature, had not backed up a step.

The beast's huge arms flew past to either side of the Third — both severed at the shoulder joint by the flanking brothers in their single pass. Mok's swords darted upward, stabbed, cut, twisted, hooked then withdrew with the hunter's massive head balanced on the tips for the briefest of moments before the Third flung its blade-bending weight aside and leapt to the right, barely avoiding the decapitated body's forward pitch.

The K'Chain Che'Malle thundered as it struck the ground, legs kicking and tail thrashing. Then its movements ceased.

'Well,' Toc said after he'd regained his breath, 'that wasn't so hard. Those beasts look tougher than they are, obviously. Good thing, too. We'll just stroll into the Domin, now, right? Gawking at Bastion's wonder, then beyond—'

'You're babbling,' Lady Envy said. 'Very unattractive, Toc the Younger. Please stop, now.'

Mouth clamped shut, Toc managed a nod.

'Now, let us go and examine the K'Chain Che'Malle. I, for one, am curious.'

He watched her walk ahead, then followed at a stumble. As he passed Tool, he offered the T'lan Imass a sickly grin. 'I think you can relax, now, right?'

The deathless face turned to him. 'The Third's dismantling, Toc the Younger ...'

'Yes?'

'I could not have done that. I have never seen such ... skill.'

Toc paused, his eye narrowing. 'Tool, that was glorified dissection — are you not his match in speed?'

'Perhaps.'
'And could he have done that without his brothers slicing those arms off? What if the beast had attacked with its feet instead of its jaws? Tool, that K'Chain Che'Malle was trying for all three of them at once. Stupid. Arrogant.'

The T'lan Imass cocked his head. 'Arrogance. A vice of being undead, Toc the Younger.'

The Malazan's grin broadened. 'And yours has just been shaken, Tool?'

'An unfamiliar sensation.'

Toc shrugged, about to turn and rejoin Lady Envy.

The stone sword was in Tool's hands. 'I must challenge him.'

Grin falling away, Toc stepped closer. 'Hold on, friend – you don't—'

'I must challenge him. Now.'

'Why?'

'The First Sword of the T'lan Imass must be without equal, Aral Fayle.'

'Gods, not you too!'

The T'lan Imass set off towards the Seguleh.

'Wait! Tool—'

The First Sword glanced back. 'You share my shaken faith, mortal, despite your earlier words.'

'Damn it, Tool, now's not the time for this! Think! We need all of you – each in one piece. Intact—'

'Enough words, Aral Fayle.'

The brothers stood around the fallen K'Chain Che'Malle. Lady Envy had joined them and was now crouched, examining the creature's corpse.

Filled with dread, Toc matched Tool's steady, determined pace as they approached.

Senu was the first of the Seguleh to notice them. He slowly sheathed his swords, stepped back. A moment later Thurule did the same. Mok slowly faced the T'lan Imass.

'By the Abyss!' Lady Envy snapped, straightening, her expression darkening. 'Not now.' She waved a hand.

Mok collapsed.

Tool staggered to a halt. 'Awaken him, Lady,' he rasped.

'I shall not. Senu, you and Thurule, rig up a travois for your sleeping brother. You two can pull it.'

'Lady—'

'I'm not talking to you, T'lan Imass.' And to reinforce her announcement, she crossed her arms and turned her back on Tool.

After a long moment in which neither moved, the First Sword finally sheathed his blade. 'He cannot remain asleep for ever, Lady Envy,' he said. 'You do naught but prolong the inevitable.'

She made no reply.

Toc drew a deep breath. 'What a lovely woman,' he softly sighed.

She heard, and turned with a heart-stopping smile. 'Why, thank you!'
'That's not—' He stopped.

Her brow knitted. 'Excuse me?'

'Nothing.' Gods, nothing!

Fashioned of straps, leather webbing and two spear-shafts that Lady Envy conjured from somewhere, the travois carrying the Third was pulled by Senu and Thurule from rigged shoulder slings. The two brothers were clearly agitated by the turn of events but, as was evident to Toc – and doubtless the T’lan Imass too – there would be no challenging the Lady’s will.

They ascended the ridge as the afternoon waned. Rain clouds approached from the north, obscuring the mountains beyond. The air grew cooler.

The border itself was marked by a series of cairns lining the ridge. Long-abandoned enclosures were visible here and there, the low unmortared stone walls hinting of more affluent times in the past. Flagstone byways crisscrossed the land ahead, overgrown with grasses. The hills gave way to a broad, shallow valley, treed at its base where a stream twisted its way northward. Three squat farmhouses were visible on the valley floor, and a cluster of structures positioned at the stream marked a hamlet at what had to be a ford. No livestock was in sight, nor were the chimneys streaming smoke, lending an eerie quality to the pastoral scene.

None the less, the transition from barren plain to green pastures and signs of human activity was something of a shock to Toc the Younger. He realized, with a dull and faint surge of unease, that he’d grown used to the solitude of the plain the Elin called Lamatath. Absence of people – those outside the group ... strangers – had diminished what he now understood to be a constant tension in his life. Perhaps in all our lives. Unfamiliar faces, gauging regard, every sense heightened in an effort to read the unknown. The natural efforts of society. Do we all possess a wish to remain unseen, un-noticed? Is the witnessing of our actions by others our greatest restraint?

'You are looking thoughtful, darling,' Lady Envy murmured at his side.

He shrugged. 'We're not ... unobtrusive, are we? This group of ours. Masked warriors and giant wolf and dog – and a T'lan Imass—'

Tool stopped and faced them. 'I shall make myself unseen, now.'

'When you fall to dust the way you do,' Toc asked, 'are you entering your Tellann warren?'

'No. I simply return to what I was meant to be, had not the Ritual taken place. It would be unwise to employ Tellann within this Domin, Toc the Younger. I shall, however, remain close, and vigilant.'

Toc grunted. 'I was used to having you around. In the flesh, I mean.' He scowled. 'As it were.'

The T'lan Imass shrugged, then vanished in a sluice of dust.

'Other solutions present themselves,' Lady Envy said, 'with respect to our canine companions. Observe.' She walked towards Baaljagg. 'You, pup, are far too ... alarming in appearance ... in your present form. Shall we make you smaller?'

The ay had not moved, and watched as she reached out a slim hand and rested a finger on its brow.

Between blinks, Baaljagg shifted from tall and gaunt to a size to match the dog, Garath. Smiling, Lady Envy glanced southward. 'Those yellow wolves are still following, so very curious, but it seems unlikely they will approach now that we are among humans. Alas, reducing the Seguleh to the size of children would achieve little in the way of anonymity, wouldn't you concur, Toc the Younger?'

The Malazan conjured in his mind an image of two masked, death-dealing 'children', and a moment later his imagination was in full retreat. 'Uh,' he managed, 'No. I mean, yes. Yes, I concur.'
‘The hamlet yonder,’ she continued, ‘will prove a modest test as to how the locals react to the Seguleh. If further illusory adjustments to our party prove necessary, we can address them later. Have I covered all considerations, my dear?’

‘Yes,’ he reluctantly grumbled, ‘I suppose.’

‘The hamlet might have an inn of some sort.’

‘I wouldn’t count on it, Lady. These trader tracks haven’t seen use in years.’

‘How uncivilized! Shall we make our way down there in any case?’

The first drops of rain were spattering the stony trail when they reached the first of the hamlet’s half-dozen squalid and ramshackle buildings. It had once been a travellers’ inn, complete with stables and a low-walled compound for merchant carts, but was now unoccupied and partially dismantled, the wood and dressed stone of the kitchen wall scavenged, leaving the interior exposed to the elements. High grasses and herbs rose amidst the brick ovens.

Three small buildings lay just beyond the abandoned inn. Smithy and tack stall, and a tithe-collector’s office and residence. All lifeless. The only structure showing evidence of upkeep was on the other side of the shallow ford. High-walled – the stones revealing disparate provenance – and gated with wooden doors beneath an arch, all that was visible of the structure within was a pyramidal peak scaled in polished copper.

‘I’d guess that to be a temple,’ Toc muttered, standing in the centre of the hamlet’s lone street, his eye narrowed on the building on the other side of the stream.

‘Indeed,’ Lady Envy replied. ‘And those within are aware of us.’

He shot her a glance. ‘How aware?’

She shrugged. ‘We are strangers from Lamath – a priest within has the power to quest, but he’s easily led. You forget—’ She smiled. ‘I have had generations in which to perfect my innocuous persona.’

_Innocuous? Hood’s breath, woman, have you got that wrong!_

‘I already have the priest in hand, my dear, all unsuspecting, of course. Indeed, I believe if we ask they will grant us accommodation. Follow me.’

He stumbled after her. ‘Accommodation? Have you lost your mind, Lady?’

‘Hush, young man. I am feeling amicable at the moment – you wouldn’t want to see me cross, would you?’

‘No. Absolutely not. Still, Lady Envy, this is a risk we—’

’Nonsense! You must learn to have faith in me, Toc the Younger.’ She reached out, curled an arm about his lower back and pulled him close. ‘Walk with me, dearest. There, isn’t this nice? The brushing contact of our hips, the sudden familiarity that sends the heart racing. The dampness of the rain, matching—’

‘Yes, yes, Lady! Please, no more details, else my walking prove most awkward.’

She laughed. ‘I believe I have finally succeeded in charming you, my love. And now I wonder, upon what path shall I lead you? So many choices! How exciting. Tell me, do you think me cruel, Toc the Younger?’

He kept his gaze on the temple.

They stepped into the cool water of the stream, the flow swirling around their ankles but no higher.

‘Yes,’ he replied at length.

‘I can be. In fact, I usually am. I suspected you always knew. I sympathize with your desire to resist, you
'I don't know. Well, here we are. Do we knock?'

Lady Envy sighed. 'I hear the patter of feet.'

The door on their left creaked open, revealing a naked, emaciated man of indeterminate age, pale-skinned, head and eyebrows shaved, his watery grey eyes fixed on Lady Envy.

'Welcome, mistress,' the man said. 'Please, enter. The Pannion Domin extends its hospitality' – his eyes flicked past her to take in the wolf and dog, then the Seguleh – 'to you and your companions.' He stepped back.

With an unreadable glance at Toc, Lady Envy followed the priest.

The compound's hot, moist air was rife with the stench of decay, and as soon as the Malazan strode from the shadow of the gate, he saw the source of the smell. A score of bodies lined the inside walls, large iron hooks jutting from beneath their breast bones, feet dangling an arm's length above the ground. The stone at their backs was stained yellow and deep red. Eyeless heads hung downward, strands of hair dripping with rainwater.

The priest, seeing where the attention of his guests had focused, surveyed the corpses with a faint smile. 'The villagers have been delivered. Once the labours of building this temple were completed, they were given their reward. They remain before us as reminders of our Lord's mercy.'

'A rather peculiar version of mercy,' Toc muttered, struggling against a wave of nausea.

'One you will come to understand in time, sir,' the priest replied. 'Please. A meal is being prepared. Seerdomin Kahlt – the master of this temple – awaits you within the guest hall.'

'How kind,' Lady Envy said. 'An extraordinary construction, this temple of yours.'

Pulling his gaze from the murdered villagers, Toc studied the edifice rearing before them. The pyramidal shape continued down to ground level, the copper sheathing broken only by a dozen randomly placed skylights, each paneed with slabs of thin rose quartzite. A narrow but high portal marked the entrance, framed by four massive cut-stones – a broad threshold underfoot, two tapering, flanking menhirs, and a single lintel stone overhead. The corridor beyond was three strides in length, revealing the breadth of the pyramid's foundations.

The air within, as they emerged into a wide and shallow chamber, proved hotter than in the compound, the light tinted pink and fractiously cast by the windows. A low table awaited them, crowded with footstuffs and lined by pillows on which to recline. Standing before another triangular doorway – this one directly opposite the entrance – stood a huge figure in arcane, black-wrought armour. A double-bladed, long-handled axe leaned on the door's frame to his left. The warrior was bare-headed, his pate shaved, and his angular beardless face revealed old scars along his jawline and down the length of his nose.

'Hood's breath, I recognize those scars – a cheek-guarded, bridged helm makes those marks . . . when someone swings a mace flush against it, that is.

Frowning, Lady Envy hesitated, then turned to the priest. 'I believe you said the High Priest awaits us?'

The gaunt man smiled. 'And he does, mistress.' He bowed towards the warrior. 'This is Seerdomin Kahlt, the master of this temple. Seerdomin are the Gifted among the Pannion Seer's children. Warriors without parallel, yet learned as well. Now, to complete the introductions, will you grant me the honour of your names?'

'I am Lady Islah'Dracon,' Lady Envy said, eyes now on the Seerdomin. 'My companion is named Toc the Younger; my bodyguards Senu, Thurule, and the one presently sleeping is Mok. Do you wish the names of my pets as well?'

You just gave them, didn't you?

The priest shook his head. 'That will not be necessary. No respect is accorded mindless animals within the Domin. Provided you have them within control, they will, for the sake of hospitality, be tolerated. Thank you
for the introductions, Lady. I shall now take my leave.' With another bow, he turned and hobbled towards a small side door.

Seerdomin Kahlt took a step forward, armour clanking. ‘Seat yourselves,’ he said, his voice soft and calm. ‘It is not often that we are privileged with guests.’

Lady Envy raised an eyebrow. ‘Not often?’

Kahlt smiled. ‘Well, you are the first, in fact. The Pannion Domin is an insular land. Few visit, and rarely more than once. There are some, of course, who receive the wisdom and so take the faith, and these are welcomed as brothers and sisters. Great are the rewards when the faith is embraced.’ His eyes glittered. ‘It is my fervent hope that such gifting will come to you.’

Toc and Lady Envy settled onto the cushions. Baaljagg and Garath remained with the Seguleh, who stood just within the entrance.

Seerdomin Kahlt sat down opposite his guests. ‘One of your servants is ill?’ he asked. ‘Shall I send for a healer, Lady?’

‘Not necessary. Mok will recover in time. I am curious, Seerdomin. Why build a temple in such a paltry settlement? Particularly if you then execute all the inhabitants?’

‘The inhabitants were rewarded, not executed,’ Kahlt said, face darkening. ‘We only execute criminals.’

‘And the victims were satisfied with the distinction?’

‘Perhaps you might enquire that of them yourselves, before too long, Lady.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘To answer your question. This temple is one of seventy such recent constructions, each commanding a traditional border crossing to and from the Domin. The Pannion Seer’s borders are ones of spirit as well as geography. It falls to his most faithful to accept the responsibility of regulation and protection.’

‘We are your guests, then, so that you may gauge our measure and judge us worthy of entering your empire, or unworthy.’

Kahlt shrugged, reaching for a wedge of some local fruit Toc did not recognize. ‘Please, refresh yourselves. The wine is from Gredfallan, most agreeable. The slices of flesh are bhederin—’

Lady Envy leaned forward and daintily picked up a slice, which she then tossed towards the chamber’s entrance. Garath stepped forward, sniffed the meat, then ate it. She smiled at the high priest. ‘Thank you, we will.’

‘Among our people,’ Kahlt rasped, his hands twitching, ‘what you have just done is a grave insult.’

‘Among mine it’s a matter of pragmatism.’

The Seerdomin bared his teeth in a cold smile. ‘Trust and honour are valued traits in the Pannion Domin, Lady. The contrast with the culture you are from can be made no more obvious.’

‘Indeed. Do you dare risk our corrupting influence?’

‘You have no influence, Lady. Perhaps, however, we have.’

Toc poured himself some wine, wondering at what Envy was up to. They had walked into a hornets’ nest and, smiling, she was plucking one man’s wings.

Kahlt had regained his composure. ‘Is it wise to mask your servants, Lady? The practice seems to run contrary to the needs of your unfortunate paranoia.’
'Ah, but they are more than simple servants, Seerdomin. They are, in fact, emissaries. Tell me, are you familiar with the Seguleh?'

Kahlt slowly leaned back, studying the silent warriors at the entrance. 'The island people ... who slay all our monks. And have asked us to declare war upon them, and mount an invasion fleet. Arrogance reaps its own reward, as they shall discover. After all, it is one thing to murder unarmed priests ... Ten thousand Seerdomin shall enact vengeance upon the Seguleh. Very well,' he sighed, 'do these emissaries now come to beg forgiveness?'

'Oh no,' Lady Envy said. 'They come to—'

Toc's hand snapped out, closed on her arm. Surprised, she faced him. 'Lady,' he murmured, then turned to Kahlt. 'They have been sent to deliver a message to the Pannion Seer. In person.'

'That's certainly one way of putting it,' Envy remarked drily.

Withdrawing his hand, Toc sat back, waiting for his heart to slow its wild hammering.

'There are provisos to such an audience,' Kahlt said, eyes still on the Seguleh. 'Disarmed. Unmasked. Perhaps more – but that is not for me to decide.' His gaze flicked back to Lady Envy. 'How can these emissaries be your servants?'

'A woman's wiles,' she replied, flashing him a smile.

He visibly flinched.

'Aye, I know what that's like. Your heart's just turned to water. Struggling not to prostrate yourself at her feet. Aye, plucked and now pinned and writhing...'

Kahlt cleared his throat. 'I shall now leave you to your repast. Sleeping chambers have been prepared. The monk who met you at the door will be your guide. Day's end is in a bell's time. Thank you for this most enlightening conversation.' He rose, collected his axe from the wall behind him, then exited through the inner door.

Toc grunted as the panel closed. 'Enlightening? Was that a joke?'

'Eat up, my love,' Envy said. 'Belly filled and content ... before we receive our reward.'

Toc choked on a mouthful of wine, coughed helplessly for a time, then looked at her through a bleary eye. 'Reward?' he rasped.

'You and I, yes. I suspect the Seguleh will be given a proper escort or some such thing. Baaljagg and Garath will be butchered, of course. Here, try this, it's delicious. Before dawn, is my guess, the fire in our veins released to greet the sun's rise, or some such thing equally pathetic. Then again, we could embrace the faith – do you think we'll convince him? What kind of fruit is this? Tastes like a soldier's foot-wrap. I don't – he's made up his mind, you see.'

'And you helped him along, Lady.'

'Did I?' She paused, looked thoughtful for a moment, then reached for some bread. 'I can't imagine how. True, I was irritated. Have you ever noticed how language can be twisted to mask brutality? Ah, a thought! Look at the Seguleh – masked, yes, yet they speak true and plain, do they not? Is there something in that, do you think? Some hidden significance? Our malleable, fleshy visages are skilled at deceit – a far more subtle mask than what the brothers over there are wearing. More wine? Quite wonderful. Gredfallan? Never heard of it. The Seguleh reveal only their eyes, devoid of framing expression, yet portals to the soul none the less. Remarkable. I wonder who originated the custom, and why.'

'Lady, please,' Toc cut in. 'If they intend to kill us—'

'Intentions are unimportant, my dear. I taste clover in this honey. Lovely. By the way, the walls around us are
mostly hollow, but not unoccupied. Would you be so kind as to deliver these plates of meat to my pups? Thank you, darling, you're sweet.'

'All right,' Toc growled. 'So now they know that we know. What now?'

'Well, I don't know about you, but I am dead tired. I do hope the beds are soft. Are the Pannions interested in such conveniences as plumbing, do you think?'

'Nobody's interested in plumbing, Lady Envy, but I'm sure they've worked something out.'

'Repast complete! Now where is our poor little monk?'

A side door opened and the man appeared.

'Extraordinary coincidence. Thank your master for the repast, cowed one, and please, lead the way.'

The monk bowed, gestured. 'Follow me, honoured guests. Alas, the beasts must remain outside, in the compound.'

'Of course.'

The man bowed again.

Lady Envy fluttered the fingers of one thin hand and Baaljagg and Garath loped outside.

'Well trained, Lady,' the monk murmured.

'You have no idea,' she replied.

The sleeping chambers ran the length of one wall, small square, low-ceilinged rooms, unfurnished except for narrow hide-mattressed cots and a lantern sitting on a shelf on one wall. A room at the far end of the hallway was provided for communal bathing, its floors tiled and sunken at gradating levels in the various pools, the water continually flowing and cool and clean.

Leaving the lady to her ablutions, Toc entered his sleeping chamber and set his pack down with a sigh. His nerves were already in tatters, and listening to Envy's melodic singing wasn't helping. He threw himself on the cot.

Sleep? Impossible. These bastards are whetting their knives right now, preparing our reward. We're about to embrace the faith, and its face is a death's head ...

His eye snapped open at a sudden, curdling scream. It was dark – the lanterns had either gone out or been removed. Toc realized he'd fallen asleep after all, and that had the stench of sorcery. The scream sounded again, ending in a dwindling gurgle.

Claws clicked down the hallway outside his room.

Covered in sweat yet shivering, Toc the Younger edged off the bed. He drew the broad-bladed obsidian dagger Tool had made for him, settled the hide-wrapped grip in his right hand, then unsheathed his own iron knife with his left.

Claws. Either there's Soletaken here ... or Baaljagg and Garath are paying a visit. He silently prayed it was the latter.

A crash of masonry made him jump, a wall tumbling into ruin somewhere close. Someone whimpered, then squealed as bones snapped. The sound of a body being dragged just outside his door had Toc crouching low, knives trembling.

Dark. What in Hood's name am I supposed to do? I can't see a damned thing!

The door splintered in its frame under the impact of some large body. As the report echoed, the door fell inward . . . beneath the weight of a naked corpse faintly illuminated by low light coming from the hallway.
A massive head slid into view, eyes dully glowing.

Toc loosed a shuddering sigh. ‘Baaljagg,’ he whispered. ‘You've grown since I last saw you.’

The ay, after the briefest pause of mutual recognition, lumbered past the doorway. Toc watched the full length of the beast's body slide by, then he followed.

The hallway was a shambles. Shattered stone, mangled cots and pieces of flesh everywhere. The walls were painted in splashes of blood and bile. Gods, has this wolf been crashing through arm-length-thick stone walls? How?

Head slung low, claws clacking, Baaljagg padded towards the bathing chamber. Toc moved lightly in the ay's wake.

Before they arrived a second four-legged shape emerged from a side passage beside the entrance, dark, mottled grey and black, and dwarfing Baaljagg. Coal-lit eyes set in a broad, blood-soaked head slowly fixed on Toc the Younger.

Garath?

The creature's shoulders were covered in white dust. It edged to one side to allow Baaljagg to pass.

‘Garath,’ Toc murmured as he followed, well within reach of those huge, dripping jaws. ‘What was in those bhederin slices you ate, anyway?’

The gentle pet was gone this night, and in its place Garath had become a slayer of the highest, coldest order. Death capered in the huge hound's eyes.

The beast allowed Toc to pass, then swung round and slunk off back the way it had come.

A row of candles on the far wall lit the bathing chamber. Baaljagg, nose to the tiles, was skirting the pools. The trickling water was crimson and steaming. Through its murk Toc could see four corpses, all armoured, lying at the bottom of the pools. He could not be sure, but he thought that they had been boiled alive.

The Malazan pitched against a wall, and, in a series of racking heaves, lost the supper the Seerdomin had so kindly provided.

Distant crashing shook the floor beneath his feet. Garath continuing his relentless hunt. Oh, you poor bastards, you invited the wrong guests into your temple ...

‘Oh, there you are!’

Still sickened, he twisted round to see Lady Envy, dressed in her spotless white nightclothes, her raven hair tied up and pinned, standing at the doorway. ‘That armour proved fatally heavy, alas,’ she said regretfully, her eyes on the corpses in the pools, then brightened. ‘Oh well! Come along, you two! Senu and Thurule should be finished with the Seerdomin warriors.’

‘There's more than one?’ Toc asked, bewildered.

‘There were about twenty in all. Kahlt was their captain as well as being this temple’s high priest. Warrior-priests – what an unfortunate combination. Back to your room, now, my dear. You must gather up your belongings. We're rendezvousing in the compound.’

She set off.

Stumbling in her wake, with Baaljagg trailing, Toc drew a deep, shuddering breath. ‘Has Tool shown up for this?’ he asked.

‘I've not seen him. He wasn't required in any case. We had matters in hand.’

‘With me snoring like a fool!’
‘Baaljagg watched out on your behalf, my love. You were weary, were you not? Ah, here we are. Gather your accoutrements. Garath intends to destroy this temple—’

‘Yes,’ Toc snapped. ‘About Garath—’

‘You don't wake up well at all, do you, young man? Surely we can discuss all this later?’

‘Fine,’ he growled, entering his room. ‘We will indeed.’

The inner chambers of the temple thundering into dust, Toc stood in the compound, watching the two Seguleh dismounting the corpses of the villagers and replacing them with the freshly butchered bodies of the Seerdomin warriors. Kahlt, bearing a single thrust wound through the heart, was among them.

‘He fought with fierce determination,’ Lady Envy murmured at Toc's side. ‘His axe was everywhere, yet it seemed that Thurule barely moved. Unseen parries. Then he languidly reached out, and stabbed the Seerdomin captain straight through the heart. A wondrous display, Toc the Younger.’

‘No doubt,’ he muttered. ‘So tell me, does the Seer know about us, now?’

‘Oh yes, and the destruction of this temple will pain him greatly.’

‘He'll send a Hood-damned army down on us.’

‘Assuming he can spare one from his northern endeavours, that seems likely. Certainly he will feel the need to respond in some manner, if only to slow our progress.’

‘I might as well turn back here and now,’ Toc said.

She raised an eyebrow. ‘You lack confidence?’

‘Lady, I'm no Seguleh. I'm not an ay on the edge of ascendancy. I'm not a T’lan Imass. I'm not a dog that can stare eye-to-level-eye with a Hound of Shadow! And I'm not a witch who can boil men alive with a snap of her fingers!’

‘A witch! Now I am offended!’ She advanced on him, arms crossed, eyes flaring. ‘A witch! And have you ever seen me snap my fingers? By the Abyss, what an inelegant notion!’

He took an involuntary step back. ‘A figure of speech—’

‘Oh, be quiet!’ She took his face in her hands, pulled him inexorably closer. Her full lips parted slightly. Toc tried to pull away, but his muscles seemed to be dissolving around his bones. She stopped suddenly, frowned. ‘No, perhaps not. I prefer you ... free.’ The frown shifted to a scowl. ‘Most of the time, in any case, though you have tried my patience this morning.’

She released him, studied his face for a moment longer, then smiled and turned away. ‘I need to get changed, I think. Senu! When you're done, find me my wardrobe!’

Toc slowly shook himself. He was trembling, chilled in the wake of a sure, instinctive knowledge of what that kiss would have done. And poets write of the chains of love. Hah! What they write figuratively she embodies literally. If desire could have a goddess...

A swirl of dust, and Tool rose from the ground beside him. The T’lan Imass turned his head, stared over at Mok's recumbent form near the outer gate, then said. ‘K'ell Hunters are converging on us.’ It seemed the T’lan Imass was about to say something more, then simply vanished once again.

‘See?’ Lady Envy called out to the Malazan. ‘Now aren't you glad that I insisted you get some sleep?’
They came to a crossroads marked by two menhirs, leaning and half buried on a low rise between the two cobbled roads. Arcane hieroglyphs had been carved into their faces, the pictographs weathered and faint.

Lady Envy stood before them, chin propped on one hand as she studied the glyphs. 'How curious. The root of this language is Imari. Genostelian, I suspect.'

Toc rubbed sweaty dust from his brow. 'What do they say? Let me guess. "All who come here shall be torn in two, flayed alive, beheaded and badly beaten."'

She glanced back at him, a brow raised. 'The one to the right indicates the road to Kel Tor. The one to the left, Bastion. None the less remarkable, for all the mundanity of the messages. Clearly, the Pannion Domin was once a Genostel colony – the Genostelians were distant seafarers, my dear. Alas, their glory waned centuries ago. A measure of their height is evinced by what we see before us, for the Genostel archipelago is halfway across the world from here.'

Grunting, Toc squinted up the heaved road that led to Bastion. 'Well, maybe their cities survived, but by all accounts the Pannions were once hill peoples. Herders. Barbaric. Rivals of the Daru and Gadrobi tribes. Your colony was conquered, Lady Envy.'

'It's always the way, isn't it? A civilization flowers, then a horde of grunting savages with close-set eyes show up and step on it. Malazan Empire take note.'

"Never ignore the barbarians," Toc muttered. 'Emperor Kellanved's words.'

'Surprisingly wise. What happened to him?'

'He was murdered by a woman with close-set eyes . . . but she was from civilized stock. Napan ... if you can call Napans civilized. From the heart of the empire, in any case.'

'Baaljagg looks restless, my dear. We should resume our journey, what with all these undead two-legged lizards on their way.'

'Tool said the nearest ones were still days distant. How far is it to Bastion?'

'We should arrive by dusk tomorrow night, assuming the distance indicated on these milestones remains accurate.'

They set off down the road, the Seguleh trailing with the travois. The cobbles underfoot, though worn deep in places, were now mostly clothed in grasses. There had been few if any travellers this season, and Toc saw no-one on the road as the day wound on. Old carcasses of cattle and sheep in the pastures to either side showed evidence of predation by wolves. No shepherds to tend the flocks, and among all domesticated livestock only goats and horses could survive a return to the wild.

As they paused for a mid-afternoon rest on the outskirts of yet another abandoned hamlet – this one without a temple – Toc checked his weapons one more time, then hissed in frustration and glared at Lady Envy who was sitting across from him. 'This doesn't make sense. The Domin's expanding. Voraciously. Armies need food. So do cities. If the countryside's home to nothing but ghosts, who in Hood's name is supplying them?'

Lady Envy shrugged. 'I am not the one to ask, my love. Questions of materiel and economics leave me deathly bored. Perhaps the answers to your irrelevant concerns will be found in Bastion.'

'Irrelevant?'

'Well, yes. The Domin is expanding. It has armies, and cities. These are facts. Details are for academics, Toc the Younger. Shouldn't you be concerning yourself with more salient matters, such as your survival?'

He stared at her, then slowly blinked. 'Lady Envy, I am already as good as dead. So why think about it?'

'Absurd! I value you too highly to see you simply cut down. You must learn to trust me, darling.'

He looked away. 'Details, Lady, reveal hidden truths. Know your enemy – that's a basic tenet. What you
know you can use.' He hesitated, then continued. 'Details can lead one to trust, as well, when it comes to the motives and interests of those who would be allies.'

'Ah, I see. And what is it you wish to know?'

He met her eyes. 'What are you doing here?'

'Why, Toc the Younger, have you forgotten? Your T'lan Imass companion has said that the secrets of the Morn Rent can only be found within the Domin.'

'A convenience, Lady,' he growled. 'You're busy manipulating. All of us. Me, the Seguleh, even Tool himself. He gestured. 'Garath, your pup. He could be a Hound of Shadow—'

'He could be indeed,' she smiled. 'I believe, however, that he is reluctant.'

'What does that mean?'

'You are very easily exasperated, my dear. If you're a leaf trembling on a wide, deep river, relax and ride the current. It's always worked for me, I assure you. As for manipulation, do you truly believe I have the power to pull and prod a T'lan Imass? The Seguleh are, uh, unique – we travel in step, after all, thus the notion of coercion does not arise.'

'Not yet, maybe. But it will, Lady.'

She shrugged. 'Finally, I have no control over Garath, or Baaljagg. Of that I assure you.'

He bared his teeth. 'Leaving just me.'

She reached out, rested a slim hand lightly on his arm. 'In that, darling, I am simply a woman.'

He shook her hand off. 'There's sorcery in your charms, Lady Envy. Don't try and tell me otherwise.'

'Sorcery? Well, yes, you could call it that, I suppose. Mystery as well, yes? Wonder, and excitement. Hope and possibilities. Desire, darling, is a most alluring magic. And, my love, it is one to which I am not immune ...'

She leaned closer, her eyes half closed. 'I will not force my kiss upon you, Toc the Younger. Don't you see? The choice must be yours, else you shall indeed be enslaved. What do you say?'

'Time to get going,' he said, rising. 'Obviously, I won't be hearing any honest answers from you.'

'I have just given them!' she retorted, also standing.

'Enough,' he said, collecting his gear. 'I've stopped playing, Lady Envy. Take the game elsewhere.'

'Oh, how I dislike you when you're like this!'

'Sulk away,' he muttered, setting off down the road.

'I shall lose my temper, young man! Do you hear me?'

He stopped, glanced back. 'We've got a few leagues' worth of daylight left.'

'Oh! She stamped her foot. 'You're just like Rake!'

Toc's lone eye slowly widened, then he grinned. 'Take a few deep breaths, lass.'

'He always said that, too! Oh, this is infuriating! It's all happening again! What is wrong with all of you?'

He laughed, not harshly, but with genuine warmth. 'Come along, Envy. I'll bore you with a detailed recounting of my youth – it'll pass the time. I was born on a ship, you know, and it was more than a few days before Toc the Elder stepped forward to acknowledge his fatherhood – my mother was Captain Cartheron Crust's sister, you see, and Crust had a temper ...'
The lands lying just beyond Bastion's walls were devastated. Farmsteads were blackened, smouldering heaps; to either side of the road the ground itself had been torn into, ripped open like wounds in flesh. Within sight of the small city's squat walls, the remnants of massive bonfires dotted the landscape like round barrows dusted with white ash. No-one walked the wasteland.

Smoke hung over Bastion's block-like, tiered buildings. Above the grey wreaths rode the white flags of seagulls, their faint cries the only sound to reach Toc and Lady Envy as the group approached the city's inland gates. The stench of fire masked the smell of the lake on the other side of the city, the air's breath hot and gritty.

The gates were ajar. As they neared, Toc caught a glimpse of movement beyond the archway, as of a figure swiftly passing, dark and silent. His nerves danced. 'What has happened here?' he wondered aloud.

'Very unpleasant,' Lady Envy agreed.

They strode beneath the shadow of the arch, and the air was suddenly sickly sweet with the smell of burning flesh. Toc hissed through his teeth.

Baaljagg and Garath – both returned to modest proportions – trotted forward, heads slung low.

'I believe the question of sustenance has a grim answer indeed,' Lady Envy said.

Toc nodded. 'They're eating their own dead. I don't think it's a good idea to enter this city.'

She turned to him. 'Are you not curious?'

'Curious, aye, but not suicidal.'

'Fear not. Let us take a closer look.'

'Envy ...'

Her eyes hardened. 'If the inhabitants are foolish enough to threaten us, they shall know my wrath. And Garath's as well. If you think this is ruination now, your judgement will receive a lesson in perspective, my dear. Come.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Familiarity breeds facetiousness, I see. How regrettable.'

The two Seguleh and their unconscious master trailing three paces behind them, Toc and Lady Envy strode into the square.

Split human long bones were piled against the inner walls, some calcined by heat, others red and raw. The buildings facing onto the square were blackened, doorways and windows gaping. The bones of various animals – dogs, mules, horses and oxen – lay about, gnawed and split.

Three men who were obviously priests awaited them in the centre of the square, clean-shaven, gaunt and pale in their colourless robes. One took a step forward as Toc and Envy approached.

'Strangers, welcome. An acolyte saw you on the road, and we three have hastened to greet you. You have chosen an auspicious day to visit glorious Bastion; alas, this day also places your lives in great peril. We shall endeavour to guide you, and thus improve the likelihood of your surviving the Embrasure's violent... afterbirth. If you will follow us...' He gestured towards a side street. 'At the mouth of Iltara Avenue, we shall have removed ourselves from the exodus's path, yet remain able to witness the miracle.'

'Ideal,' Lady Envy said. 'We thank you, holy ones.'

The walk to the mouth of the side street was no more than fifty paces, yet in that time the city's silence was replaced by a growing murmur, a dry susurrus approaching from Bastion's heart. Upon arriving, Baaljagg
and Garath returned to flank Lady Envy. Senu and Thurule set the travois down against the wall of a corner building, then faced the square once more, hands on their weapons.

'The will of the Faith has embraced the citizens of Bastion,' the priest said. 'It arrives like a fever ... a fever that only death can abate. Yet it must be remembered that the Embrasure was first felt here in Bastion itself, fourteen years ago. The Seer had returned from the Mountain, speaking the Words of Truth, and the power of those words rippled outward . . . ' The priest's voice broke with some kind of emotion wrought by his own words. Hebowedhis head, his entire body trembling.

Another priest continued for him. 'The Faith flowered here first. A caravan from Elingarth was encamped beyond the walls. The foreigners were rewarded in a single night. And the First Child of the Dead Seed was gifted to the mortal world nine months later. That child has now come of age, an event that has triggered a renewed burgeoning of the Faith – a second Embrasure has occurred, under the command of the First Child, Anaster. You shall see him now – his mother at his side – leading his newfound Tenescowri. A war awaits them far to the north – the faithless city of Capustan must be rewarded.'

'Holy ones,' Lady Envy said, raising her voice to be heard over the growing roar of chanting voices, 'please forgive my ignorance. A Child of the Dead Seed – what precisely is that?'

'The moment of reward among the male unbelievers, mistress, is often marked by an involuntary spilling of life-seed ... and continues after life has fled. At this moment, with a corpse beneath her, a woman may ride and so take within her a dead man's seed. The children that are thus born are the holiest of the Seer's kin. Anaster is the first to reach his age.'

'That is,' Lady Envy said, 'extraordinary ...'

Toc saw her face sickly pale for the first time in his memory.

'The Seer's gift, mistress. A Child of the Dead Seed bears the visible truth of death's kiss of life – proof of the Reward itself. We know that foreigners fear death. The Faithful do not.'

Toc cleared his throat, leaned close to the priest. 'Once these Tenescowri leave Bastion ... is there anyone else still breathing in the city?'

'Embrasure is absolute, sir.'

'In other words, those who did not succumb to the fever have been ... rewarded.'

'Indeed.'

'And then eaten.'

'The Tenescowri have needs.'

Conversation ended then as the leading edge of a mass of humanity poured from the main avenue and began spreading to fill the square. A young man was in the lead, the only person mounted, his horse an aged roan draught animal with a bowed spine and botfly sores on its neck. As the youth rode forward, his head whipped suddenly to where Toc and the others stood. He stabbed a long, thin arm in their direction and shrieked.

The cry was wordless, yet it was understood by his followers. Hundreds of faces swung to look upon the strangers, then surged towards them.

'Oh,' Lady Envy said.

The second priest flinched back. 'Alas, our protection is insufficient. Prepare for your reward, strangers!' And with that, the three acolytes fled.

Lady Envy raised her hands, and was suddenly flanked by two huge beasts. Both flowed in a blur to greet the mob. Suddenly, blood and bodies spilled onto the flagstones.

The Seguleh pushed past Toc. Senu stopped at Envy's side. 'Awaken our brother!' he shouted.
'Agreed,' she said. 'No doubt Tool is about to appear as well, but I suspect they will find themselves too busy to contest each other.'

Leather straps snapped as Mok seemed to fling himself upright, weapons already in his hands.

And here I am, all but forgotten. Toc reached a decision. 'Have fun, all of you,' he said, backing up the side street.

As the ay and the hound chewed through the screaming mass, Lady Envy spun, eyes wide. 'What? Where are you going?'

'I've embraced the Faith,' he called out. 'This mob's heading straight for the Malazan Army – though it doesn't know it yet! And I'm going with it!'

'Toc, listen! We shall obliterate this pathetic army and that pale runt leading them! There is no need—'

'Don't wipe them out! Please, Envy. Carve your way clear, yes, but I need them.'

'But—'

'No time! I've decided. With Oponn's luck we'll meet again – go find your answers, Envy. I've got friends to find!'

'Wait—'

With a final wave, Toc whirled and ran down the street.

A concussive blast of sorcery threw him forward, but he did not turn. Envy was letting loose. Hood knows, she might even have just lost her temper. Gods, leave some of them standing, lass...

He swung right at the first intersection he came to, and found himself plunging into the midst of screaming peasants, pushing like him towards the city's main artery, where flowed the mass of the Faithful. He added his screams – wordless, the sounds that a mute man might make – and clawed with mindless zeal.

Like a leaf on a wide, deep river . . .
CHAPTER TEN

Mother Dark begat three children,
the First, Tiste Andii, were her dearest,
dwellers of the land before Light.
Then were birthed in pain the Second, Tiste Lians,
the burning glory of Light itself,
and so the First denied their Mother,
in their fury, and so were cast out,
doomed children of Mother Dark.
She then gave rise, in her mercy, to the Third,
spawn of the war between Dark and Light,
the Tiste Edur, and there was shadow
upon their souls.

Kilmanar’s Fables
Sebun Imanan

The hand slapped him hard, the shock quickly fading even as he struggled to comprehend its significance, leaving a tingling numbness that he was content to ride back into unconsciousness. He was slapped a second time.

Gruntle pried open his eyes. 'Go away,' he mumbled, shutting them again.

'You're drunk,' Stonny Menackis snarled. 'And you stink. Gods, the blanket's soaked with vomit. That's it, he can rot for all I care. He's all yours, Buke. I'm heading back to the barracks.'

Gruntle listened to boots stamping away, across the creaking, uneven floorboards of his squalid room, listened to the door squeal open, then slam shut. He sighed, made to roll over and go back to sleep.

Cold, wet cloth slapped down on his face. 'Wipe yourself,' Buke said. 'I need you sober, friend.'

'No-one needs me sober,' Gruntle said, pulling the cloth away. 'Leave me be, Buke. You, of all people—'

'Aye, me of all people. Sit up, damn you.'

Hands gripped his shoulders, pulled him upright. Gruntle managed to grab Buke's wrists, but there was no strength in his arms and he could only manage a few feeble tugs. Pain rocked through his head, swarmed behind his closed eyes. He leaned forward and was sick, fermented bile pouring out through mouth and nostrils onto the floor between his scuffed boots.

The heaves subsided. His head was suddenly clearer. Spitting out the last dregs of vomit, he scowled. 'I'm not asking, you bastard. You got no right—'

'Shut up.'

Grumbling, he sank his head into his hands. 'How many days?'

'Six. You've missed your chance, Gruntle.'

'Chance? What are you talking about?'

'It's too late. The Septarch and his Pannion army have crossed the river. The investiture has begun. Rumour is, the blockhouses in the killing fields beyond the walls will be attacked before the day's done. They won't hold. That's one big army out there. Veterans who've laid more than one siege – and every one successful—'
'Enough. You're telling me too much. I can't think.'

'You won't, you mean. Harllo's dead, Gruntle. Time to sober up and grieve.'

'You should talk, Buke.'

'I've done my grieving, friend. Long ago.'

'Like Hood you have.'

'You misunderstand me. You always have. I have grieved, and that's faded away. Gone. Now ... well, now there's nothing. A vast, unlit cavern. Ashes. But you're not like me – maybe you think you are, but you're not.'

Gruntle reached out, groped for the wet cloth he'd let fall to the floor. Buke collected it and pushed it into his hand. Pressing it against his pounding brow, Gruntle groaned. 'A pointless, senseless death.'

'They're all pointless and senseless, friend. Until the living carve meaning out of them. What are you going to carve, Gruntle, out of Harllo's death? Take my advice, an empty cave offers no comfort.'

'I ain't looking for comfort.'

'Still in the employ of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach.'

'You Hood-damned fool.'

Wiping his face, Buke turned from the window, managed a tight grin. 'Welcome back.'

'Go to the Abyss, bastard.'
can't remember what.'

'Excuses are easy enough to come by. I well recall that.'

'Aye, they are and no doubt you do.' He glanced down at the sorry state of his clothes. 'I need a bath – where are my weapons?'

'Stonny took care of them. And most of your coin as well. You're paid up – no debts – so you can put your back to all that.'

'And walk.'

'And walk. I'll join you, to the barracks, at least—'

'In case I get lost,' Gruntle said wryly.

Buke nodded.

'Well, it's a few bells yet before the shakes.'

'Aye. The Destriant might help with that, if you ask kindly.'

They turned south, skirting the battered tenement block, and approached the wide avenues between the high-walled, circular Camps. Few citizens were in the streets, and those that were moved furtively, as if skating a thin patina of panic. A city surrounded, awaiting the first drawing of blood.

Gruntle spat into a gutter. 'What are your masters up to, Buke?'

'They have taken possession of a recently abandoned estate. Settled in.'

The sudden tension in Buke's voice raised the hairs on Gruntle's neck. 'Go on.'

'That's why I ... went to you. Partly. A Gidrath Watch found the first body last night, not a hundred paces from our estate. Disembowelled. Organs... missing.'

'Inform the prince, Buke. Make no hesitation – a cancer at the heart of a besieged city ...'

'I cannot.' He stopped and gripped Gruntle's arm. 'We must not. You haven't seen what they can do when their backs are against a wall—'

'They need to be driven out, Buke. Let the Pannions embrace their company, with pleasure. Just cut yourself loose, first. And maybe that old manservant, Reese, too.'

'We can't.'

'Yes you can—'

Buke's grip tightened painfully. 'No,' he hissed, 'we can't!'

Scowling, Gruntle glanced up the avenue, trying to think.

'They'll start knocking down walls, Gruntle. Outer walls. They'll wipe out hundreds of soldiers – unleash demons, raise the corpses and fling them back in our faces. They'll level Capustan for the Pannions. But there's more to it than all that. Consider another possibility. If it's the Pannions who get them annoyed . . . '

'They'll let loose on them,' Gruntle sighed, nodding. 'Aye. In the meantime, however, the murder victims start piling up. Look around, Buke, these people are close enough to panic. What do you think it will take to push 'em over the edge? How many more victims? The Camps are kin-bound communities – every neighbourhood is knit together by blood and marriage. This is a fine line to walk...'

'I can't do it alone,' Buke said.
‘Do what?’

‘Shadow Korbal Broach. When he goes out at night. If I can foul his hunting . . . yet remain unseen, undiscovered—’

‘You've lost your mind!’ Gruntle hissed. ‘He's a Hood’ damned sorcerer, old man! He'll sniff you out the first time!’

‘If I'm working alone, you're right...’

Gruntle studied the man at his side, searched the worn, lean face, the hard eyes above the grey, tangled beard. Old burn scars painted Buke's forearms, from when he clawed through coals and embers the morning after the fire in some frenzied, insane faith that he would find them... find his family alive somewhere in the rubble.

Buke's gaze dropped beneath that steady examination. 'I've no cunning, friend,' the old man said, releasing Gruntle's arm. 'I need someone to think of a way to do this. I need someone with the brains to outwit Korbal Broach—'

‘Not Broach. Bauchelain.’

‘Aye, only he's not the one going out at night. Bauchelain tolerates Korbal's ... peculiar interests. Broach has the mind of a child – an unfettered, malign child. I know them, now, Gruntle. I know them.’

‘How many other fools have tried to outwit Bauchelain, I wonder?’

‘Cemeteries full, I’d guess.’

Gruntle slowly nodded. 'All to achieve what? Save a few lives ... so that they can get slaughtered and devoured by the Tenescowri?'

‘A more merciful demise even so, friend.’

‘Hood take me, Buke. Let me think on this.’

‘I’ll come by this evening, then. At the barracks. Stonny—’

‘Stonny can't know a damn thing about it. If she catches on, she'll go after Broach herself, and she won't be subtle—’

‘And they’ll kill her. Aye.’

‘Gods, my head's about to explode.’

Buke grinned. 'What you need is a priest.'

‘A priest?’

‘A priest with the powers to heal. Come on, I know just the man.’

Shield Anvil Itkovian stood by the barracks gate, fully armoured and gauntleted, his helm's visor raised though the cheek-guards remained in place. The afternoon's first bell had tolled a hundred heartbeats ago. The others were late, but that was nothing new; nor was Itkovian's punctuality. He'd grown long accustomed to awaiting Brukhalian and Karnadas, and it seemed that the two Barghast who were to join them for the meeting held a similar disregard.

The Mask Council would greet them all seething from the apparent insult – and not for the first time.

_The contempt is mutual, alas. Dialogue has degraded. No-one wins in such a situation. And poor Prince Jelarkan . . . positioned directly between two parties exchanging mutual loathing._
The Shield Anvil had spent the morning on Capustan's walls, surveying the measured settling of the Domin's besieging army. He judged that Septarch Kulpath had been given command of fully ten legions of Beklites, the red- and gold-clad, peak-helmed regular infantry that was the heart of the Domin's forces – half of the famed Hundred Thousand, then. Kulpath's Urdomen – elite heavy infantry – numbered at least eight thousand. When the breach occurred, it would be the Urdomen who pushed through into the city. In addition to these arrayed forces were various augmented divisions: Betaklites, medium infantry; at least three Betrullid Wings, light cavalry; as well as a division of Desandi – sappers and engineers – and Scalandi skirmishers. Perhaps eighty thousand soldiers in all.

Beyond the impressively organized camps of the Septarch's army, the landscape was a seething mass of humanity, reaching down to the banks of the river to the south, and to the cobbled beaches of the coast to the east – the Tenescowri, the peasant army, with their wild-haired Women of the Dead Seed and their shrieking feral offspring; the scavenging parties – hunters of the weak and old among their own kind, and, soon, among the hapless citizens of Capustan. A starving horde, and seeing them crumbled the professional detachment with which Itkovian had viewed Kulpath's legions. He had left the walls, shaken for the first time in his life.

There were a hundred thousand Tenescowri, with more arriving on overloaded barges with every bell, and Itkovian was staggered by the waves of their palpable hunger.

The prince's Capanthall soldiers manning the battlements were pale as corpses, silent and virtually motionless. Upon arriving on the walls, the Shield Anvil had been dismayed by their fear; by the time he made his descent, he shared it, a cold knife lodged in his chest. The companies of Gidrath in the outside redoubts were the fortunate ones – their deaths were imminent, and would come beneath the blades of professional soldiers. Capustan's fate, and the fate of those defending it, was likely to be far more horrifying.

The soft slither of coin armour announced the approach of the two Barghast warriors. Itkovian studied the woman in the lead. Hetan's face was smeared in ash, as was her brother Cafal's. The mourning visage would remain for as long as they chose, and the Shield Anvil suspected he would not live to see its removal. *Even sheathed in grey, there is a brutal beauty to this woman.*

'Where is the hill bear and his scrawny pup?' Hetan demanded.

'Fener's Mortal Sword and the Destriant have just emerged from the building behind you, Hetan.'

She bared her teeth. 'Good, let us go meet these bickering priests, then.'

'I still wonder why you have requested this audience, Hetan,' Itkovian said. 'If you are to announce the impending arrival of the entire clans of the Barghast to our aid, the Mask Council is not the place to do so. Efforts will begin immediately to manipulate you and your people, towards an endless and infectious mire of petty rivalries and battles of will. If you will not inform the Grey Swords, then I strongly urge you to speak with Prince Jelarkan—'

'You talk too much, wolf.'

Itkovian fell silent, his eyes narrowing.

'Your mouth will be too busy when I bed you,' she continued. 'I will insist.'

The Shield Anvil swung to face Brukhalian and Karnadas as they arrived. He saluted.

'There's some colour in your face, sir,' the Destriant observed. 'Which was not the case when you returned from the walls.'

Hetan barked a laugh. 'He is about to lie with a woman for the first time.'

Karnadas raised his brows at Itkovian. 'What of your vows, Shield Anvil?'

'My vows remain,' the soldier grated. 'The Barghast is mistaken.'

Brukhalian grunted. 'Besides, aren't you in mourning, Hetan?'
'To mourn is to feel a flower's slow death, hill bear. To bed a man is to recall the flower's bright glory.'

'You'll have to pluck another,' Karnadas said with a faint smile. 'The Shield Anvil has taken monastic vows, alas—'

'Then he mocks his god! The Barghast know of Fener, the Tusked One. There is fire in his blood!'

'The fire of battle—'

'Of lust, scrawny pup!'

'Enough,' Brukhalian rumbled. 'We walk to the Thrall, now. I have news to relate to you all and will need the time. Come.'

They strode through the barracks gate, swung left to cross the concourse that skirted the city's south wall. Capustan's open spaces – an accidental feature of the self-contained Camps – had needed little in their conversion into killing grounds. Strongpoints had been constructed at various approaches, of stone and wood and soaked bales of hay. When the walls were breached the enemy would pour into the concourses and enter an enfilade. Prince Jelarkan had emptied half his treasury for arrows, bows, ballistae, mangonels and other weapons of slaughter. The network of defences imposed a web on the city, in keeping with Brukhalian's plan of measured, organized contraction.

_Yield not a single cobble until it is ankle deep in Pannion blood._

The few brightly clothed citizens in sight moved from the path of the Grey Swords and the ash-faced, barbaric Barghast.

Brukhalian spoke. 'The Destriant and I have held counsel with the Kron T'lan Imass. Bek Okhan informs us that their offer of alliance is in answer to the K'Chain Che'Malle. They will not fight mortal humans. He further informs us that the K'ell Hunters have gathered half a league to the north, perhaps eighty in all. From this I surmise that they will represent Septarch Kulpath's opening gambit – an assault on the north gate. The appearance of such formidable creatures will strike terror in our defenders. The gate will be shattered, the Hunters will enter the city, and the slaughter will begin. Kulpath will then send his Urdomen forward, against the other gates. By dusk Capustan will have fallen.' He paused, as if chewing his words, then resumed. 'No doubt the Septarch is confident. Fortunately for us, the K'ell Hunters will never reach the north gate, for fourteen thousand T'lan Imass and however many T'lan Ay with them will rise to block their path. Bek Okhan assures us the denial will be absolute, and final.'

'Assuming the validity of his assertion,' Itkovian allowed as they approached the Old Daru district, 'Septarch Kulpath will need to adjust his plan.'

'And in circumstances of great confusion,' Karnadas said.

Brukhalian nodded. 'It falls to us to predict his adjustment.'

'He won't know that the T'lan Imass are interested only in the K'Chain Che'Malle,' the Shield Anvil said. 'At least not immediately.'

'And that limitation may prove temporary,' the Destriant said. 'Once this Gathering takes place, the T'lan Imass may find themselves directed to a new purpose.'

'What more have we learned of the summoner?'

'She accompanies Brood's army.'

'How far away?'

'Six weeks.'

Hetan snorted. 'They are slow.'
'They are a small army,' Brukhalian growled. 'And cautious. I find no fault in the pace they have chosen. The Septarch intends to take Capustan in a single day, but he well knows that the longest he can safely take to conclude the siege is six weeks. Once he fails in his first effort, he will step back and reconsider. Probably at length.'

'We cannot hold for six weeks,' Itkovian murmured, his eyes reaching over the row of temples lining Old Daru's front street and fixing on the high walls of the ancient keep that was now the Thrall.

'We must, sir,' Brukhalian replied. 'Shield Anvil, your counsel, please. Kulpath's campaign at Setta – there were no K'Chain Che'Malle to hasten that siege. Its duration?'

'Three weeks,' Itkovian immediately replied. 'Setta is a larger city, sir, and the defenders were unified and well organized. They stretched to three weeks a siege that should only have required a week at most. Sir, Capustan is smaller, with fewer defenders – and disputatious defenders at that. Further, the Tenescowri has doubled its size since Setta. Finally, the Beklites and Urdomen have been honed by a hard-fought contest. Six weeks, sir? Impossible.'

'We must make the impossible possible, Shield Anvil.'

Itkovian's jaw clenched. He said nothing.

Within sight of the Thrall's high gates, Brukhalian stopped and faced the Barghast. 'You have heard us, Hetan. Should the clans of the White Face grasp the spear of war, how many warriors will march? How soon could they arrive?'

The woman bared her teeth. 'The clans have never united to wage war, but if they did, the warriors of the White Face would number seventy thousand.' Her smile broadened, cold and defiant. 'They will not do so now. No march. No relief. For you, no hope.'

'The Domin will set hungry eyes upon your people next, Hetan,' Itkovian said.

She shrugged.

'What then,' Brukhalian rumbled, 'is the purpose of this audience with the Mask Council?'

'When I give answer, it will be to the priests.'

Itkovian spoke. 'I was given to understand that you had travelled south to discover the nature of the K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'There was no cause to elaborate on our mission, wolf. We have completed one task set before us by the shoulder-men of the clans. Now, we must complete the second task. Will you now present us to the fools, or must we continue on alone?'

The Council Hall was a massive chamber, domed with a semicircle of wooden tiers facing the grand entrance. The dome's ceiling had once glittered with gold leaf, of which only a few patches remained. The bas-relief images the gold had once lit were now faded and mostly shapeless, hinting of a procession of human figures in ceremonial garb. The floor was laid with bright, geometric tiles, forming no discernible pattern around a central disc of polished granite, and much worn.

Torches high on the stone walls flickered yellow light and exhaled tendrils of black smoke that drifted in the chamber's currents. Standing motionless to either side of the entrance and before each of the fourteen doors arrayed behind the tiers were Gidrath guards, visored and in full scaled armour.

The fourteen priests of the Mask Council sat in a row on the highest of the three tiers, sombre in their robes and silent behind the carved, hinged masks of their gods. The representations were varied but singularly ghastly, caricatured in their malleable expressions, though at the moment every one of them was fixed in neutral regard.
Brukhalian's boots echoed as he strode to halt in the centre of the chamber, standing on the single huge millstone appropriately called the Navel. 'Mask Council,' he intoned, 'may I present to you Hetan and Cafal, Barghast emissaries of the White Face. The Grey Swords have honoured the request for this introduction. Now that it is complete, we shall depart this session.' He stepped back.

Rath'Dessembrae raised a slim hand. 'One moment, please, Mortal Sword,' she said. 'Whilst we know nothing of the nature of the Barghast's intentions, we ask that you remain in attendance, for there are matters that must be discussed at the conclusion of the audience.'

Brukhalian bowed his head. 'Then we must convey our distance from the Barghast and their unknown petition.'

'Of course,' the masked woman murmured, the sorrowful visage of her god's face shifting into a slight smile.

Itkovian watched Brukhalian return to where he and Karnadas stood just within the entrance.

Hetan and her brother strode to take position on the millstone. She studied the priests, then lifted her head and called out, 'The White Face is in mourning!'

A hand thumped down on the railing. Rath'D'rek was on his feet, the Worm of Autumn's goddess face twisted into a scowl. 'Again? By the Abyss, you deliver your tribe's claims at this time? The same opening words! The same idiotic assertion! The answer was no the first time, no the second time, no every time! This audience is closed!'

'It is not!'

'You dare address us in such a tone—'

'I do, you fart-fouled runt!'

Eyes wide, Itkovian stared at Hetan, then at the Council.

The Barghast woman spread out her arms. 'Attend my words! Ignore them at your peril!'

Her brother had begun a soft chant. The air swirled around the two savage warriors.

On all sides, the Gidrath guards reached for their weapons.

Itkovian stumbled as Karnadas pushed past him, robes flowing behind the priest in his haste. 'A moment, please!' he cried. 'Holy brothers and sisters! Would you see your loyal guards slain? Would you see the Thrall itself destroyed, with all of you killed in the process? Look carefully upon the sorcery you see before you, I beg you! No simple shaman's magic – look! The Barghast spirits have assembled. Brothers and sisters, the Barghast Spirits are here, in this room!'

Silence, save for Cafal's low chant.

Brukhalian drew close to Itkovian. 'Shield Anvil,' he muttered, 'know you anything, sir, of what we see before us?'

'The possibility had not even occurred to me,' Itkovian murmured. 'An old petition, this one. I did not think—'

'What is it they request?'

He slowly shook his head. 'Recognition, sir. The earth beneath this city is Barghast land, or so they assert. Reading the accounts of previous audiences, they have been dismissed with a boot to the backside, more or less. Mortal Sword, I did not imagine—'

'Listen, now, sir. The woman has leave to speak.'

The brothers and sisters had heeded the Destriant's words, were now once again seated, displaying an array
of furious expressions. Had not the moment been so tense, Itkovian would have grinned at the obvious ... consternation of the gods.

'Aacceptable,' Hetan grated, narrow gaze studying the priests and priestesses. 'What has been a request is now a demand. I shall now list your past arguments for denying our petition, and repeat once again our replies. Perhaps this time you will choose to see reason when you vote. If not, I shall force the issue.'

Rath'Hood barked a laugh, leaned forward. 'Force the issue? Dear lass, this city and all within it are perhaps no more than a few bells from annihilation. Yet you threaten us with force? Are you truly the foolish little girl you seem?'

Hetan's grin was savage. 'Your past arguments. The earliest Daru records of this settlement insist the land was unoccupied. Save for ancient buildings long abandoned that were clearly not Barghast in origin. The few records that the herder camps possessed reinforced this notion. The Barghast lived to the north, upon the slopes of the hills and within the Range itself. Aye, shouldermen made pilgrimages to this land, but such journeys were infrequent and of brief duration. Agreed thus far? Good. To these arguments we have in the past made simple reply. Barghast do not live upon holy ground – the dwelling place of the bones of their ancestors. Do you live in your own cemeteries? You do not. Nor do we. The first Capan tribes found naught but the barrows of Barghast dead. They levelled them and with the Daru raised a city on our sacred land.

'This affront cannot be undone. The past is immutable, and we are not so foolish as to insist otherwise. No, our request was simple. Formal recognition of our ownership, and right to make pilgrimage.

'You denied the request, again and again. Priests, our patience is at an end.'

Rath'Shadowthrone crowed his laughter. He threw up his hands. 'Indeed! Excellent! Very well! Brothers and sisters, let us grant the Barghast all they wish! Delicious irony, to freely give all that we are about to lose! Will the Pannions honour it? I think not.'

Hetan shook her head. 'I said our patience has ended, beetle-under-rock. Our past requests no longer obtain. This city will fall. The Pannions will offer no welcome. The desire of Barghast pilgrims none the less must be answered. Thus.' She crossed her arms.

The silence stretched.

Then Rath'Queen of Dreams gasped.

Hetan faced her squarely. 'Ah, you know the truth of it!'

With a visage of thoughtful regard belied by the flustered alarm evinced by her posture and gestures, the priestess cleared her throat. 'Not all among us. A few. Very few.' Her head turned, surveyed her brothers and sisters. Rath'Burn was the first to react, her breath hissing through the slitted mouth of her mask.

After a moment, Rath'Hood grunted. 'I see. An extraordinary solution indeed—'

'Obvious!' Rath'Shadowthrone snapped, jerking in his seat. 'No secret knowledge required! None the less, we must consider the matter! What is lost by relinquishment? What is gained by denial?'

'No,' Hetan said. 'Denial shall not force our hand into defending this land. Humbrall Taur, my father, rightly guessed the twist of your thoughts. If it must be, we shall accept our loss. However, my brother and I will kill everyone in this chamber before we leave here today, should you choose to deny us. Can you accept your loss?'

No-one spoke for a long moment, then Rath'Queen of Dreams coughed again. 'Hetan, may I ask you a question?'

The grey-faced woman nodded.

'How will you effect the expediting of ... of what you seek?'

'What secret do you withhold?' Rath'Oponn shrieked. 'You and Rath'Hood and Rath'Burn! What are you all
going on about! The rest of us must know!'

'Use that kernel of a brain,' Rath'Shadowthrone sneered. 'What do pilgrims go to honour and revere?'

'Uh ... relics? Icons?'

Rath'Shadowthrone mimed a tutor's patient, condescending nod. 'Very good, brother. So, how do you put an end to the pilgrimage?'

Rath'Oponn stared, his mask blank.

'You move the relics, you idiot!' Rath'Shadowthrone screamed.

'But wait!' Rath'Beru said. 'Doesn't that assume their location is known? Weren't all the mounds flattened? By the Abyss, how many estates and Camp hearthhomes have some battered Barghast urn up on a shelf? Are we to set out and search every house in the city?'

'We care nothing for vessels,' Hetan rumbled.

'That's precisely the secret!' Rath'Shadowthrone chimed to Rath'Beru, head wagging from side to side. 'Our two sisters and one brother know where the bones lie!' He faced Rath'Queen of Dreams. 'Don't you, dear? Some fool or wise spark gathered them all those centuries back and deposited them in one place – and that place still remains, doesn't it? Put that nauseating coyness to bed and out with the goods, woman!'

'You are so crass,' the priestess hissed.

Itkovian stopped listening as the bickering continued. His gaze was on Hetan, his attention sharpened. He wished he could see her eyes, if only to confirm what he now suspected.

She was trembling. So slight, the Shield Anvil doubted anyone else noticed. Trembling ... and I think I know why.

Movement caught his eye. Karnadas was backing away, edging towards Brukhalian's side once again. The Destriant's gaze seemed to be fixed on the brothers and sisters on the council, in particular upon the silent, slight figure of Rath'Fener, seated on the far right. The set of Karnadas's back and shoulders – and his deliberate avoidance of focusing on Hetan – told Itkovian that the Destriant had come to the same revelation – a revelation that had the Shield Anvil's heart thumping.

The Grey Swords were not part of this. Indeed, they were neutral observers, but Itkovian could not help adding his silent will to Hetan's cause.

The Destriant withdrew to Brukhalian's side, casually glanced over and met Itkovian's eyes.

The Shield Anvil responded with the faintest of nods.

Karnadas's eyes widened, then he sighed.

Aye. The Barghast gambit. Generations of pilgrims . . . long before the coming of the Capon and Daru, long before the settlement was born. Barghast do not normally honour their dead in such a manner. No, the bones hidden here – somewhere – are not simply the bones of some dead warchief or shoulder-man. These bones belong to someone . . . profoundly important. Valued so highly that the sons and daughters of countless generations journeyed to their legendary resting place. Thus, one significant truth . . . which leads to the next one.

Hetan trembles. The Barghast spirits. . . tremble. They have been lost – made blind by the desecration. For so long . . . lost. Those holiest of remains . . . and the Barghast themselves were never certain – never certain that they were here, in this earth in this place, were never certain that they existed at all.

The mortal remains of their spirit-gods.

And Hetan is about to find them. Humbrall Tour's long-held suspicion . . . Humbrall Tour's audacious – no,
outrageous – gambit. 'Find me the bones of the Founding Families, daughter Hetan.'

The White Face clans knew that the Domin would come for them, once Capustan fell. There would, in truth, be war. Yet the clans had never before been unified – the ancient blood-feuds and rivalries ever gnawed from within. Humbrall Taur needed those ancient holy remains. To raise as a standard. To knit the clans together – all feuds forgotten.

But Hetan is too late. Even if she wins, here, now, she is too late. Take the mortal remains, dear, by all means – but how will you get them out of Capustan? How will you get through rank upon rank of Pannion soldiers?

Rath'Queen of Dreams's voice cut through his thoughts. 'Very well. Hetan, daughter of Humbrall Taur, we accede to your request. We return to you the mortal remains of your ancestors.' She slowly rose and gestured to her Gidrath captain. The soldier stepped close and she began whispering instructions. After a moment the man nodded and exited through the door behind him. The masked woman turned once again to the Barghast. 'Some effort will be required in ... reaching the resting place. With your permission, we would like to speak with Mortal Sword Brukhalian in the meantime, on matters pertaining to the defence of this city.'

Hetan scowled, then shrugged. 'As you wish. But our patience is short.'

The Queen of Dreams mask shifted into a smile. 'You shall be able to witness the extrication yourself, Hetan.'

The Barghast woman stepped back from the Navel.

'Approach, Mortal Sword,' Rath'Hood rumbled. 'Sword sheathed, this time.'

Itkovian watched his commander stride forward, wondering at the high priest's admonition, and at Brukhalian's answering cold smile.

Rath'Shadowthrone leaned forward. 'Know, Mortal Sword, that the Mask Council finally acknowledges what was obvious to you and me from the very start – the inevitable destruction of Capustan.'

'You are mistaken,' Brukhalian replied, his deep voice reverberating in the hall. 'There is nothing inevitable about this impending siege, provided we each hold to a unified defence—'

'The outlying redoubts shall be held,' Rath'Beru snapped, 'for as long as is possible.'

'They will be slaughtered, you blinkered fool!' Rath'Shadowthrone shrieked. 'Hundreds of lives thrown away! Lives we can ill afford to lose!'

'Enough!' Rath'Queen of Dreams shouted. 'This is not the issue we are meant to discuss. Mortal Sword, the return of the Shield Anvil's troop was witnessed by many. Specifically, the appearance of... large wolves. Reputedly somewhat ... worse for wear. These creatures have not been seen since—'

An inner door opened to a line of unarmoured Gidrath soldiers, each carrying picks, who strode across the broad floor before fanning out at one end, where they set to examining the tiles along the edge.

Brukhalian cleared his throat. 'This is a subject, Rath'Queen of Dreams, that involves Prince Jelarkan—'

Only momentarily distracted by the arrival of the workers, the high priestess faced Brukhalian again. 'We have already had discourse with the prince on the subject. He was reluctant with his knowledge, and seemed intent on winning concessions from the Council in exchange for information. We will not participate in such crass bargaining, Mortal Sword. We wish to know the nature and the significance of these beasts, and you will provide us with answers.'

'Alas, in the absence of our employer,' Brukhalian said, 'we cannot comply. Should the prince instruct us otherwise ...'

The workers began tapping their picks against the edge of the floor. Fragments of ceramic tile pattered like...
hail around their feet. Itkovian watched Hetan draw a step closer to the men. Cafal's chant had fallen to a whisper, a susurration beneath every other sound in the chamber, and his eyes were now fixed, glittering, on the Gidraths' efforts.

_The bones lie beneath us. Gathered here, in the chambered heart of the Thrall – how long ago, I wonder?_

Rath'Shadowthrone snorted at Brukhalian's words. 'Really, now. This avails us nothing. Someone call for the prince. Shield Anvil, there were two mages among those merchants you saved – were those undead wolves their pets, perhaps? We understand that the mages have taken up residence here in the Daru Quarter. While another of that merchant party has done the same; indeed, has purchased a small house and has petitioned the Council for Rights to Renovation. What an odd lot! A hundred thousand cannibals outside our walls, and these strangers are all buying property! With undead wolves for pets as well! What say you, Itkovian, to all this?'

The Shield Anvil shrugged. 'Your reasoning has a certain logic, Rath'Shadowthrone. As for the mages' and merchants' actions, I cannot, alas, account for their optimism. Perhaps you would be better advised to enquire of them directly.'

'So I shall, Shield Anvil, so I shall.'

The tiles proved to be fixed to larger, rectangular slabs of stone. The workers had managed to pry one loose and were dragging it to one side, revealing trusses of pitch-stained wooden beams. The trusses formed a gridwork, suspended above a subterranean chamber from which musty, turgid air flowed. Once the first slab was free, the removal process quickened in pace.

'I think,' Rath'Hood said, 'we should postpone our discussion with the Mortal Sword, for it seems that the chamber will soon lose its floor in answer to Hetan's demands. When that particular discussion resumes, Prince Jelarkan will attend, in order that he may hold the Mortal Sword's hand in the face of our questioning. In the meantime, we are witness to a historic unveiling which is swiftly acquiring our collective attention. So be it.'

'Gods,' Rath'Shadowthrone muttered, 'you do prattle on, Deathmask. Even so, let us heed your advice. Quickly, you damned soldiers, away with the floor! Let us see these mouldy bones!'

Itkovian edged closer to stand at Hetan's side. 'Well played,' he murmured.

Tension made her breath shallow, and she clearly did not trust herself to make reply.

More slabs were dragged clear. Pole-lanterns were found and readied, but thus far, darkness continued to swallow all that lay beneath the floor.

Cafal came to Itkovian's other side, his chant ended. 'They are here,' he rumbled. 'Crowding us.'

The Shield Anvil nodded in understanding. _The spirits, drawn through into our world by the chant. Arrived. Avid with yearning. I feel them indeed ..._

A vast pit had been opened, its sides ragged but geometric, perhaps seven paces across and almost as wide, reaching out to the central millstone which itself seemed to be standing atop a stone column. The Rath' priests and priestesses of the Council had risen from their places and were now edging down for a closer look. One figure separated himself from the others and approached the trio of Grey Swords.

Brukhalian and Itkovian bowed when Rath'Fener arrived. The man's tusked, furred mask was expressionless, the human eyes flatly regarding Karnadas. 'I have quested,' he said in a quiet, soft tone, 'to the very hooves of our Lord. I fasted for four days, slipped through the reeds and found myself on the blood-soaked shore of the Tusked One's own realm. When last, sir, did you make such a journey?'

The Destriant smiled. 'And what did you learn when there, Rath'Fener?'

'The Tiger of Summer is dead. His flesh rots on a plain far to the south of here. Slain by minions of the Pannion Seer. Yet, look upon Rath'Trake – he is possessed of a renewed vigour, nay, a silent joy.'

'It would seem, then,' Karnadas said after a moment, 'the tale of Trake is not yet done.'
Rath'Fener hissed, 'Is this a true gambit to godhood? There is but one lord of war!'

'Perhaps we'd be wise to look to our own, sir,' the Destriant murmured.

The masked priest snorted, then whirled away and stalked off.

Itkovian watched him for a moment, then leaned towards Karnadas. 'Are you immune to shock and dismay, sir? Did you know of this news?'

'Trake's death? The Destriant's brows slowly rose, his eyes still on Rath'Fener. 'Oh yes. My colleague travelled far to arrive at Fener's cloven hooves. While I, sir, have never left that place.' Karnadas turned to Brukhalian. 'Mortal Sword, the time has surely come to unmask this pompous shrew and his claims to pre-eminence—'

'No,' Brukhalian rumbled.

'He reeks of desperation, sir. We cannot trust such a creature among our flock—'

Brukhalian faced Karnadas. 'And the consequences of such an act, sir? Would you take your place among the Mask Council?'

'There would be value in that—'

'This city is not our home, Karnadas. Becoming snared in its web risks far too much. My answer remains no.'

'Very well.'

The pole-lanterns had been ignited, had begun a collectively cautious descent in the hands of Gidrath guards. All attention was suddenly fixed on what was revealed below.

The subterranean chamber's earthen floor was less than a man's height beneath the crossbeams. Filling the space between the two levels was the wooden prow of an open, seafaring craft, twisted with age and perhaps the one-time weight of soil and rocks, black-pitched and artfully carved. From where Itkovian stood he could see a web-like span of branches reaching out to an outrigger.

Three workers lowered themselves into the chamber, lanterns in hand. The Shield Anvil moved closer. The craft had been carved from a single tree, its entire length – more than ten paces – now flattened and corkscrewed in its resting place. Alongside it, Itkovian could now make out another craft, identical with the first, then another. The entire hidden floor of the Thrall's Council Chamber was crowded with boats. He had not known what to expect, but it was certainly not this.

'Tens of thousands,' the Destriant whispered at his side. 'Even the sorcery that preserves them has begun to fail.'

Hetan dropped down to land lithely beside the first craft. Itkovian could see that she too was surprised, reaching out tentatively close to but not touching the gunnel, where her hand hovered in trembling uncertainty.

One of the guards moved his lantern pole directly over the boat.

Voices gasped.

Bodies filled the craft, stacked haphazardly, each one wrapped in what looked to be red-stained sailcloth, each limb separately entwined, the rough-woven cloth covering each corpse from head to toe. There appeared to be no desiccation beneath the wrapping.

Rath'Queen of Dreams spoke, 'The early writings of our Council describe the finding of such dugout canoes ... in most of the barrows razed during the building of Capustan. Each held but a few bodies such as these you see here, and most of the canoes disintegrated in the effort of removing them. However, some measure of respect for the dead was honoured – those corpses not inadvertently destroyed in the excavations were gathered, and reinterred within the surviving craft. There are,' she continued, her words cutting through the
silence, 'nine canoes beneath us, and over sixty bodies. It was the belief of scholars at that time that these barrows were not Barghast – I think you can see why that conclusion was reached. You may also note that the bodies are larger – almost Toblakai in stature – supporting the notion that they weren't Barghast. Although, it must be granted, there are most certainly Toblakai traits among Hetan and her people. My own belief is that the Toblakai, the Barghast and the Trell are all from the same stock, with the Barghast having more human blood than the other two. I have little evidence to support my belief, apart from simple observation of physical characteristics and ways of living.'

'These are our Founding Spirits,' Hetan said. 'The truth screams within me. The truth closes about my heart with iron fingers.'

'They find their power,' Cafal rumbled from the edge of the pit.

Karnadas nodded and said quietly, 'They do indeed. Joy and pain ... exaltation tempered by the sorrow for the ones still lost. Shield Anvil, we are witnessing the birth of gods.'

Itkovian walked over to Cafal, laid a hand on the man's shoulder. 'Sir, how will you take these remains from the city? The Pannions view every god but their own as avowed enemies. They will seek to destroy all that you have found.'

The Barghast fixed his small, hard eyes on the Shield Anvil. 'We have no answer, wolf. Not yet. But we do not fear. Not now, and not ever again.'

Itkovian slowly nodded. 'It is well,' he said with fullest understanding, 'when you find yourself in the embrace of your god.'

Cafal bared his teeth. 'Gods, wolf. We have many. The first Barghast to come to this land, the very first.'

'Your ancestors have ascended.'

'They have. Who now dares challenge our pride?'

_That remains to be seen, alas._

'You've an apology to make,' Stonny Menackis said as she stepped out of the practice circle and reached for a cloth to wipe the sweat from her face.

Gruntle sighed. 'Aye, I'm sorry, lass—'

'Not to me, you idiot. No point in apologizing for who you are and always will be, is there?' She paused to examine the narrow blade of her rapier, scowled at a nick near the inside edge a hand's span from the tip, and glanced back at the Grey Swords recruit who was still in the circle and awaiting a new opponent. 'Damn woman's green, but a fast learner. Your apology, oaf, should be made to Master Keruli—'

'Not my master any longer.'

'He saved our skins, Gruntle, including your worthless hide.'

Crossing his arms, Gruntle raised a brow. 'Oh, and how did he manage that? Blacking out at the first rush – funny, I didn't see any lightning and conflagration from his Elder God, his nasty Lord—'

'We all went down, you fool. We were done for. But that priest plucked our souls away – as far as those K'Chain Che'Malle could sense, we were dead. Don't you remember dreaming? Dreaming! Pulled right into that Elder God's own warren. I recall every detail—'

'I guess I was too busy dying for real,' Gruntle snapped.

'Yes, you were, and Keruli saved you from that, too. Ungracious pig. One moment I was getting tossed around by a K'Chain Che'Malle, the next I woke up ... somewhere else ... with a huge ghost wolf standing over me. And I knew – knew instantly, Gruntle, that nothing was getting past that wolf. It was standing guard . . .
'Some kind of servant of the Elder God?'

'No, he doesn't have any servants. What he has is friends. I don't know about you, but knowing that – realizing it as I did there with that giant wolf – well, a god that finds friends instead of mindless worshippers ... dammit, I'm his, Gruntle, body and soul. And I'll fight for him, because I know he'll fight for me. Horrible Elder Gods, bah! I'll take him over those snarling bickering fools with their temples and coffers and rituals any day.'

Gruntle stared at her, disbelieving. 'I must still be hallucinating,' he muttered.

'Never mind me,' Stonny said, sliding her rapier into its scabbard. 'Keruli and his Elder God saved your life, Gruntle. So we're now going to him, and you're going to apologize and if you're smart you're going to pledge to stand with him, in all that's to come—'

'Like Hood I am. Oh, sure, I'll say sorry and all that, but I don't want anything to do with any gods, Elder or otherwise, and that includes their priests—'

'I knew you weren't smart but I had to offer anyway. Let's go, then. Where's Buke disappeared to?'

'Not sure. He was just, uh, delivering me.'

'The Elder God saved him, too. And Mancy. Hood knows those two necromancers didn't give a damn whether they lived or died. If he's smart, he'll quit that contract.'

'Well, none of us are as smart as you, Stonny.'

'Don't I know it.'

They left the compound. Gruntle was still feeling the effects of the last few days, but with a belly full of food instead of wine and ale and the momentary but efficacious attention of the Grey Sword priest, Karnadas, he found his walk steadier and the pain behind his eyes had faded to a dull ache. He had to lengthen his stride to keep up with Stonny's habitual march. Even as her beauty attracted attention, her relentless pace and dark glare ensured a clear path through any crowd, and Capustan's few, cowed citizens scurried quicker than most to get out of her way.

They skirted the cemetery, the upright clay coffin-boles passing on their left. Another necropolis lay just ahead, evincing the Daru style of crypts and urns that Gruntle knew well from Darujhistan, and Stonny angled their route slightly to its left, taking the narrow, uneven passageway between the necropolis's low-walled grounds and the outer edge of the Tura'l Concourse. Twenty paces ahead was a smaller square, which they traversed before reaching the eastern edge of the Temple District.

Gruntle had had enough of stumbling in Stonny's wake like a dog in tow. 'Listen,' he growled, 'I just came from this quarter. If Keruli's camped nearby why didn't you just come to get me and save me the walk?'

'I did come to get you, but you stank like a pauper-tavern's piss pit. Is that how you wanted to show yourself to Master Keruli? You needed cleaning up, and food, and I wasn't going to baby you through all that.'

Gruntle subsided, muttering under his breath. *Gods, I wish the world was full of passive, mewling women. He thought about that a moment longer, then scowled. On second thoughts, what a nightmare that'd be. It's the job of a man to fan the spark into flames, not quench it ...*

'Get that dreamy look off your face,' Stonny snapped. 'We're here.'

Blinking, Gruntle sighed, then stared at the small, dilapidated building before them – plain, pitted stone blocks, covered here and there by old plaster; a flat, beamed roof, the ancient wood sagging; and a doorway that he and Stonny would have to crouch to pass through. 'This is it? Hood's breath, this is pathetic.'

'He's a modest man,' Stonny drawled, hands on hips. 'His Elder God's not one for pomp and ceremony. Anyway, with its recent history, it went cheap.'
'History?'

Stonny frowned. 'Takes spilled blood to sanctify the Elder God's holy ground. A whole family committed suicide in this house, less than a week past. Keruli was ...'

'Delighted?'

'Tempered delight. He grieved for the untimely deaths, of course—'

'Of course.'

'Then he put in a bid.'

'Naturally.'

'Anyway, it's now a temple—'

Gruntle swung to her. 'Hold on, now. I'm not buying into any faith when I enter, am I?'

She smirked. 'Whatever you say.'

'I mean, I'm not. Understand me? And Keruli had better understand, too. And his hoary old god! Not a single genuflection, not even a nod to the altar, and if that's not acceptable then I'm staying out here.'

'Relax, no-one's expecting anything of you, Gruntle. Why would they?'

He ignored the mocking challenge in her eyes. 'Fine, so lead the way, woman.'

'I always do.' She strode to the door and pulled it open. 'Local security measures – you can't kick these doors in, they all open outward, and they're built bigger than the inside frame. Smart, eh? The Grey Swords are expecting a house by house scrap once the walls fall – those Pannions are going to find the going messy.'

'The defence of Capustan assumes the loss of the walls? Hardly optimistic. We're all in a death trap, and Keruli's dream-escape trick won't help us much when the Tenescowri are roasting our bodies for the main course, will it?'

'You're a miserable ox, aren't you?'

'The price for being clear-eyed, Stonny.'

She ducked as she entered the building, waving for Gruntle to follow. He hesitated, then, still scowling, stepped through.

A small reception chamber greeted them, bare-walled, clay-tiled, with a few lantern niches set in the walls and a row of iron pegs unadorned by clothing. Another doorway was opposite, a long leather apron providing the barrier. The air smelled of lye soap, with a faint undercurrent of bile.

Stonny unclasped her cloak and hung it on a hook. 'The wife crawled out of the main room to die here,' she said. 'Dragging her entrails the whole way. Raised the suspicion that her suicide wasn't voluntary. Either that or she changed her mind.'

'Maybe a goat's milk hawker knocked on the door,' Gruntle suggested, 'and she was trying to cancel her order.'

Stonny studied him for a moment, as if considering, then she shrugged. 'Seems a bit elaborate, as an explanation, but who knows? Could be.' She swung about and entered the inner doorway in a swish of leather.

Sighing, Gruntle followed.

The main chamber ran the full width of the house; a series of alcoves – storage rooms and cell-like bedrooms – divided up the back wall, a central arched walkway bisecting it to lead into the courtyard garden beyond. Benches and trunks crowded one corner of the chamber. A central firepit and humped clay bread-oven was
directly before them, radiating heat. The air was rich with the smell of baking bread.

Master Keruli sat cross-legged on the tiled floor to the left of the firepit, head bowed, his pate glistening with beads of sweat.

Stonny edged forward and dropped to one knee. 'Master?'

The priest looked up, his round face creasing in a smile. 'I have wiped clean their slates,' he said. 'They now dwell at peace. Their souls have fashioned a worthy dream-world. I can hear the children laughing.'

'Your god is merciful,' Stonny murmured.

Rolling his eyes, Gruntle strode over to the trunks. 'Thanks for saving my life, Keruli,' he growled. 'Sorry I was so miserable about it. Looks like your supplies survived, that's good. Well, I'll be on my way now—'

'A moment please, Captain.'

Gruntle turned.

'I have something,' the priest said, 'for your friend, Buke. An ... aid ... for his endeavours.'

'Oh?' Gruntle avoided Stonny's searching stare.

'There, in that second trunk, yes, the small, iron one. Yes, open it. Do you see? Upon the dark grey bolt of felt.'

'The little clay bird?'

'Yes. Please instruct him to crush it into powder, then mix with cooled water that has been boiled for at least a hundred heartbeats. Once mixed, Buke must drink it – all of it.'

'You want him to drink muddy water?'

'The clay will ease the pains in his stomach, and there are other benefits as well, which he will discover in due time.'

Gruntle hesitated. 'Buke isn't a trusting man, Keruli.'

'Tell him that his quarry will elude him otherwise. With ease. Tell him, also, that to achieve what he desires, he must accept allies. You both must. I share your concerns on this matter. Additional allies will find him, in time.'

'Very well,' Gruntle said, shrugging. He collected the small clay object and dropped it into his belt-pouch.

'What are you two talking about?' Stonny asked quietly.

Gruntle tensed at that gentle tone, as it usually preceded an explosion of temper, but Keruli simply broadened his smile. 'A private matter, dear Stonny. Now, I have instructions for you – please be patient. Captain Gruntle, there are no debts between us now. Go in peace.'

'Right. Thanks,' he added gruffly. 'I'll make my own way out, then.'

'We'll talk later, Gruntle,' Stonny said. 'Won't we?'

_You'll have to find me first._ 'Of course, lass.'

A few moments later he stood outside, feeling strangely weighed down, by nothing less than an old man's kind, forgiving nature. He stood for a while, unmoving, watching the locals hurrying past. Like ants in a kicked nest. _And the next kick is going to be a killer ..._

Stonny watched Gruntle leave, then turned to Keruli. 'You said you had instructions for me?'
'Our friend the captain has a difficult path ahead.'

Stonny scowled. 'Gruntle doesn't walk difficult paths. First sniff of trouble and he's off the opposite way.'

'Sometimes there is no choice.'

'And what am I supposed to do about it?'

'His time is coming. Soon. I ask only that you stay close to him.'

Her scowl deepened. 'That depends on him. He has a talent for not being found.'

Keruli turned back to tend the oven. 'I'd rather think,' he murmured, 'that his talent is about to fail him.'

Torchlight and diffuse sunlight bathed the array of dugout canoes and their wrapped corpses. The entire pit had been exposed, gutting most of the Thrall's floor – the granite pillar with its millstone cap standing alone in the very centre – to reveal the crafts, crushed and cluttered like the harvest of an ancient hurricane.

Hetan knelt, head bowed, before the first dugout. She had not moved in some time.

Itkovian had descended to conduct his own close examination of the remains, and now moved with careful steps among the wreckage, Cafal following in silence. The Shield Anvil’s attention was drawn to the carving on the prows; while no two sets were identical, there was a continuity in the themes depicted – scenes of battle at sea, the Barghast clearly recognizable in their long, low dugouts, struggling with a singular enemy, a tall, lithe species with angular faces and large, almond-shaped eyes, in high-walled ships.

As he crouched to study one such panel, Cafal murmured behind him, 'T’isten’ur.'

Itkovian glanced back. 'Sir?'

'The enemies of our Founding Spirits. T’isten’ur, the Grey-Skinned. Demons in the oldest tales who collected heads, yet kept the victims living ... heads that remained watchful, bodies that worked ceaselessly. T’isten’ur: demons who dwelt in shadows. The Founding Spirits fought them on the Blue Wastes...' He fell silent, brow knitting, then continued, 'The Blue Wastes. We had no understanding of such a place. The shouldermen believed it was our Birth Realm. But now ... it was the sea, the oceans.'

'The Barghast Birth Realm in truth, then.'

'Aye. The Founding Spirits drove the T’isten’ur from the Blue Wastes, drove the demons back into their underworld, the Forest of Shadows – a realm said to lie far to the southeast ...'

'Another continent, perhaps.'

'Perhaps.'

'You are discovering the truth behind your oldest legends, Cafal. In my home of Elingarth, far to the south of here, there are stories of a distant continent in the direction you have indicated. A land, sir, of giant firs and redwoods and spruce – a forest unbroken, its feet hidden in shadows and peopled with deadly wraiths.

'As Shield Anvil,' Itkovian resumed after a moment, returning his attention once more to the carvings, 'I am as much a scholar as a warrior. T’isten’ur – a name with curious echoes. Tiste Andii, the Dwellers in Darkness. And, more rarely mentioned, and then in naught but fearful whispers, their shadow-kin, the Tiste Edur. Grey-skinned, believed extinct – and thankfully so, for it is a name sheathed in dread. T’isten’ur, the first glottal stop implies past tense, yes? T’lan, now T’lan – your language is kin to that of the Imass. Close kin. Tell me, do you understand Moranth?'

Cafal grunted. 'The Moranth speak the language of the Barghast shouldermen – the holy tongue – the language that rose from the pit of darkness from whence all thought and all words first came. The Moranth claim kinship with the Barghast – they call us their Fallen Kin. But it is they who have fallen, not us. They who have found a shadowed forest in which to live. They who have embraced the alchemies of the T’isten’ur. They
who made peace with the demons long ago, exchanging secrets, before retreating into their mountain fastnesses and hiding for ever behind their insect masks. Ask no more of the Moranth, wolf. They are fallen and unrepentant. No more.'

'Very well, Cafal.' Itkovian slowly straightened. 'But the past refuses to remain buried – as you see here. The past hides restless truths, too, unpleasant truths as well as joyous ones. Once the effort of unveiling has begun ... Sir, there is no going back.'

'I have reached that understanding,' the Barghast warrior growled. 'As my father warned us – in success, we shall find seeds of despair.'

'I should like to meet Humbrall Taur someday,' Itkovian murmured.

'My father can crush a man's chest in his embrace. He can wield hook-swords in both hands and slay ten warriors in a span of heartbeats. Yet what the clans fear most in their warleader is his intelligence. Of his ten children, Hetan is most like him in that wit.'

'She affects a blunt forthrightness.'

Cafal grunted. 'As does our father. I warn you now, Shield Anvil, she has lowered her lance in your direction and sighted along its length. You shall not escape. She will bed you despite all your vows, and then you shall belong to her.'

'You are mistaken, Cafal.'

The Barghast bared his filed teeth, said nothing.

You too have your father's wit, Cafal, as you deftly turn me away from the ancient secrets of the Barghast with yet another bold assault on my honour.

A dozen paces behind them, Hetan rose and faced the ring of priests and priestesses lining the edge of the floor. 'You may return the slabs of stone. The removal of the Founding Spirits' remains must wait—'

Rath'Shadowthrone snorted. 'Until when? Until the Pannions have completed razing the city? Why not call upon your father and have him bring down the clans of the Barghast? Have him break the siege, and then you and your kin can cart away these bones in peace and with our blessing!'

'No. Fight your own war.'

'The Pannions shall devour you once we're gone!' Rath' Shadowthrone shrieked. 'You are fools! You, your father! Your clans! All fools!'

Hetan grinned. 'Is it panic I see on your god's face?'

The priest hunched suddenly, rasped, 'Shadowthrone never panics.'

'Then it must be the mortal man behind the fa?ade,' Hetan concluded with a triumphant sneer.

Hissing, Rath'Shadowthrone wheeled and pushed through his comrades, his sandals flapping as he hurried from the chamber.

Hetan clambered up from the pit. 'I am done here. Cafal! We return to the barracks!'

Brukhalian reached down to help Itkovian climb from the pit, and as the Shield Anvil straightened the Mortal Sword pulled him close. 'Escort these two,' he murmured. 'They've something planned for the removal of—'

'Perhaps,' Itkovian interjected, 'but frankly, sir, I don't see how.'

'Think on it, then, sir;' Brukhalian commanded.

'I shall.'
"Through any means, Shield Anvil."

Still standing close, Itkovian met the man's dark eyes. "Sir, my vows—"

'I am Fener's Mortal Sword, sir. This demand for knowledge comes not from me, but from the Tusked One himself. Shield Anvil, it is a demand born of fear. Our god, sir, is filled with fear. Do you understand?"

'No,' Itkovian snapped. 'I do not. But I have heard your command, sir. So be it.'

Brukhalian released the Shield Anvil's arm, turned slightly to face Karnadas, who stood, pale and still, beside them. 'Contact Quick Ben, sir, by whatever means—'

'I am not sure I can,' the Destriant replied, 'but I shall try, sir.'

'This siege,' Brukhalian growled, eyes clouding with some inner vision, 'is a bloodied flower, and before this day is done it shall unfold before us. And in grasping the stalk, we shall discover its thorns—'

The three men turned at the approach of a Rath' priest. Calm, sleepy eyes were visible behind the striped, feline mask. 'Gentlemen,' the man said, 'a battle awaits us.'

'Indeed,' Brukhalian said drily. 'We were unaware of that.'

'Our lords of war will find themselves in its fierce midst. The Boar. The Tiger. An ascendant in peril, and a spirit about to awaken to true godhood. Do you not wonder, gentlemen, whose war this truly is? Who is it who would dare cross blades with our Lords? But there is something that is even more curious in all this – whose hidden face lies behind this fated ascension of Trake? What, indeed, would be the value of two gods of war? Two Lords of Summer?'

'That,' the Destriant drawled, 'is not a singular title, sir. We have never contested Trake's sharing it.'

'You have not succeeded in hiding your alarm at my words, Karnadas, but I shall let it pass. One final question, however. When, I wonder, will you depose Rath'Fener, as is your right as Fener's Destriant – a title no-one has rightfully held for a thousand years... except for you, of course and, in aside, why has Fener seen the need to revive that loftiest of positions now?' After a moment, he shrugged. 'Ah, well, never mind that. Rath'Fener is no ally of yours, nor your god's – you must know that. He senses the threat you present to him, and will do all he can to break you and your company. Should you ever require assistance, seek me out.'

'Yet you claim you and your Lord as our rivals, Rath'Trake,' Brukhalian growled.

The mask hinged into a fierce smile. 'It only seems that way, right now, Mortal Sword. I shall take my leave of you, for the moment. Farewell, friends.'

A long moment of silence passed whilst the three Grey Swords watched the Rath' priest stride away, then Brukhalian shook himself. 'Be on your way, Shield Anvil. Destriant, I would have a few more words with you...'

Shaken, Itkovian swung about and set off after the two Barghast warriors. *The earth has shifted beneath our feet. Unbalanced, moments from drawing blood, and peril now besets us from all sides. Tusked One, deliver us from uncertainty. I beg you. Now is not the time...*
CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Malazan military's vaunted ability to adapt to whatever style of warfare the opposition offered was in fact superficial. Behind the illusion of malleability there remained a hard certainty in the supremacy of the Imperial way. Contributing to that illusion of flexibility was the sheer resiliency of the Malazan military structure, and a foundation bolstered by profound knowledge, and insightful analysis, of disparate and numerous styles of warfare.

Abstract (Part XXVII, Book VII, Vol. IX)
on Temul's thirteen-page treatise, 'Malazan Warfare'
Enet Obar (the Lifeless)

Spindle's hairshirt had caught fire. Eyes watering and coughing at the foul stench, Picker watched the scrawny mage rolling back and forth on the dusty ground beside the firepit. Smoke snaked from smouldering hair, curses rode sparks up into the night air. Since everyone else was too busy laughing, the corporal reached over to collect a water skin, which she wedged between her knees. Unstoppering the spout and pressing her thighs together, she tracked Spindle with the lone stream of water until she heard hissing sounds.

'All right all right!' the mage shrieked, smudged hands waving about. 'Stop! I'm drowning!'

Convulsed in his own fits, Hedge had rolled perilously close to the flames. Picker stretched out one booted foot and kicked the sapper. 'Everyone calm down,' she snapped. 'Before the whole squad gets burnt crispy. Hood's breath!'

In the gloom at her side, Blend spoke. 'We're dying of boredom, Corporal, that's the problem.'

'If boredom was fatal there wouldn't be a soldier alive on this whole world, Blend. Feeble excuse. The problem's simple: starting with the sergeant writhing around over there, the whole Oponn-cursed squad is insane.'

'Except for you, of course—'

'You kissing my dung-stained boots, lass? Wrong move. I'm crazier than the rest of you. If I wasn't, I'd have run off long ago. Gods, look at these idiots. Got a mage wearing his dead mother's hair and every time he opens his warren we get attacked by snarling ground squirrels. Got a sapper with permanent flashburns whose bladder must be a warren unto itself since I ain't seen him wander off once and it's three days running now at this camp. Got a Napan woman being stalked by a rogue bhederin bull that's either blind or sees more than we do when he looks at her. And then there's a healer who went and got himself so badly sunburned he's running a fever.'

'Don't bother mentioning Antsy,' Blend murmured. 'The sergeant would top anyone's list as a wall-eyed lunatic—'

'I wasn't done. Got a woman who likes sneaking up on her friends. And finally,' she added in a low growl, 'dear old Antsy. Nerves of cold iron, that one. Convinced the gods themselves have snatched Quick Ben and it's all Antsy's own fault. Somehow.' Picker reached up and slipped a finger under the torcs on her arm, her scowl deepening. 'As if the gods care a whit about Quick Ben, never mind the sergeant himself. As if they take note of any of us no matter what we do.'

'Treach's torcs bothering you, Corporal?'
'Careful, Blend,' Picker murmured. 'I ain't in the mood.'

Sodden and miserable, Spindle was climbing to his feet. 'Evil spark!' he hissed. 'Finger-flicked like a burning booger – there's malevolent spirits lurkin' about, mark my words.'

'Mark 'em!' Picker snorted. 'I'll carve 'em in your grave stone, Spindle, and that's a Hood-blown promise!'

'Gods, what a stink!' Hedge swore. 'I doubt even a grease-smeared Barghast will come near you! I say we should vote – the whole squad, I mean. Vote to tear that disgusting shirt off of Spindle's pimply back and bury it somewhere – ideally under a few tons of rubble. What say you, Sergeant? Hey, Antsy?

'Shhh!' the sergeant hissed from where he sat at the very edge of the firelight, staring out into the darkness. 'Something's out there!'

'If it's another angry squirrel-' Picker began.

'I ain't done nothing!' Spindle growled. 'And nobody's gonna bury my shirt, not while I'm still breathing, anyway. So forget it, sapper. Besides, we don't vote on nothing in this squad. Hood knows what Whiskeyjack let you idiots do back in the Ninth, but you ain't in the Ninth any more, are ya?'

'Be quiet!' Antsy snarled. 'Someone's out there! Snuffling around!'

A huge shape loomed into view directly in front of the sergeant, who let out a yelp and leapt back, almost stumbling into the fire in his gibbering retreat.

'It's that bhederin bull!' Hedge shouted. 'Hey, Detoran! Your date's arrived – ow! Gods, what did you just hit me with, woman? A mace? A Hood-cursed – your fist? Liar! Antsy, this soldier almost broke my head! Can't take a joke – ow! Ow!'

'Leave off him,' Picker ordered. 'Someone shoo that beast away—'

'This I gotta see,' Blend chortled. 'Two thousand pounds of horns, hooves and cock—'

'Enough of that,' Picker said. 'There's delicate ears present, lass. Look, you got Detoran all blushing in between punching Hedge senseless.'

'I'd say the high colour was exertion, Corporal. The sapper's got some good dodging tactics – oh, well, all right, so he missed slipping that one. Ouch.'

'Ease up, Detoran!' Picker bellowed. 'He ain't seeing straight any more as it is and you'd better start hoping it ain't permanent damage you done there!'

'Aye,' Spindle added. 'The lad's got cussers in that bag of his and if he can't throw straight—'

That was enough to make Detoran drop her fists and step back. Hedge reeled about drunkenly then sat with a heavy thump, blood streaming from his broken nose. 'Can't take a joke,' he mumbled through puffed lips. A moment later he keeled over.

'Terrific,' Picker muttered. 'If he ain't come to in the morning and we gotta march, guess who's pulling the travois, Detoran?'

The large woman scowled and turned away to find her bedroll.

'Who's injured?' a high voice piped up.

The soldiers looked up to see Mallet, wrapped in a blanket, totter into the firelight. 'I heard punching.'

'The boiled crayfish is awake,' Spindle observed. 'Guess you won't nap on any more sunward hillsides, eh, Healer?'

'It's Hedge,' Picker said. 'Rubbed Detoran's fur the wrong way. Slumped by the fire – see him?'
Nodding, Mallet hobbled to the sapper's side. 'Alarming image you conjured there, Corporal.' He crouched, began examining Hedge. 'Hood's breath! Busted nose, fractured jaw ... and concussed, too – the man's done a quiet puke.' He glared over at Picker. 'Didn't anybody think to stop this little argument?'

With a soft grunt, the bhederin bull wheeled away and thumped off into the darkness.

Mallet's head snapped around. 'What by Fener's hoof was that?

'Hedge's rival,' Blend murmured. 'Probably saw enough to take his chances elsewhere.'

Sighing, Picker leaned back, watching Mallet tend to the unconscious sapper. *Squad's not gelling too good. Antsy ain't no 'Whiskeyjack, Spindle ain't Quick Ben, and I ain't no Corporal Kalam neither. If there was a best of the best among the Bridgeburners, it was the Ninth. Mind you, Detoran could stand toe to toe with Trotts . . .

'That wizard had better show up soon,' Blend murmured after a time.

Picker nodded in the darkness, then said, 'Might be the captain and the rest are with the White Faces already. Might be Quick Ben and us'll come too late to make any difference in the outcome—'

'We won't make any difference anyway,' Blend said. 'What you mean is we'll be too late to see the spectacle.'

'Could be a good thing, that.'

'You're starting to sound like Antsy.'

'Yeah, well, things ain't looking too good,' Picker said under her breath. 'The company's best mage has disappeared. Add that to a green noble-born captain and Whiskeyjack gone and what do you know – we ain't the company we once was.'

'Not since Pale, that's for sure.'

Visions of the chaos and horror in the tunnels the day of the Enfilade returned to the corporal and she grimaced. 'Betrayed by our own. That's the worst thing there is, Blend. I can take falling to enemy swords, or magefire, or even demons tearing me limb from limb. But to have one of your own flash the knife when your back's turned ...' She spat into the fire.

'It broke us,' Blend said.

Picker nodded again.

'Maybe,' the woman at her side continued, 'Trotts losing his contest with the White Faces and us getting executed one and all might be a good thing. Barghast allies or not, I ain't looking forward to this war.'

Picker stared into the flames. 'You're thinking of what might happen when we next step into battle.'

'We're brittle, Corporal. Riven with cracks ...'

'Got no-one to trust, that's the problem. Got nothing to fight for.'

'There's Dujek, to answer both of those,' Blend said.

'Aye, our renegade Fist...' Blend softly snorted.

Picker glanced over at her friend, frowned. 'What?'

'He ain't no renegade,' Blend said in a low voice. 'We're only cut loose 'cause of Brood and the Tiste Andii, 'cause we couldn't have managed the parley otherwise. Ain't you wondered, Corporal, who that new standard-bearer of Onearm's is?'

'What's his name? Arantal? Artanthos. Huh. He showed up—'
'About a day after the outlawry proclamation.'

'So? Who do you think he is, Blend?'

'A top-ranking Claw, is my wager. Here at the command of the Empress.'

'You got proof of that?'

'No.'

Picker swung her scowl back to the fire. 'Now who's jumping at shadows?'

'We're no renegades,' Blend asserted. 'We're doing the Empire's bidding, Corporal, no matter how it looks. Whiskeyjack knows, too. And maybe so does that healer over there, and Quick Ben—'

'You mean the Ninth.'

'Aye.'

Her scowl deepening, Picker rose, strode to Mallet's side and crouched down. 'How's the sapper, Healer?' she asked quietly.

'Not as bad as it first looked,' Mallet conceded. 'Mild concussion. A good thing – I'm having trouble drawing on my Denul warren.'

'Trouble? What kind of trouble?'

'Not sure. It's gone . . . foul. Somehow. Infected . . . by something. Spindle's got the same problem with his warren. Might be what's delaying Quick Ben.'

Picker grunted. 'Could've mentioned this at the start, Mallet.'

'Too busy recovering from my sunburn, Corporal.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'If not sun scorching you, then what happened?'

'Whatever's poisoned my warren can cross over. Or so I found.'

'Mallet,' Picker said after a moment, 'there's a rumour going around, says we maybe ain't as outlawed as Dujek and Whiskeyjack are making out. Maybe the Empress nodded her head in our direction, in fact.'

In the firelight the healer's round face was blank as he shrugged. 'That's a new one to me, Corporal. Sounds like something Antsy would think up.'

'No, but he'll love it when he hears it.'

Mallet's small eyes settled on Picker's face. 'Now why would you do that?'

Picker raised her brows. 'Why would I tell Antsy? The answer should be obvious, Healer. I love watching him panic. Besides,' she shrugged, 'it's just an empty rumour, right? She straightened. 'Make sure the sapper's ready to march tomorrow.'

'We going somewhere, Corporal?'

'In case the mage shows up.'

'Right. I'll do what I can.'

Hands clawing rotted, stained energy, Quick Ben dragged himself from his warren. Gagging, spitting the bitter, sicky taste from his mouth, the mage staggered forward a few paces, until the clear night air flowed into his lungs and he halted, waiting for his thoughts to clear.
The last half-day had been spent in a desperate, seemingly endless struggle to extricate himself from Hood's realm, yet he knew it to be the least poisoned among all the warrens he commonly used. The others would have killed him. The realization left him feeling bereft – a mage stripped of his power, his vast command of his own discipline made meaningless, impotent.

The sharp, cool air of the steppes flowed over him, plucking the sweat from his trembling limbs. Stars glittered overhead. A thousand paces to the north, beyond the scrub-brush and grassy humps, rose a line of hills. Dull yellow firelight bathed the base of the nearest hill.

Quick Ben sighed. He'd been unable to establish sorcerous contact with anyone since beginning his journey. Paran's left me a squad . . . better than I could have hoped for. I wonder how many days we've lost. I was supposed to be Trotts's back-up, in case things went wrong . . .

He shook himself and strode forward, still fighting the remnants of the enervating influence of Hood's infected warren. This is the Crippled God's assault, a war against the warrens themselves. Sorcery was the sword that struck him down. Now he seeks to destroy that weapon, and so leave his enemies unarm'd. Helpless.

The wizard drew his ash-stained cloak about him as he walked. No, not entirely helpless. We've our wits. More, we can sniff out a feint – at least I can, anyway. And this is a feint – the whole Pannion Domin and its infectious influence. Somehow, the Chained One's found a way to open the floodgates of the Warren of Chaos. A conduit, perhaps the Pannion Seer himself entirely unaware that he is being used, that he's no more than a pawn thrown forward in an opening gambit. A gambit designed to test the will, the efficacy, of his foe . . . We need to take the pawn down. Fast. Decisively.

He approached the squad's firelight, heard the low mutter of voices, and felt he was coming home.

A thousand skulls on poles danced along the ridge, their burning braids of oil-soaked grass creating manes of flame above the bleached death-grimaces. Voices rose and fell in a wavering, droning song. Closer to where Paran stood, young warriors contested with short hook-bladed knives, the occasional spatter of blood sizzling as it sprayed into the clan's hearth-ring – rivalries took precedence over all else, it seemed.

Barghast women moved among the Bridgeburner squads, pulling soldiers of both sexes towards the hide tents of the encampment. The captain had thought to prohibit such amorous contact, but had then dismissed the notion as both unworkable and unwise. Come tomorrow or the day after, we might all be dead.

The clans of the White Face had gathered. Tents and yurts of the Senan, Gilk, Ahkrata and Barahn tribes – as well as many others – covered the valley floor. Paran judged that a hundred thousand Barghast had heeded Humbrall Taur's call to counsel. But not just counsel. They've come to answer Trotts's challenge. He is the last of his own clan, and tattooed on his scarred body is the history of his tribe, a tale five hundred generations long. He comes claiming kinship, blood-ties knotted at the very beginning . . . and more, though no-one's explaining precisely what else is involved. Taciturn bastards. There are too many secrets at work here . . .

A Nith'rithal warrior loosed a wet shriek as a rival clan's warrior opened his throat with a hook-knife. Voices bellowed, cursed. The stricken warrior writhed on the ground before the hearth-fire, life spilling out in a glimmering pool that spread out beneath him. His slayer strutted circles to wild cheers.

Amidst hisses from those Barghast near by, Twist came to the captain's side, the Black Moranth ignoring the curses.

'You're not too popular,' Paran observed. 'I didn't know the Moranth hunted this far east.'

'We do not,' Twist replied, his voice thin and flat behind his chitinous helm. 'The enmity is ancient, born of memories, not experience. The memories are false.'

'Are they now. I'd suggest you make no effort at informing them of your opinion.'

'Indeed, there is no point, Captain. I am curious, this warrior, Trotts – is he uniquely skilled as a fighter?'

Paran grimaced. 'He's come through a lot of nasty scrapes. He can hold his own, I suppose. To be honest, I
have never seen him fight.'

'And those among the Bridgeburners who have?'

'Disparaging, of course. They disparage everything, however, so I don't think that's a reliable opinion. We will see soon enough.'

'Humbrall Taur has selected his champion,' Twist said. 'One of his sons.'

The captain squinted through the darkness at the Black Moranth. 'Where did you hear this? Do you understand the Barghast language?'

'It is related to our own. The news of the selection is upon everyone's lips. Humbrall's youngest son, as yet unnamed, still two moons before his Death Night – his passage into adulthood. Born with blades in his hands. Undefeated in duel, even when facing seasoned warriors. Dark-hearted, without mercy ... the descriptions continue, but I tire of repeating them. We shall see this formidable youth soon enough. All else is naught but wasted breath.'

'I still don't understand the need for the duel in the first place,' Paran said. 'Trotts doesn't need to make any claim – the history is writ plain on his skin. Why should there be any doubt as to its veracity? He's Barghast through and through – you just have to look at him.'

'He makes claim to leadership, Captain. His tribe's history sets his lineage as that of the First Founders. His blood is purer than the blood of these clans, and so he must make challenge to affirm his status.'

Paran grimaced. His gut was clenched in knots. A sour taste had come to his mouth and no amount of ale or wine would take it away. When he slept visions haunted his dreams – the chill cavern beneath the Finnest House, the carved stone flagstones with their ancient, depthless images from the Deck of Dragons. Even now, should he close his eyes and let his will fall away, he would feel himself falling into the Hold of the Beasts – the home of the T'lan Imass and its vacant, antlered throne – with a physical presence, tactile and rich with senses, as if he had bodily travelled to that place. And to that time . . . unless that time is now, and the throne remains, waiting . . . waiting for a new occupant. Did it seem that way for the Emperor? When he found himself before the Throne of Shadow? Power, domination over the dread Hounds, all but a single step away?

'You are not well, Captain.'

Paran glanced over at Twist. Reflected firelight glimmered on the Moranth's midnight armour, played like the illusion of eyes across the planes of his helm. The only proof that a flesh and blood man was beneath that chitinous shell was the mangled hand that dangled lifeless from his right arm. Withered and crushed by the necromantic grasp of a Rhivi spirit. . . that entire arm hangs dead. Slow, but inevitable, the lifelessness will continue its climb . . . to shoulder, then into his chest. In a year this man will be dead – he'd need a god's healing touch to save him, and how likely is that? 'I've an unsettled stomach,' the captain replied.

'You deceive by understatement,' Twist said. Then he shrugged. 'As you wish. I will pry no further.'

'I need you to do something,' Paran said after a moment, his eyes narrowed on yet another duel before the hearth-ring. 'Unless you and your quorl are too weary—'

'We are rested enough,' the Black Moranth said. 'Request, and it shall be done.'

The captain drew a deep breath, then sighed and nodded. 'Good. I thank you.'

A bruise of colour showed on the eastern horizon, spreading through the clefts in the ridge of hills just south of the Barghast Mountains. Red-eyed and shivering in the chill, Paran drew his quilted cloak tighter as he surveyed the first stirrings in the massive, smoke-wreathed encampment filling the valley. He was able to pick out various clans by the barbaric standards rising above the seemingly haphazard layout of tents – Whiskeyjack's briefing had been thorough – and held most of his attention on those that the commander had cited as being potential trouble-makers.
To one side of the Challenge Clearing, where Trotts and Humbrall Taur's champion would fight in a short while, was the thousand-strong camp of the Ahkrata. Distinguished by their characteristic nose-plugs, lone braids and multi-toned armour fashioned from Moranth victims – including Green, Black, Red and, here and there, Gold Clans – they were the smallest contingent, having travelled farthest, yet reputedly the meanest. Avowed enemies of the Ilgres Clan – who now fought for Brood – they could prove difficult in the fashioning of an alliance.

Humbrall Taur's closest rival was the warchief Maral Eb, whose own Barahn Clan had arrived in strength – over ten thousand weapon-bearers, painted in red ochre and wearing bronze brigandine armour, their hair spiked and bristling with porcupine quills. There was the risk that Maral might contest Humbrall's position if an opportunity arose, and the night just past had seen over fifty duels between the Barahn and Humbrall Taur's own Senan warriors. Such a challenge could trigger an all-out war between the clans.

Perhaps the strangest group of warriors Paran had seen was the Gilk. Their hair was cut in stiff, narrow wedges and they wore armour assembled from the plates of some kind of tortoise. Distinctively short and stout for Barghast, they looked to the captain to be a match for any heavy infantry they might face.

Scores of minor tribes contributed to the confused mix that made up the White Face nation. Mutually antagonistic and with longstanding feuds and rivalries, it was a wonder that Humbrall Taur had managed to draw them all together, and more or less keep the peace for four days and counting.

And today is the crux. Even if Trotts wins the duel, full acceptance is not guaranteed. Bloody eruptions could follow. And if he loses . . . Parish pulled his thoughts away from that possibility.

A voice wailed to greet the dawn, and suddenly the camps were alive with silent, rising figures. The muted clank of weapons and armour followed, amidst the barking of dogs and nasal bellowing of geese. As if the Challenge Clearing drew an invisible breath, warriors began converging towards it.

Paran glanced over to see his Bridgeburners slowly gathering themselves, like quarry pricked alert by a hunter's horn. Thirty-odd Malazans – the captain knew they were determined to put up a fight if things went wrong; knew as well that the struggle would be shortlived. He scanned the lightening sky, eyes narrowing to the southwest in the hopes that he would see a dark speck – Twist and his quorl, fast approaching – but there was nothing to mar the silver-blue vastness.

A deeper silence among the Barghast alerted Paran. He turned to see Humbrall Taur striding through the press to take position in the centre of the clearing. This was the closest the captain had come to the man since their arrival. The warrior was huge, bestial, bedecked in the withered, hair-matted skins of deboned human heads. His hauberk of overlapping coins glittered in the morning light: the horde of ancient, unknown money that the Senan stumbled across some time in the past must have been huge, for every warrior in the tribe wore such armour. There must have been shiploads of the damned things. That, or an entire temple filled to its ceiling.

The warchief wasted no time with words. He unslung the spiked mace at his hip and raised it skyward, slowly turning full circle. All eyes held on him, the elite warriors from all the tribes ringing the clearing, the rest massed behind them, all the way to the valley's slopes.

Humbrall Taur paused as a witless dog trotted across the expanse. A well-flung stone sent it scampering with a yelp. The warchief growled something under his breath, then gestured with his weapon.

Paran watched Trotts emerge from the crowd. The tattooed Barghast wore the standard issue Malazan armour for marines: studded boiled leather with iron bands over the shoulders and hips. His half-helm had been collected from a dead officer among the soldiers of Aren, in Seven Cities. Bridge-guard and cheek-plates bore a filigreed design of inlaid silver. A chain camail protected the sides and back of his neck. A round shield was strapped to his left forearm, the hand protected by a spiked, iron-banded cestus. A straight, blunt-tipped broadsword was in his right hand.

His arrival elicited low growls from the gathered Barghast, which Trotts answered with a hard grin, revealing blue-stained, filed teeth.
Humbrall Taur eyed him for a moment, as if disapproving of Trotts's choice of Malazan weapons over those of the Barghast, then he swung in the opposite direction and gestured once more with the mace.

His youngest son emerged from the circle.

Paran had not known what to expect, but the sight of this scrawny, grinning youth – wearing only leathers, with a single short hook-knife in his right hand – did not match any of the images he had fashioned. What is this? Some kind of twisted insult? Does Taur want to ensure his own defeat? At the cost of his youngest son's life?

The warriors on all sides began thumping their feet on the hard earth, raising a rhythmic drumbeat that echoed its way across the valley.

The unnamed youth sauntered into the Circle to stand opposite Trotts, five paces between them. Eyeing the Bridgeburner from head to toe, the boy's smile broadened.

'Captain,' a voice hissed beside Paran.

He turned. 'Corporal Aimless, isn't it? What can I do for you? And be quick.'

The lean, stooped soldier's habitually dour expression was even bleaker than usual. 'We were just wondering, sir ... If this scrap goes bad, I mean, well, me and a few others, we been hoarding some Moranth munitions. Cussers too, sir, we got five of those at hand. We could open something of a path – see that knoll over there, a good place, we figured, to withdraw to and hold up. Those steep sides—'

'Stow it, Corporal,' Paran growled under his breath. 'My orders haven't changed. Everyone sits tight.'

'Sure he's a runt, sir, but what if—'

'You heard me, soldier.'

Aimless bobbed his head. 'Yes, sir. It's just that, uh, some – nine, maybe ten – well, they're muttering about maybe doing whatever they please and to Hood with you ... sir.'

Paran pulled his gaze away from the two motionless warriors in the Circle and met the corporal's watery eyes. 'And you are their spokesman, Aimless?'

'No! Not me, sir! I ain't got no opinion, I never did. Never do, in fact, Captain. No, not me. I'm just here telling you what's going on among the squads right now, that's all.'

'And there they all are, watching you and me having this conversation, which is how they wanted it. You're the mouth, Corporal, whether you like it or not. This is one instance where I probably should kill the messenger, if only to rid myself of his stupidity.'

Aimless's dour expression clouded. 'I wouldn't try that, sir,' he said slowly. 'The last captain that drew his sword on me I broke his neck.'

Paran raised an eyebrow. Beru fend me, I underestimate even the true idiots in this company. 'Try showing some restraint this time, Corporal,' he said. 'Go back and tell your comrades to hold tight until I give the signal. Tell them there's no way we're going down without a fight, but trying a break-out when the Barghast most expect it will see us die fast.'

'You want me to say all that, sir?'

'In your own words, if you like.'

Aimless sighed. 'That's easy, then. I'll go now, Captain.'

'You do that, Corporal.'

Returning his attention to the Circle, Paran saw that Humbrall Taur had moved to stand directly between the
two contestants. If he addressed them it was brief and under his breath, for he then stepped back, once more raising the mace overhead. The thumping dance of the massed warriors ceased. Trotts swung his shield to the ready, dropping his left leg back and positioning his sword in a tight guard position. The youth's sloppy stance did not change, the knife held loosely at his side.

Humbrall Taur reached one edge of the ring. He waved the mace one final time over his head, then lowered it.

The duel had begun.

Trotts stepped back, crouching low with the shield rim just under his eyes. The blunt tip of his broadsword edged outward as he half extended his arm.

The youth pivoted to face him, the knife in his hand making slight bobbing, snake-head motions. At some unseen shift in weight from Trotts he danced lithely to the left, blade wavering in a haphazard, desultory defence, but the big Bridgeburner did not come forward. Ten paces still remained between them.

Every move the lad makes tells Trotts more, fills out the tactical map. What the boy reacts to, what makes him hesitate, taunt, withdraw. Every shift in weight, the play over the ground and the balls of his feet...and Trotts has yet to move.

The youth edged closer, approaching at an angle that Trotts matched only with his shield. Another step. The Bridgeburner's sword slid out to the side. The lad skittered back, then he neared again, sharpening the angle.

Like a stolid infantryman, Trotts swung round to replant his feet – and the Barghast attacked.

A snort gusted from Paran as the Bridgeburner's heavy-footedness vanished. Negating his own advantage in height, Trotts met the lashing assault from low behind his shield, surging forward unexpectedly into the lad's high-bladed attack. Hook-knife glanced without strength off Trotts's helm, then the heavy round shield hammered into the boy's chest, throwing him back.

The youth struck the ground, skidding, raising a cloud of dust as he tumbled and rolled.

A fool would have pursued, only to find the lad's knife slashing through the sunlit cloud – but Trotts simply settled back behind his shield. The youth emerged from the swirling dust, face powdered, knife wavering. His smile remained.

Not a style the lad's used to. Trotts could well be standing front-line in a phalanx, shoulder to shield with hard-eyed Malazan infantry. More than one barbaric horde has been deflowered and cut to pieces against that deadly human wall. These White Faces have never experienced an Imperial engagement.

The lithe Barghast began a swift, darting dance, circling Trotts, edging in then back out, playing with the bright sunlight and flashes on weapon and armour, kicking up clouds of dust. In answer, the Bridgeburner simply pivoted into one of four facings – he had become his own square – and waited, again and again seeming to hold a position too long before shifting, each time stamping the methodical steps of the Malazan infantry drill like a thick-skulled recruit. He ignored every feint, would not be pulled forward by the lad's moments of imbalance and awkwardness – which were themselves illusory.

The ring of warriors had begun shouting their frustration. This was not a duel as they knew duels. Trotts would not play the lad's game. He is now a soldier of the Empire, and that is the addendum to his tale.

The youth launched another attack, his blade blurring in a wild skein of feints, then slashing low, seeking the Bridgeburner's right knee – the hinge in the armour's joint. Shield came down, driving the knife away. Broadsword slashed horizontally for the boy's head. He ducked lower, hook-blade dropping down to slash ineffectually across the toe-cap of Trotts's boot. The Bridgeburner snapped his shield into the boy's face.

The youth reeled, blood spraying from his nose. Yet his knife rose unerringly, skirting the rim of the shield as if following a hissing guide to dig deep into the armour's joint hinge of Trotts's left arm, the hook biting, then tearing through ligaments and veins.
The Malazan chopped down with his broadsword, severing the lad's knife-hand at the wrist.

Blood poured from the two warriors, yet the close-in engagement was not yet complete. Paran watched in amazement as the youth's left hand shot up, stiff-fingered, beneath the chin-guard of Trotts's helmet. A strange popping sound came from Trotts's throat. Shield-arm falling senseless in a welter of blood, knees buckling, the Bridgeburner sank to the ground.

Trotts's final gesture was a lightning-quick sweep of his broadsword across the lad's stomach. Sleek flesh parted and the youth looked down in time to see his intestines tumble into view in a gush of fluids. He convulsed around them, pitched to the ground.

Trotts lay before the dying boy, clawing frantically at his throat, legs kicking.

The captain lurched forward, but one of his Bridgeburners was quicker – Mulch, a minor healer from the Eleventh Squad, raced into the Circle to Trotts's side. A small flickblade flashed in the soldier's hand as he straddled the writhing warrior and pushed his head back to expose the throat.

*What in Hood's name—*

There was pandemonium on all sides. The Circle was dissolving as Barghast warriors surged forward, weapons out yet clearly confused as to what they should do with them. Paran's head snapped round, to see his Bridgeburners contracting within a ring of shrieking, belligerent savages.

*Gods, it's all coming down.*

A horn cut through the cacophony. Faces turned. Senan warriors were reasserting the sanctity of the Circle, bellowing as they pushed the other tribesmen and women back. Humbrall Taur had once more raised high his mace, a silent yet inescapable demand for order.

Voices rose from the Barghast surrounding the company of Bridgeburners, and the captain saw Moranth munitions held high in the hands of his soldiers. The Barghast were recoiling, drawing lances back to throw.

'Bridgeburners!' Paran shouted, striding towards them. 'Put those damned things away! Now!'

The horn sounded a second time.

Faces turned. The deadly grenados disappeared once more beneath rain-capes and cloaks.

'Stand at ease!' Paran growled as he reached them. In a lower voice, he snapped, 'Hold fast, you damned fools! Nobody counted on a Hood-damned *draw*! Keep your wits. Corporal Aimless, go to Mulch and find out what in Fener's name he did with that flickblade – and get the bad news on Trotts – I know, I know, he looked done for. But so's the lad. Who knows, maybe it's a question of who dies first—'

'Captain,' one of the sergeants cut in. 'They were gonna have at us, sir, that's all. We wasn't planning on nothing – we was waitin' for your signal, sir.'

'Glad to hear it. Now keep your eyes open, but stay calm, while I go confer with Humbrall Taur.' Paran swung round and headed towards the Circle.

The Barghast warchief's face was grey, his gaze returning again and again to the small figure now ominously motionless on the stained ground a dozen paces away. A half-dozen minor chiefs clustered around Humbrall, each shouting to make himself heard above his rival. Taur was ignoring them one and all.

Paran pushed through the crowd. A glance to his right showed Aimless crouched down beside Mulch. The healer had a hand pressed tight against the wound in Trotts's left arm and seemed to be whispering under his breath, his eyes closed. Slight movement from Trotts revealed that the Bridgeburner still lived. And, the captain realized, he had ceased his thrashing around. Somehow, Mulch had given him a means of drawing breath. Paran shook his head in disbelief. Crush a man's throat and he dies. *Unless there's a High Denul healer nearby*. *... and Mulch isn't, he's a cutter with a handful of cantrips at his disposal – the man's pulled off a miracle...*
'Malazan!' Humbrall Taur's small, flat eyes were fixed on Paran. He gestured. 'We must speak, you and I.' He switched from Daru to bellow at the warriors crowding him. They withdrew, scowling, casting venomous glares towards the captain.

A moment later Paran and the Barghast warchief stood face to face. Humbrall Taur studied him for a moment, then said, 'Your warriors think little of you. Soft blood, they say.'

Paran shrugged. 'They're soldiers. I'm their new officer.'

'They are disobedient. You should kill one or two of them, then the others will respect you.'

'It's my task to keep them alive, not kill them, Warchief.'

Humbrall Taur's eyes narrowed. 'Your Barghast fought in the style of you foreigners. He did not fight as kin to us. Twenty-three duels, my unnamed son. Without loss, without so much as a wound. I have lost one of my blood, a great warrior.'

'Trotts lives still,' Paran said.

'He should be dead. Crush a man's throat and the convulsions take him. He should not have been able to swing his sword. My son sacrificed a hand to kill him.'

'A valiant effort, Warchief.'

'In vain, it seems. Do you claim that Trotts will survive his wounds?'

'I don't know. I need to confer with my healer.'

'The spirits are silent, Malazan,' Humbrall Taur said after a moment. 'They wait. As must we.'

'Your council of chiefs might not agree with you,' Paran observed.

Taur scowled. 'That is a matter for the Barghast. Return to your company, Malazan. Keep them alive ... if you can.'

'Does our fate rest on Trotts's surviving, Warchief?'

The huge warrior bared his teeth. 'Not entirely. I am done with you, now.' He turned his back on the captain. The other chiefs closed in once again.

Paran pulled away, fighting a resurgence of pain in his stomach, and strode to where Trotts lay. Eyes on the Barghast warrior, he crouched down beside the healer, Mulch. There was a hole between Trotts's collar bones, home to a hollow bone tube that whistled softly as he breathed. The rest of his throat was crumpled, a mass of green and blue bruising. The Barghast's eyes were open, aware and filled with pain.

Mulch glanced over. 'I've healed the vessels and tendons in his arm,' he said quietly. 'He won't lose it, I think. It'll be weaker, though, unless Mallet gets here soon.'

Paran pointed at the bone tube. 'What in Hood's name is that, healer?'

'It ain't easy playing with warrens right now, sir. Besides, I ain't good enough to fix anything like that anyway. It's a cutter's trick, learned it from Bullit when I was in the 6th Army – he was always figuring ways of doing things without magic, since he could never find his warren when things got hot.'

'Looks ... temporary.'

'Aye, Captain. We need Mallet. Soon.'

'That was fast work, Mulch,' Paran said, straightening. 'Well done.'

'Thanks, sir.'
'Corporal Aimless.'

'Captain?'

'Get some soldiers down here. I don't want any Barghast getting too close to Trotts. When Mulch gives the word, move him back to our camp.'

'Aye, sir.'

Paran watched the soldier hurry off, then he faced south and scanned the sky. 'Hood's breath!' he muttered with plaintive relief.

Mulch rose. 'You sent Twist to find 'em, didn't you, sir? Look, he's got a passenger. Probably Quick Ben, though ...'

Paran slowly smiled, squinting at the distant black speck above the ridgeline. 'Not if Twist followed my orders, Healer.'

Mulch looked over. 'Mallet. Fener's hoof, that was a good play, Captain.'

Paran met the healer's gaze. 'Nobody dies on this mission, Mulch.'

The old veteran slowly nodded, then knelt once again to tend to Trotts.

Picker studied Quick Ben as they trudged up yet another grass-backed hillside. 'You want us to get someone to carry you, Mage?'

Quick Ben wiped the sweat from his brow, shook his head. 'No, it's getting better. The Barghast spirits are thick here, and getting thicker. They're resisting the infection. I'll be all right, Corporal.'

'If you say so, only you're looking pretty rough to me.' And ain't that an understatement.

'Hood's warren is never a fun place.'

'That's bad news, Mage. What have we all got to look forward to, then?'

Quick Ben said nothing.

Picker scowled. 'That bad, huh? Well, that's just great. Wait till Antsy hears.'

The wizard managed a smile. 'You tell him news only to see him squirm, don't you?'

'Sure. The squad needs its entertainment, right?'

The summit revealed yet another set of small cairns, scattered here and there on its weathered expanse. Tiny, long-legged grey birds hopped from their path as the soldiers marched on. Few words were wasted – the heat was oppressive, with half a day of sunlight remaining. Buzzing flies kept pace.

The squad had seen no-one since Twist's visit at dawn. They knew the duel had taken place by now, but had no idea of its outcome. Hood, we could walk in to our own execution. Spindle and Quick Ben were next to useless, unable and unwilling to test the taste of their warrens, pallid and shaky and uncommunicative. Hedge's jaw was too swollen for him to manage anything more than grunts, but the looks he cast at Detoran's back as she walked point hinted at plans of murderous vengeance. Blend was scouting somewhere ahead, or behind – or maybe in my Hood-damned shadow – she glanced over her shoulder to check, but the woman wasn't there. Antsy, taking up the rear, kept up a private conversation with himself, his ceaseless mumbling a steady accompaniment to the droning flies.

The landscape showed no life beyond the grasses cloaking the hills and the stunted trees occasionally visible in the valleys where seasonal streams hoarded water beneath the soil. The sky was cloudless, not a bird in sight to mar the blue vastness. Far to the north and east rose the white peaks of the Barghast Range, jagged in their
youth and forbidding.

By Twist's estimate, the Barghast gathering was in a valley four leagues to the north. They'd arrive before sunset, if all went well.

Striding at her side, Quick Ben voiced a soft grunt, and the corporal turned in time to see a score of dirt-smeared hands closing around the wizard's legs. The earth seemed to foam beneath Quick Ben's boots, then he was being dragged down, stained, bony fingers clutching, tugging, gnarled forearms reaching upward to wrap themselves about the wizard's struggling form.

'Quick!' Picker bellowed, flinging herself towards him. He reached for her, a look a dumb amazement on his face as the soil heaved around his waist. Pounding footsteps and shouts closed in. Picker's hand clamped on the wizard's wrist.

The earth surged to his chest. The hands reappeared to grasp Quick Ben's right arm and drag it down.

Her eyes met his, then he shook his head. 'Let me go, Corporal—'

'Are you mad—'

'Now, before you get my arm torn off—' His right shoulder was yanked beneath the soil.

Spindle appeared, flinging himself forward to wrap an arm around Quick Ben's neck.

'Let him go!' Picker yelled, releasing the wizard's wrist.

Spindle stared up at her. 'What?'

'Let him go, damn you!'

The squad mage unlocked his arm and rolled away, cursing.

Antsy burst among them, his short-handled shovel already in his hands as Quick Ben's head vanished beneath the earth. Dirt began flying.

'Ease off there, Sergeant,' Picker snapped. 'You'll end up taking off the top of his damned head!'

The sergeant stared at her, then leapt back as if standing on coals. 'Hood!' He raised his shovel and squinted at the blade. 'I don't see no blood! Anybody see any blood? Or – gods! – hair! Is that hair? Oh, Queen of Dreams—'

'That ain't hair,' Spindle growled, pulling the shovel from Antsy's hands. 'That's roots, you idiot! They got 'im. They got Quick Ben.'

'Who has?' Picker demanded.

'Barghast spirits. A whole horde of 'em! We was ambushed!'

'What about you, then?' the corporal asked.

'I ain't dangerous enough, I guess. At least' – his head snapped as he looked around – 'I hope not. I gotta get off this damned barrow, that's what I gotta do!'

Picker watched him scamper away. 'Hedge, keep an eye on him, will you?'

The swollen-faced sapper nodded, trudged off after Spindle.

'What do we do now?' Antsy hissed, his moustache twitching.

'We wait a bell or two, then if the wizard ain't managed to claw his way back out, we go on.'

The sergeant's blue eyes widened. 'We leave him?' he whispered.
'It's either that or we level this damned hill. And we wouldn't find him anyway – he's been pulled into their warren. It's here but it ain't here, if you know what I mean. Maybe when Spindle finds his nerve he can do some probing.'

'I knew that Quick Ben wasn't nothing but trouble,' Antsy muttered. 'Can't count on mages for nothing. You're right, what's the point of waiting around? They're damned useless anyway. Let's pack up and get going.'

'It won't hurt to wait a little while,' Picker said.

'Yeah, probably a good idea.'

She shot him a glance, then looked away with a sigh. 'Could do with something to eat. Might want to fix us something special, Sergeant.'

'I got dried dates and breadfruit, and some smoked leeches from that market south side in Pale.'

She winced. 'Sounds good.'

'I'll get right on it.'

He hurried off.

_Gods, Antsy, you're losing it fast. And what about me? Mention dates and leeches and my mouth's salivating_ . . .

The high-prowed canoes lay rotting in the swamp, the ropes strung between them and nearby cedar boles bearded in moss. Dozens of the craft were visible. Humped bundles of supplies lay on low rises, swathed in thick mould, sprouting toadstools and mushrooms. The light was pallid, faintly yellow. Quick Ben, dripping with slime, dragged himself upright, spitting foul water from his mouth as he slowly straightened to look around.

His attackers were nowhere in sight. Insects flitted through the air in a desultory absence of haste. Frogs croaked and the sound of dripping water was constant. A faint smell of salt was in the air.

_I'm in a long-dead warren, decayed by the loss of mortal memory. The living Barghast know nothing of this place, yet it is where their dead go – assuming they make it this far._ 'All right,' he said, his voice strangely muted by the turgid, heavy air, 'I'm here. What do you want?'

Movement in the mists alerted him. Figures appeared, closing in tentatively, knee-deep in the swirling black water. The wizard's eyes narrowed. These creatures were not the Barghast he knew from the mortal realm. Squatter, wider, robustly boned, they were a mix of Imass and Toblakai. _Gods, how old is this place?_ Hooded brow-ridges hid small, glittering eyes in darkness. Black leather strips stitched their way down gaunt cheeks, reaching past hairless jawlines where they were tied around small longbones that ran parallel to the jaw. Black hair hung in rough braids, parted down the middle. The men and women closing in around Quick Ben were one and all dressed in close-fitting sealskins decorated with bone, antler and shell. Long, thin-bladed knives hung at their hips. A few of the males carried barbed spears that seemed made entirely of bone.

A smaller figure skittered onto a rotted cedar stump directly in front of Quick Ben, a man-shaped bundle of sticks and string with an acorn head.

The wizard nodded. 'Talamandas. I thought you were returning to the White Faces.'

'And so I did, Mage, thanks solely to your cleverness.'

'You've an odd way of showing your gratitude, Old One.' Quick Ben looked around. 'Where are we?'

'The First Landing. Here wait the warriors who did not survive the journey's end. Our fleet was vast, Mage, yet when the voyage was done, fully half of the canoes held only corpses. We had crossed an ocean in ceaseless battle.'
'And where do the Barghast dead go now?'

'Nowhere, and everywhere. They are lost. Wizard, your challenger has slain Humbrall Taur's champion. The spirits have drawn breath and hold it still, for the man may yet die.'

Quick Ben flinched. He was silent for a moment, then he said, 'And if he does?'

'Your soldiers will die. Humbrall Taur has no choice. He will face civil war. The spirits themselves will lose their unity. You would be too great a distraction, a source of greater divisiveness. But this is not why I have had you, brought here.' The small sticksnare gestured at the figures standing silent behind him. 'These are the warriors. The army. Yet... our warchiefs are not among us. The Founding Spirits were lost long ago. Mage, a child of Humbrall Taur has found them. Found them!'

'But there's a problem.'

Talamandas seemed to slump. 'There is. They are trapped... within the city of Capustan.'

The implications of that slowly edged into place in the wizard's mind. 'Does Humbrall Taur know?'

'He does not. I was driven away by his shouldermen. The most ancient of spirits are not welcome. Only the young ones are allowed to be present, for they have little power. Their gift is comfort, and comfort has come to mean a great deal among the Barghast. It was not always so. You see before you a pantheon divided, and the vast schism between us is time – and the loss of memory. We are as strangers to our children; they will not listen to our wisdom and they fear our potential power.'

'Was it Humbrall Taur's hope that his child would find these Founding Spirits?'

'He embraces a grave risk, yet he knows the White Face clans are vulnerable. The young spirits are too weak to resist the Pannion Domin. They will be enslaved or destroyed. When comfort is torn away, all that will be revealed is a weakness of faith, an absence of strength. The clans will be crushed by the Domin's armies. Humbrall Taur reaches for power, yet he gropes blindly.'

'And when I tell him that the ancient spirits have been found... will he believe me?'

'You are our only hope. You must convince him.'

'I freed you from the wards,' Quick Ben said.

'What do you ask in return?'

'Trotts needs to survive his wounds. He must be recognized as champion, so that he can legitimately take his place among the council of chiefs. We need a position of strength, Talamandas.'

'I cannot return to the tribes, Wizard. I will only be driven away once again.'

'Can you channel your power through a mortal?'

The sticksnare slowly cocked his head.

'We've a Denul healer, but like me, he's having trouble making use of his warren – the Pannion's poison—'

'To be gifted with our power,' Talamandas said, 'he must be led to this warren, to this place.'

'Well,' Quick Ben said, 'why don't we figure out a way to achieve that?'

Talamandas slowly turned to survey his spirit kin. After a moment he faced the wizard once again. 'Agreed.'

A rogue javelin arced up towards Twist as the Black Moranth and his passenger began their descent. The quorl darted to one side, then quickly dropped towards the Circle. Laughter and cursing voices rose from the gathered warriors, but no further gestures were made.
Paran cast one last scan over the squad standing guard around Trotts and Mulch, then jogged to where Twist and a blistered Mallet were dismounting amidst challenges and threatening weapons.

‘Clear them a path, damn you!’ the captain bellowed, thrusting a Senan tribesman aside as he pushed closer. The man righted himself with a growl, then showed his filed teeth in a challenge. Paran ignored it. Five jostling strides later, he reached Twist and Mallet.

The healer’s eyes were wide with alarm. ‘Captain—’

‘Aye, it’s heating up, Mallet. Come with me. Twist, you might want to get the Abyss out of here—’

‘Agreed. I shall return to Sergeant Antsy’s squad. What has happened?’

Trotts won the fight, but we might lose the war. Get going, before you get skewered.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

Taking the healer by one arm, Paran swung about and began pushing through the crowd. ‘Trotts needs you,’ he said as they walked. ‘It’s bad. A crushed throat—’

‘Then how in Hood’s name is he still alive?’

‘Mulch opened a hole above his lungs and the bastard’s breathing through that.’

Mallet frowned, then slowly nodded. ‘Clever. But Captain, I may not be much use to you, or Trotts—’

Paran’s head snapped around. ‘You’d better be. If he dies, so do we.’

‘My warren—’

‘Never mind the excuses, just heal the man, damn you!’

‘Yes, sir, but just so you know, it’ll probably kill me.’

‘Fener’s balls!’

‘It’s a good exchange, sir. I can see that. Don’t worry, I’ll heal Trotts – you’ll all get out of this, and that’s what matters right now.’

Paran stopped. He closed his eyes, fighting the sudden waves of pain from his stomach. Through clenched teeth, he said, ‘As you say, Mallet.’

‘Aimless is waving us over—’

‘Aye, go on, then, Healer.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Mallet disengaged his arm and headed over to the squad.

Paran forced open his eyes.

*Look at the bastard. Not a falter in his step. Not a blink at his fate. Who – what are these soldiers?*

Mallet pushed Mulch aside, knelt next to Trotts, met the warrior’s hard eyes and reached out a hand.

‘Mallet!’ Mulch hissed. ‘Your warren—’

‘Shut up,’ Mallet said, eyes closing as his fingers touched the collapsed, mangled throat.

He opened his warren, and his mind shrieked as virulent power rushed into him. He felt his flesh swelling, splitting, heard the blood spurt and Mulch’s shocked cry. Then the physical world vanished within a thrashing
sea of pain.

*Find the path, dammit! The mending way, the vein of order – gods! Stay sane, Healer. Hold on . . .*

But he felt his sanity being torn away, devoured. His sense of self was being shredded to pieces before his mind's eye, and he could do nothing. He drew on that core of health within his own soul, drew on its power, felt it pour through his fingertips to the ravaged cartilage of Trotts's throat. But the core began to dissolve . . .

Hands grasped him, tore at him – a new assault. His spirit struggled, tried to pull away. Screams engulfed him from all sides, as of countless souls being destroyed. Hands fell away from his limbs, were replaced by new ones. He was being dragged, his mind yielding to the savage determination of those grasping, clawing hands.

Sudden calm. Mallet found himself kneeling in a fetid pool, shrouded in silence. Then a murmuring arose all around him. He looked up.

*Take from us, a thousand voices whispered in susurrating unison. Take our power. Return to your place, and use all that we give to you. But hurry – the path we have laid is a costly one – so costly . . .*

Mallet opened himself to the power swirling around him. He had no choice, he was helpless before its demand. His limbs, his body, felt like wet clay, moulded anew. From the bones outward, his tattered soul was being reassembled.

He lurched upright, swung round, and began walking. A lumpy, yielding ground was underfoot. He did not look down, simply pushed on. The Denul warren was all around him now, savage and deadly, yet held back from him. Unable to reclaim his soul, the poison howled.

Mallet could feel his fingers once more, still pressed against the broken throat of his friend, yet within his mind he still walked. Step by step, inexorably pushed onward. *This is the journey to my flesh. Who has done this for me? Why?*

The warren began to dim around him. He was almost home. Mallet looked down, to see what he knew he would see. He walked a carpet of corpses – his path through the poisoned horror of his warren. Costly – so costly . . .

The healer's eyes blinked open. Bruised skin beneath his fingers, yet no more than that. He blinked sweat away, met Trotts's gaze.

*Two paths, it seems. One for me, and one for you, friend.*

The Barghast weakly lifted his right arm. Mallet clasped it with an iron grip. 'You're back,' the healer whispered, 'you shark-toothed bastard.'

'Who?' Trotts croaked, the skin around his eyes tightening at the effort. 'Who paid?'

Mallet shook his head. 'I don't know. Not me.'

The Barghast's eyes flicked down to the split and bleeding flesh of the healer's arms.

Mallet shook his head again. 'Not me, Trotts.'

Paran could not move, dared not approach closer. All he could see was a huddle of soldiers around where Trotts lay and Mallet knelt. *Gods forgive me, I ordered that healer to kill himself. If this is the true face of command, then it is a skull's grin. I want none of it. No more, Paran, you cannot steel yourself to this life, to these choices. Who are you to balance lives? To gauge worth, to measure flesh by the pound? No, this is a nightmare. I'm done with it.*

Mulch staggered into view, swung to the captain. The man's face was white, his eyes wide. He stumbled over.
No, tell me nothing. Go away, damn you. 'Let's hear it, Healer.'

'It's – it's all right, Captain. Trotts will make it—'

'And Mallet?'

'Superficial wounds – I'll take care of those, sir. He lives – don't ask me how—'

'Leave me, Mulch.'

'Sir?'

'Go. Back to Mallet. Get out of my sight.'

Paran swung his back to the man, listened to him scurrying away. The captain shut his eyes, waiting for the agony of his gut to resume, to rise once again like a fist of fire. But all was quiescent within him. He wiped at his eyes, drew a deep breath. No-one dies. We're all getting out of here. Better tell Humbrall Taur. Trotts has won his claim . . . and damn the rest of you to Hood!

Fifteen paces away, Mulch and Aimless crouched, watching their captain's back straighten, watching as Paran adjusted his sword belt, watching as he strode towards Humbrall Taur's command tent.

'He's a hard bastard,' the healer muttered.

'Cold as a Jaghut winter,' Aimless said, face twisting. 'Mallet looked a dead man there for a time.'

'For a time, he damn near was.'

The two men were silent for a while, then Mulch leaned to one side and spat. 'Captain might make it after all,' he said.

'Aye,' Aimless said. 'He might.'

'Hey!' one of the soldiers nearby shouted. 'Look at that ridge! Ain't that Detoran? And there's Spindle – they're carrying somebody between 'em!'

'Probably Quick Ben,' Mulch said, straightening. 'Played too long in his warrens. Idiot.'

'Mages,' Aimless sneered. 'Who needs the lazy bastards anyway?'

'Mages, huh? And what about healers, Corporal?'

The man's long face suddenly lengthened even more as his jaw dropped. 'Uh, healers are good, Mulch. Damned good. I meant wizards and sorcerers and the like—'

'Stow it before you say something real stupid, Aimless. Well, we're all here, now. Wonder what these White Faces will do to us?'

Trotts won!

'So?'

The corporal's jaw dropped a second time.

Woodsmoke filled Humbrall Taur's hide tent. The huge warchief stood alone, his back to the round hearth, silhouetted by the fire's light. 'What have you to tell me?' he rumbled as Paran let the hide flap drop behind him.

'Trotts lives. He asserts his claim to leadership.'

'Yet he has no tribe——'
'He has a tribe, Warchief. Thirty-eight Bridgeburners. He showed you that, in the style he chose for the duel.'

'I know what he showed us—'

'Yet who understood?'

'I did, and that is all that matters.'

There was silence. Paran studied the tent and its meagre scatter of contents, seeking clues as to the nature of the warrior who stood before him. The floor was covered in bhederin hides. A half-dozen spears lay to one side, one of them splintered. A lone wooden chest carved from a single tree trunk, big enough to hold a three-deep stack of stretched-out corpses, dominated the far wall. The lid was thrown back, revealing on its underside a huge, massively complex locking mechanism. An unruly tumble of blankets ran parallel to the chest where Taur evidently slept. Coins, stitched into the hide walls, glittered dully on all sides, and on the conical ceiling more coins hung like tassels – these ones blackened by years of smoke.

'You have lost your command, Captain.'

Paran blinked, met the warchief's dark eyes. 'That is a relief,' he said.

'Never admit your unwillingness to rule, Malazan. What you fear in yourself will cloud your judgement of all that your successor does. Your fear will blind you to his wisdom and stupidity both. Trotts has never been a commander – I saw that in his eyes when he first stepped forward from your ranks. You must watch him, now. With clear vision. The man turned and walked to the chest. 'I have mead. Drink with me.'

Gods, my stomach ...

'Thank you, Warchief.'

Humbrall Taur withdrew from the chest a clay jug and two wooden mugs. He unstoppered the jug, sniffed tentatively, then nodded and poured. 'We shall wait another day,' he said. 'Then I shall address the clans. Trotts will have leave to speak, he has earned his place among the chiefs. But I tell you this now, Captain.' He handed Paran a mug. 'We shall not march on Capustan. We owe those people nothing. Each year we lose more of our youths to that city, to their way of life. Their traders come among us with nothing of value, bold with claims and offers, and would strip my people naked if they could.'

Paran took a sip of the heady mead, felt it burn down his throat. 'Capustan is not your true enemy, Warchief —'

'The Pannion Domin will wage war on us. I know this, Malazan. They will take Capustan and use it to marshal their armies on our very borders. Then they will march.'

'If you understand all that, then why—'

'Twenty-seven tribes, Captain Paran.' Humbrall Taur drained his mug, then wiped his mouth. 'Of those, only eight chiefs will stand with me. Not enough. I need them all. Tell me, your new chief. Can he sway minds with his words?'

Paran grimaced. 'I don't know. He rarely uses them. Then again, up until now, he's had little need. We shall see tomorrow, I suppose.'

'Your Bridgeburners are still in danger.'

The captain stiffened, studied the thick honey wine in his mug. 'Why?' he asked after a moment.

'The Barahn, the Gilk, the Ahkrata – these clans are united against you. Even now, they spread tales of duplicity. Your healers are necromancers – they are conducting a ritual of resurrection to bring Trotts back to life. The White Faces have no love of Malazans. You are allied with the Moranth. You conquered the north – how soon will you turn your hungry gaze on us? You are the plains bear at our side, urging us to lock talons with the southern tiger. A hunter always knows the mind of a tiger, but never the mind of a plains bear.'

'So it seems our fate still hangs in the balance,' Paran said.
'Come the morrow,' Humbrall Taur said.

The captain drained his mug and set it down on the edge of the chest. Spot-fires were growing in his stomach. Behind the cloying mead numbing his tongue, he could taste blood. 'I must attend to my soldiers,' he said.

'Give them this night, Captain.'

Paran nodded, then made his way out of the tent.

Ten paces away, Picker and Blend stood waiting for him. The captain scowled as the two women hurried over. 'More good news, I take it,' he growled under his breath.

'Captain.'

'What is it, Corporal?'

Picker blinked. 'Well, uh, we've made it. I thought I should report—'

'Where's Antsy?'

'He ain't feeling too good, sir.'

'Something he ate?'

Blend grinned. 'That's a good one. Something he ate.'

'Captain,' Picker interjected hastily, shooting Blend a warning glare. 'We lost Quick Ben for a while, then got him back, only he ain't woken up. Spindle figures it's some kind of shock. He was pulled into a Barghast warren—'

Paran started. 'He was what? Take me to him. Blend, get Mallet and join us, double-time! Well, Picker? Why are you just standing there? Lead on.'

'Yes, sir.'

The Seventh squad had dropped their gear in the Bridgeburner encampment. Detoran and Hedge were unfolding tents, watched morosely by a pale, shivering Antsy. Spindle sat beside Quick Ben, fingers combing absently through his tattered hairshirt as he frowned down at the unconscious wizard. The Black Moranth, Twist, stood nearby. Soldiers from other squads sat in their respective groups, watchful of the newcomers and coming no closer.

Paran followed the corporal to Spindle and Quick Ben. The captain glanced at the other squads. 'What's with them?' he wondered aloud.

Picker grunted. 'See Hedge's swollen face? Detoran's in a temper, sir. We're all thinking she's got a crush on the poor sapper.'

'And she showed her affection by beating him up?'

'She's a rough sort, sir.'

The captain sighed, guiding Spindle to one side as he crouched to study Quick Ben. 'Tell me what happened, Spin. Picker said a Barghast warren.'

'Aye, sir. Mind you, I'm just guessing. We was crossing a barrow—'

'Oh, that was smart,' Paran snapped.

The mage ducked. 'Aye, well, it wasn't the first one we crossed and all the others were sleepy enough. Anyway, the spirits reached up and snatched Quick, dragged him outa sight. We waited a while. Then they spat him back out, like this. Captain, the warrens have gone sour. Nasty sour. Quick said it was the Pannion, only
not really the Pannion, but the hidden power behind it. Said we was all in trouble.'

Footsteps approached and Paran turned to see Mallet and Blend approach. Behind them walked Trotts. A few ragged, sardonic cheers rose to greet him from the other squads, followed by a loud raspberry. Trotts bared his teeth and changed direction. A figure bolted like a rabbit. The Barghast's grin broadened.

'Get back here, Trotts,' Paran ordered. 'We need to talk.'

Shrugging, the huge warrior swung round and resumed his approach.

Mallet leaned heavily on Paran's shoulder as he knelt down. 'Sorry, Captain,' he gasped. 'I ain't feeling right.'

'I won't ask you to use your warren again, Healer,' Paran said. 'But I need Quick Ben awake. Any suggestions?'

Mallet squinted down at the wizard. 'I didn't say I was weakened, sir, only that I ain't feeling right. I got help healing Trotts. Spirits, I think now. Maybe Barghast. They put me back together, somehow, someway, and Hood knows I needed putting back together. Anyway, it's like I got someone else's legs, someone else's arms ...' He reached out and laid a hand against Quick Ben's brow, then grunted. 'He's on his way back. It's protective sorcery that's keeping him asleep.'

'Can you speed things up?'

'Sure.' The healer slapped the wizard.

Quick Ben's eyes snapped open. 'Ow. You bastard, Mallet.'

'Stop complaining, Quick. Captain wants to talk to you.'

The wizard's dark eyes swivelled to take in Paran, then, looming over the captain's shoulder, Trotts. Quick Ben grinned. 'You all owe me.'

'Ignore that,' Mallet said to Paran. 'The man's always saying that. Gods, what an ego. If Whiskeyjack was here he'd clout you on the head, Wizard, and I'm tempted to stand in for him on that.'

'Don't even think it.' Quick Ben slowly sat up. 'What's the situation here?'

'Our heads are still on the chopping block,' Paran said in a low voice. 'We haven't many friends here, and our enemies are getting bolder. Humbrall Taur's command is shaky and he knows it. Trotts killing his favoured son hasn't helped. Even so, the warchief's on our side. More or less. He may not care one whit for Capustan, but he knows the threat the Pannion Domin represents.'

'He doesn't care about Capustan, huh?' Quick Ben smiled. 'I can change that attitude. Mallet, you got company in that body of yours?'

The healer blinked. 'What?'

'Feeling strange, are you?'

'Well—'

'So he says,' Paran cut in. 'What do you know about it?'

'Only everything. Captain, we've got to go to Humbrall Taur. The three – no, the four of us – you too, Trotts. Hood, let's bring Twist, too – he knows a lot more than he's let on, and maybe I can't see that grin, Moranth, but I know it's there. Spindle, that hairshirt reeks. Go away before I throw up.'

'Some gratitude for protecting your hide,' Spindle muttered, edging back.

Paran straightened and swung his gaze back to Humbrall Taur's tent. 'Fine, here we go again.'
Sunset approached, spreading a gloom across the valley. The Barghast had resumed their wild dancing and vicious duels with an almost febrile intensity. Thirty paces away from Humbrall Taur's tent, sitting amidst discarded armour, Picker scowled. "They're still in there, the bastards. Leaving us to do a whole lot of nothing, except watch these savages mutilate each other. I don't think we should be thinking it's all over, Blend.'

The dark-eyed woman at her side frowned. 'Want me to hunt Antsy down?'

'Why bother? Hear those grunts? That's our sergeant taking that Barahn maiden for a ride. He'll be back in a moment or two, looking pleased—'

'And the lass trailing a step behind—'

'With a confused look on her face—'

'"That's it?"

'She blinked and missed it.'

They shared a short, nasty laugh. Then Picker sobered again. 'We could be dead tomorrow no matter what Quick Ben says to Taur. That's still the captain's thinking, so he leaves us to our fun this night...'

"Hooded comes the dawn..."

'Aye.'

'Trots did what he had to do in that scrap,' Blend observed. 'It should have been as simple as that.'

'Well, I'd have been happier if it'd been Detoran from the start. There wouldn't have been no near draw or whatever. She would have done that brat good. From what I've heard, our tattooed Barghast just stood back and let the weasel come to him. Detoran would've just stepped forward and brained the lad at the feather's drop—'

'Wasn't no feather drop, just a mace.'

'Whatever. Anyway, Trotts ain't got her meanness.'

'No-one has, and I've just noticed, she hasn't come back from dragging that Gilk warrior off into the bushes.'

'Compensation for Hedge running and hiding. Poor lad – the Gilk, that is. He's probably dead by now.'

'Let's hope she notices.'

The two women fell silent. The duels down by the fire were coming fast and with a ferocity that had begun drawing more and more Barghast onlookers. Picker grunted, watching another warrior go down with a rival's knife in his throat. If this keeps up, they'll have to start building a new barrow tomorrow. Then again, they might do that anyway – a barrow for the Bridgeburners. She looked around, picking out solitary Bridgeburners among the crowds of natives. Discipline had crumbled. That fast surge of hope at the news that Trotts would live had sunk just as fast with the rumour that the Barghast might kill them all anyway – out of spite.

'The air feels ... strange,' Blend said.

'Aye... as if the night itself was aflame... as if we're in the heart of an unseen firestorm. The tores on Picker's arms were hot and slowly getting hotter. I'm about due for another dousing in that water barrel – shortlived relief, but at least it's something.

'Remember that night in Blackdog?' Blend continued in a low voice. 'That retreat..."

Stumbling onto a Rhivi Burn Ground... malign spirits rising up out of the ashes... 'Aye, Blend, I remember well enough.' And if that wing of Black Moranth hadn't spied us and come down to pull us up...

'Feels the same, Picker. We've got spirits loosed.'

'Not the big ones – these are ancestors we've got gathering. If it was the big ones our hair'd be standing on
'True. So where are they? Where are the nastiest of the Barghast spirits?'

'Somewhere else, obviously. With Oponn's luck, they won't show up tomorrow.'

'You'd think they would. You'd think they'd not want to miss something like this.'

'Try thinking pleasant thoughts for a change, Blend. Hood's breath!'

'I was just wondering,' the woman shrugged. 'Anyway,' she continued, rising, 'I think I'm going to wander for a while. See what I can pick up.'

'You understand Barghast?'

'No, but sometimes the most telling communication doesn't use words.'

'You're as bad as the rest, Blend. Likely our last night among the living, and off you go.'

'But that's the whole point, isn't it?'

Picker watched her friend slip away into the shadows. Damned woman ... got me sitting here more miserable than before. How do I know where the serious Barghast spirits are? Maybe our last night among the living, and off you go."

'But that's the whole point, isn't it?'

'Spindle pushed through the crowd and approached. The stench of burned hair hung around him like a second cloak and his expression was grim. He crouched down before her. "It's going bad, Corporal."'

'That's a change,' she snapped. "What is?"

'Half our soldiers are drunk and the rest are well on their way. Paran and his cronies disappearing into that tent and not coming out ain't been taken as a good sign. We won't be in any shape to do a damned thing come the dawn.'

'Half our soldiers are drunk and the rest are well on their way. Paran and his cronies disappearing into that tent and not coming out ain't been taken as a good sign. We won't be in any shape to do a damned thing come the dawn.'

'Parker glanced over to Humbrall Taur's tent. The silhouetted figures within had not moved in some time. After a moment she nodded to herself. "All right, Spin. Stop worrying about it. Go have some fun."'

'The man gaped. "Fun?"

'Yeah, remember? Relaxation, pleasure, a sense of well-being. Go on, she's out there somewhere and you won't be around nine months from now either. Of course, you might have a better chance if you took off that hairshirt — for this night at least—"

'I can't do that! What will Mother think?'

Picker studied the mage's fraught, horrified expression. "Spindle," she said slowly, "your mother's dead. She ain't here, she ain't watching over you. You can misbehave, Spindle. Honest."

The mage ducked down as if an invisible hand had just clouted him and for a moment Picker thought she saw an impression of knuckles bloom on the man's pate, then he scampered away, muttering and shaking his head.

"Gods . . . maybe all our ancestors are here! Picker glared about. Come near me, Da, and I'll slit your Hood-damned throat, just like I did the first time . . ."

Grainy-eyed with exhaustion, Paran stepped clear of the tent entrance. The sky was grey, faintly luminescent. Mist and woodsmoke hung motionless in the valley. A pack of dogs loping along one ridge was the only movement he could see.
And yet they're awake. All here. The real battle is done, and now, here before me – I can almost see them – stand the dark godlings of the Barghast, facing the dawn . . . for the first time in thousands of years, facing the mortal dawn . . .

A figure joined him. Paran glanced over. 'Well?'

'The Barghast Elder Spirits have left Mallet,' Quick Ben said. 'The healer sleeps. Can you feel them, Captain? The spirits? All the barriers have been shattered, the Old Ones have joined with their younger spirit kin. The forgotten warren is forgotten no more.'

'All very well,' Paran muttered, 'but we've still a city to liberate. What happens if Taur raises the standard of war and his rivals deny him?'

'They won't. They can't. Every shoulderman among the White Faces will awaken to the change, to the burgeoning. They'll feel that power, and know it for what it is. More, the spirits will make it known that their masters – the true gods of the Barghast – are trapped in Capustan. The Founding Spirits are awake. The time has come to free them.'

The captain studied the wizard at his side for a moment, then asked, 'Did you know the Moranth were kin to the Barghast?'

'More or less. Taur may not like it – and the tribes will howl – but if the spirits themselves have embraced Twist and his people . . .'

Paran sighed. I need to sleep. But I can't.

'I'd better gather the Bridgeburners.'

'Trotts's new tribe,' Quick Ben said, grinning.

'Then why can I hear his snores?'

'He's new to responsibility, Captain. You'll have to teach him.'

Teach him what? How to live beneath the burden of command? That's something I can't manage myself. I need only look into Whiskey jack's face to understand that no-one can – no-one who has a heart, anyway. We learn to achieve but one thing: the ability to hide our thoughts, to mask our feelings, to bury our humanity deep in our souls. And that can't be taught, only shown.

'Go rouse the bastard,' Paran growled.

'Yes, sir.'
CHAPTER TWELVE

In the Mountain's Heart she waited,
dreaming of peace, so deeply curled
around her grief, when he found her,
the man's search was done,
and he took upon himself her every scar
for power's embrace is a love
that wounds.

Rise of the Domin
Scintalla of Bastion (1129-1164)

The mountain fastness of outlook, its back to the lake, was the colour of water-thinned blood in the sunset. Condors wheeled around it, twice the mass of Great Ravens, their collared necks crooked as they studied the humans seething around the base of the fortress amidst a grounded starscape of campfires.

The one-eyed Tenescowri who had once been a scout in Onearm's Host followed their curving flight with deep concentration, as if godly messages could be read in the condors' sweeping patterns against the deepening sky. He had been truly embraced, agreed those who knew him by sight. Felled mute by the Domin's vastness since that day in Bastion, three weeks past. There had been a savage hunger in his lone eye from the very beginning, an ancient fire that whispered ever louder of wolves padding the darkness. It was said that Anaster himself, First among the Children of the Dead Seed, had noted the man, had indeed drawn him closer during the long march, until the one-eyed Tenescowri had been given a horse, and rode with Anaster's lieutenants at the vanguard of the human tide.

Of course, Anaster's company of lieutenants changed faces with brutal regularity.

The shapeless, starving army now waited at the feet of the Pannion Seer. At dawn he would appear upon a balcony of Outlook's central tower, and raise his hands in holy benediction. The bestial howl that would rise to greet his blessing would shatter a lesser man, but the Seer, ancient as he was, was no ordinary man. He was the embodiment of Pannion, the god, the only god.

When Anaster led the Tenescowri army north, to the river, then beyond, to Capustan, he would carry within him the power that was the Seer. And the enemy that had gathered to oppose them would be raped, devoured, obliterated from the earth. There was no doubt in the minds of the hundred thousand. Only certainty, a razor-sharp sword of iron held in the grip of ceaseless, desperate hunger.

The one-eyed man continued staring at the condors as the light faded. Perhaps, some whispered, he was in communion with the Seer himself, and his gaze was not on the wheeling birds, but on the fortress of Outlook itself.

This was as close to the truth as the peasants would come. Indeed, Toc the Younger was studying that towering fastness, an antiquated monastery warped misshapen by military accretions: battlements and enfilading walls, vast gatehouses and sheer-walled trenches. The efforts continued, the masons and engineers clearly intent on working through the night beneath towering braziers of dancing flames.

Oh, hurry with this latest frenzy of improvements. Feel what you feel, old man. It's a new emotion to you, but one the rest of us know very well. It's called fear. The seven K'ell Hunters you sent south yesterday, the ones that passed us on the road . . . they won't be coming back. And that magefire you see lighting the southern sky at night . . . it's coming closer. Inexorable. The reason's simple enough – you've angered dear Lady Envy. She's not nice when she's angry. Did you visit the carnage in Bastion? Did you send your favourite Urdomen there to return with a detailed report? Did the news turn your legs to water? It should have. The wolf and the dog, huge and silent, ripping through the press of humanity. The T'lan Imass, his sword a rust-hued blur as it sliced
through your vaunted elites. And the Seguleh, oh, the Seguleh. The punitive army of three, come to answer your arrogance... 

The pain in Toc's stomach had dulled; the knot of hunger had tightened, shrunk, become an almost senseless core of need, a need that had itself starved. His ribs were sharp and distinct beneath stretched skin. Fluids were swelling his belly. His joints ached interminably, and he'd felt his teeth loosening in their sockets. The only taste he knew these days was the occasional scrap, and the malty bitterness of his own saliva, washed away every now and then by stale, wine-tinted water from the casks on the wagons or a rare flagon of ale reserved for the First Child's favoured few.

Toc's fellow lieutenants – and indeed Anaster himself – were well enough fed. They welcomed the endless corpses the march had claimed and continued to claim. Their boiling cauldrons were ever full. The rewards of power.

The metaphor made real – I can see my old cynical teachers nodding at that. Here, among the Tenescowri, there is no obfuscating the brutal truth. Our rulers devour us. They always have. How could I ever have believed otherwise? I was a soldier, once. I was the violent assertion of someone else's will.

He had changed, not a difficult truth to recognize in himself. His soul torn by the horrors he saw all around him, the sheer amorality born of hunger and fanaticism, he had been reshaped, twisted almost beyond recognition into something new. The eradication of faith – faith in anything, especially the essential goodness of his kind – had left him cold, hardened and feral.

Yet he would not eat human flesh. Better to devour myself from within, to take my own muscles away, layer by layer, and digest all that I was. This is the last remaining task before me, and it has begun. None the less, he was coming to realize a deeper truth: his resolve was crumbling. No, stay away from that thought.

He had no idea what Anaster had seen in him. Toc played the mute, he was the defier of gifted flesh, he offered to the world nothing but his presence, the sharpness of his lone eye – seeing all that could be seen – and yet the First had descried him, somehow, from the multitudes, had dragged him forth and granted him a lieutenancy.

But I command no-one. Tactics, strategies, the endless difficulties of managing an army even as anarchistic as this one – I attend Anaster's meetings in silence. I am asked for no opinions. I make no reports. What is it he wants of me?

Suspicions still swirled dark and deep beneath the numbed surface. He wondered if Anaster somehow knew who he was. Was he about to be delivered into the hands of the Seer? It was possible – in what the world had become, anything was possible. Anything and everything. Reality itself had surrendered its rules – the living conceived by the dead, the savage love in the eyes of the women as they mounted a dying prisoner, the flaring hope that they would take within them the corpse's last seed as it fled – as if the dying body itself sought one last chance to escape the finality of oblivion – even as the soul drowned in darkness. Love, not lust. These women have given their hearts to the moment of death. Should the seed take root...

Anaster was the eldest of the first generation. A pale, gangly youth with yellow-stained eyes and lank, black hair, leading the vast army from atop his draught horse. His face was a thing of inhuman beauty, as if no soul resided behind the perfect mask. Women and men of all ages came to him, begging his gentle touch, but he denied them all. Only his mother would he let come close; to stroke his hair, rest a sun-darkened, wrinkled hand on his shoulder.

Toc feared her more than anyone else, more than Anaster and his random cruelty, more than the Seer. Something demonic lit her eyes from within. She had been the first to mount a dying man, screaming the Night Vows of a married couple's first night, then wailing in the manner of a village widow when the man died beneath her. A tale oft repeated. A multitude of witnesses. Other women of the Tenescowri flocked to her. Perhaps it was her act of power over helpless men; perhaps it was her brazen theft of their involuntarily spilled seed; perhaps the madness simply spread from one to the next.

On their march from Bastion, the army had come upon a village that had defied the Embrace. Toc had watched as Anaster released his mother and her followers, watched as they took men and young boys alike,
their knives driving mortal blows, swarming over the bodies in a manner that the foulest beast could not match. And the thoughts he had felt then were now carved deep in his soul. They were human once, these women. They lived in villages and towns no different from this one. They were wives and mothers, tending their homes and yard animals. They danced, and they wept, they were pious and respectful in propitiating the old gods. They lived normal lives.

There was a poison within the Pannion Seer and what-ever god spoke through him. A poison that seemed born of familial memories. Memories powerful enough to dismember those most ancient of bonds. A child betrayed, perhaps. A child led by the hand... into terror and pain. This is how it feels— all that I see around me. Anaster's mother, reshaped malign, rack-born to a nightmarish role. A mother not a mother, a wife not a wife, a woman not a woman.

Shouts rose to announce the appearance of a group of riders, emerging from the ramp gate of Outlook's outer wall. Toc swung his head, studied the visitors as they rode closer through the deepening gloom. Armoured. An Urdo commander, flanked by a pair of Seerdomin, the troop of Urdomen three abreast and seven deep riding in their wake.

Behind the troop, a K'ell Hunter.

A gesture from Anaster drew his lieutenants towards the low hill he had chosen as his headquarters, Toc the Younger among them.

The white of the First's eyes was the colour of honey, his pupils a murky, slate grey. Torchlight illuminated his alabaster-hued face, made his full lips strangely red. He'd remounted and now sat bareback on the huge, weary horse, slumped as he studied his chosen officers. 'News comes,' he rasped.

Toc had never heard him speak louder. Perhaps the lad could not, born with a defect of the throat or tongue. Perhaps he'd never found the need.

'The Seer and I have spoken within our minds, and now I know more than even the courtiers within Outlook's holy walls. Septarch Ultentha of Coral has been called to the Seer, leading to much speculation.'

'What news,' one of the lieutenants asked, 'from the north border, Glorious First?'

'The investment is nearly complete. I fear, my children, that we will come too late to partake of the siege.'

Breaths hissed on all sides.

I fear our hunger will not end. This was the true meaning of Anaster's words.

'It's said that Kaimerlor, a large village to the east, has refused the Embrace,' another officer said. 'Perhaps, Glorious First—'

'No,' Anaster grated. 'Beyond Capustan await the Barghast. In their hundreds of thousands, it is said. Divided amongst themselves. Weak of faith. We shall find all we need, my children.'

We'll not make it. Toc knew this for a certainty, as did the others. There was silence.

Anaster's eyes were on the approaching soldiers. 'The Seer,' he said, 'has prepared for us a gift in the meantime. He recognizes our need for sustenance. It seems,' he continued relentlessly, 'that the citizens of Coral have been found... wanting. This is the truth behind the speculation. We need only cross the calm waters of Ortnal Cut to fill our bellies, and the Urdo who now comes will deliver to us the news that launches await us— sufficient to carry us all.'

'Then,' a lieutenant growled, 'we shall feast.'

Anaster smiled.

Feast. Hood take me, please... Toc could feel the desire rising within him, a palpable demand that he realized would defeat him, shatter his defences. A feast— gods, how I hunger!
'I am not done with news,' the First said after a moment. 'The Urdo has a second mission.' The youth's sickly eyes fell on Toc the Younger. 'The Seer requests the presence of the Defter, he of the lone eye – an eye that, night by night, has slowly changed on our journey from Bastion, though I imagine that he knows it not. The Defter shall be the Seer's guest. The Defter, with his wolf's eye that so gleams in the dark. He will have no need for those extraordinary stone weapons – I shall personally keep them safe.'

Toc's obsidian-tipped arrows and the dagger were quickly removed, handed up to Anaster.

The soldiers arrived.

Toc strode to them, fell to his knees before the Urdo's horse.

'He is honoured,' Anaster said. 'Take him.'

And Toc's gratitude was real, a flood of relief rushing through his thinned veins. He would not see Coral's walls, would not see the citizens in their tens of thousands torn to pieces, would not see the rapes, would not see himself among the crowds, rushing to the flesh that was their righteous reward ...

The workers swarmed over the nascent battlements of the approach, dust- and dirt-smeared figures lit demonic in the firelight. Stumbling in the wake of the Urdo's warhorse, Toc studied their frenzied efforts with jaded detachment. Stone, earth and wood were meagre obstacles to Lady Envy's sorcery, which he'd seen unleashed at Bastion. As in legends of old, hers was a power that rolled in broad waves, stripping the life from all it swept over, devouring rank upon rank, street by street, leaving bodies piled in their hundreds. She was, he reminded himself with something like fierce pride, the daughter of Draconus – an Elder God.

The Pannion Seer had thrown sorcerers in her path, he'd heard since, yet they fared little better. She shrugged aside their efforts, decimated their powers, then left them to Garath or Baaljagg. K'Chain Che'Malle sought to reach her, only to wither beneath an onslaught of sorcery. The dog that was Garath made sport of those that eluded Lady Envy, usually working alone but sometimes in tandem with Baaljagg. Both were quicker than the undead hunters, it was said, and far smarter. Three pitched battles had occurred, in which legions of Pannion Betaklites, supported by the mounted Betakullid and by Scalanti skirmishers, as well as the Domin equivalent of Mage Cadres, had engaged their handful of enemies as they would an opposing army. From these battles arose the whispered tales of the T'lan Imass – a creature of which the Pannions had no knowledge and had come to call Stonesword – and the Seguleh, two in the first two battles, but a third appearing for the last one. Stonesword would hold one flank, the Seguleh the opposite flank. Lady Envy stood at the centre, whilst Garath and Baaljagg flowed like ragged capes of darkness wheresoever they pleased.

Three engagements, three broken armies, thousands dead, the rest attempting to flee but always caught by Lady Envy's relentless wrath.

As terrible as the Pannion, my sweet-faced friend. As terrible ... and as terrifying. Tool and the Seguleh honour the retreat of those who oppose them; they are content to claim the field and no more than that. Even the wolf and the dog cut short their pursuit. But not Envy. An unwise tactic – now that the enemy knows that retreat is impossible, they will stand and fight. The Seguleh do not escape wounds; nor do Garath and Baaljagg. Even Tool has been buried beneath enraged swordsmen, though he simply dissolves into dust and reappears elsewhere. One charge of lancers came to within a dozen paces of Lady Envy herself. The next well-flung javelin ...

He had no regrets about leaving them. He would not have survived their company.

As they approached the outer gate fortification, Toc saw Seerdomin among the battlements, hulking and silent. Formidable as squads numbering a half-dozen, here they were scores. They might do more than slow the Seguleh. They might stop them in their tracks. This is the Seer's final line of defence ...

A single ramp led up to Outlook's inner gate, steep and sheer-sided. Human bones littered the trenches to either side. They ascended. One hundred paces later, they passed beneath the gate's arch. The Urdo detached his troop to stable their horses, then dismounted. Flanked by Seerdomin, Toc watched the K'ell Hunter thump through the gateway, bladed arms hanging low. It swung lifeless eyes on the Malazan for a moment, then
padded off down an unlit roofed corridor running parallel to the wall.

The Urdo raised the visor of his helm. 'Defier, to your left is the entrance to the Seer's tower. He awaits you within. Go.'

*Perhaps not a prisoner. Perhaps no more than a curiosity.* Toc bowed to the officer, then stumbled wearily to the gaping doorway. *More likely the Seer knows he has nothing to fear from me. I'm already in Hood's shadow. Not much longer, now.*

A high-vaulted chamber occupied the tower's entire main floor, the ceiling a chaotic inverted maze of buttresses, spans, arches and false arches. Reaching down from the centre to hover a hand's width above the floor was a skeletal circular staircase of bronze that swung in a slow, creaking circle. Lit by a single brazier near the wall opposite the entrance, the chamber was shrouded in gloom, though Toc had no difficulty discerning the unadorned stone blocks that were the walls, and the complete absence of furniture that left echoes dancing all around him as he crossed the flagstoned floor, scuffing through shallow puddles.

He set a hand on the staircase's lowest railing. The massive, depending structure pulled him inexorably to one side as it continued its rotation, causing him to stagger. Grimacing, he pulled himself onto the first step. *The bastard's at the top, I'd wager, in a swaying room. My heart's likely to give out halfway up. He'll sit up there, waiting for an audience that will never happen. Now there's a Hood-grinning joke for you.* He began climbing.

Forty-two steps brought him to the next level. Toc sank down onto the cold bronze of the landing, his limbs on fire, the world wavering drunken and sickly before him. He rested sweat-slick hands on the gritty, pebbled surface of the metal sheet, blinking as he attempted to focus.

The room surrounding him was unlit, yet his lone eye could discern every detail, the open racks crowded with instruments of torture, the low beds of stained wood, the bundle of dark, stiff rags against one wall, and, covering those walls like a mad artisan's tapestries, the skins of humans. Complete down to the fingertips and nails, stretched out into a ghastly, oversized approximation of the human form, the faces flattened with only the rough stone of the wall showing where the eyes had once been. Nostrils and mouths sewn shut, hair pulled to one side and loosely knotted.

Waves of revulsion swept through Toc, shuddering, debilitating waves. He wanted to scream, to release horror's pressure, but could only gasp. Trembling, he pulled himself upright, stared up the spiralling steps, began dragging himself higher once more.

Chambers marched by, scenes that swam with grainy uncertainty, as he climbed the seemingly endless stairs. Time was lost to him. The tower, now creaking and groaning on all sides – pitching in the wind – had become the ascent of his entire life, what he had been born to, a mortal's solitary task. Cold metal, stone, faintly lit rooms rising then falling like the passage of weak suns, the traverse of aeons, civilizations born, then dying, and all that lay between was naught but the illusion of glory.

Fevered, his mind leapt off precipices, one after another, tumbling ever deeper into the well of madness even as his body clawed upward, step by step. *Dear Hood, come find me. I beg you. Take me from this god's diseased feet, end this shameful debasement – when I face him at last, I will be nothing—*

'The stairs have ended,' an ancient, high-pitched and quavering voice called to him. 'Lift your head, I would look upon this alarming countenance of yours. You have no strength? Allow me.'

A will seeped into Toc's flesh, a stranger's vigour imbuing health and strength in each muscle. None the less, its taste was foul, insipid. Toc moaned, struggled against it, but defiance failed him. Breath steadying, heart slowing, he lifted his head. He was kneeling on the last platform of hammered bronze.

Sitting hunched and twisted on a wooden chair was the wrinkled carcass of an old man, his eyes lit flaring as if their surface was no more than the thin film of two paper lanterns, stained and torn. The Pannion Seer was a corpse, yet a creature dwelt within the husk, animating it, a creature visible to Toc as a ghostly, vaguely man-shaped exhalation of power.
'Ah, now I see,' the voice said, though the mouth did not move. 'Indeed, that is not a human's eye. A wolf's in truth. Extraordinary. It is said you do not speak. Will you do so now?'

'If you wish,' Toc said, his voice rough with disuse, a shock to his own ears.

'I am pleased. I so tire of listening to myself. Your accent is unfamiliar to me. You are most certainly not a citizen of Bastion.'

'Malazan.'

The corpse creaked as it leaned forward, the eyes flaring brighter. 'Indeed. A child of that distant, formidable empire. Yet you have come from the south, whereas my spies inform me that your kin's army marches from Pale. How, then, did you become so lost?'

'I know nothing of that army, Seer,' Toc said. 'I am now a Tenescowri, and that is all that matters.'

'A bold claim. What is your name?'

'Toc the Younger.'

'Let us leave the matter of the Malazan army for a moment, shall we? The south has, until recently, been a place devoid of threat to my nation. But that has changed. I find myself irritated by a new, stubborn threat. These ... Seguleh ... and a disturbing, if mercifully small, collection of allies. Are these your friends, then, Toc the Younger?'

'I am without friends, Seer.'

'Not even your fellow Tenescowri? What of Anaster, the First Child who shall one day lead an entire army of Children of the Dead Seed? He noted you as ... unique. And what of me? Am I not your Lord? Was it not I who embraced you?'

'I cannot be certain,' Toc said dully, 'which of you it was who embraced me.'

Entity and corpse both flinched back at his words, a blurring of shapes that hurt Toc's eye. Two beings, the living hiding behind the dead. Power waxed until it seemed the ancient's body would simply disintegrate. The limbs twitched spasmodically. After a moment, the furious emanation diminished, and the body fell still once more. 'More than a wolf's eye, that you should see so clearly what no-one else has been able to descry. Oh, sorcerers have looked upon me, brimming with their vaunted warrens, and seen nothing awry. My deception knew no challenge. Yet you . . .'

Toc shrugged. 'I see what I see.'

'With which eye?'

He shrugged again. To that, he had no answer.

'But we were speaking of friends, Toc the Younger. Within my holy embrace, a mortal does not feel alone. Anaster, I see now, was deceived.'

'I did not say I felt alone, Seer. I said I am without friends. Among the Tenescowri, I am one with your holy will. Yet, consider the woman who walks at my side, or the weary child whom I carry, or the men all around me ... should they die, I will devour them. There can be no friendship in such company, Seer. There is only potential food.'

'Yet you would not eat.'

Toc said nothing.

The Seer leaned forward once again. 'You would now, wouldn't you?'

And so madness steals upon me like the warmest cloak. 'If I am to live.'
'And is living important to you, Toc the Younger?'

'I do not know, Seer.'

'Let us see then, shall we?' A withered arm lifted. Sorcery rippled the air before Toc. A small table took form in front of the Malazan, heaped with steaming chunks of boiled meat. 'Here, then,' the Seer said, 'is the sustenance you require. Sweet flesh; it is an acquired taste, or so I am told. Ah, I see the hunger flare in your wolf's eye. There is indeed a beast within you – what does it care of its meal's provenance? None the less, I caution you to proceed slowly, lest your shrunken stomach reject all that you feed it.'

With a soft moan, Toc stumbled to his knees before the table, hands reaching out. His teeth ached as he began chewing, adding his own blood to the meat's juices. He swallowed, felt his gut clench around the morsel. He forced himself to stop, to wait.

The Seer rose from the chair, walked stiffly to a window. 'I have learned,' the ancient creature said, 'that mortal armies are insufficient to the task of defeating this threat that approaches from the south. Accordingly, I have with-drawn my forces, and will now dismiss the enemy with my own hand.' The Seer swung about and studied Toc. 'It is said wolves avoid human flesh, given the choice. Do not believe me without mercy, Toc the Younger. The meat before you is venison.'

'I know, you bastard. It seems I've more than a wolf's eye – I've its sense of smell as well. He picked up another chunk. 'It no longer matters, Seer.'

'I am pleased. Do you feel strength returning to your body? I have taken the liberty of healing you – slowly, so as to diminish the trauma of the spirit. I like you, Toc the Younger. Though few know it, I can be the kindliest of masters.' The old man faced the window once more.

Toc continued eating, feeling the life flow back into him, his lone eye fixed on the Seer, narrowing at the power that had begun building around the old man's animated corpse. Cold, that sorcery. The smell of ice on the wind – here are memories, ancient memories – whose?

The room blurred, dissolved before his vision. Baaljagg ... A steady padding forward, an eye that swung to the left to see Lady Envy striding a dozen paces away. Beyond her loped Gar am, massive, flanks crisscrossed in scars that still leaked seething, virulent blood – the blood of chaos. To Garath's left walked Tool. Swords had carved a new map on the T'lan Imass's body, splintering bones, splitting withered skin and muscle – Toc had never before seen a T'lan Imass so badly damaged. It seemed impossible that Tool could stand, much less walk.

Baaljagg's head did not turn to survey the Seguleh marching on his right, yet Toc knew that they were there, Mok included. The ay, like Toc himself, was gripped in memories sprung to life by the scent on that new, chill wind coming down from the north – memories that drew their twinned attention to Tool.

The T'lan Imass had lifted his head, steps slowing until he came to a halt. The others followed suit. Lady Envy turned to Tool.

'What sorcery is this, T'lan Imass?'

'You know as well as I, Lady,' Tool rasped in reply, still scenting the air. 'Unexpected, a deepening of the confusion surrounding the entity known as the Pannion Seer.'

'An unimaginable alliance, yet it would appear . . .'

'It would appear,' Tool agreed.

Baaljagg's eyes returned to the north, gauging the prefer-natural glow building on the jagged horizon, a glow that began flowing down between the mountains, filling the valleys, spreading outward. The wind rose to a howl, gelid and bitter.

Memories resurrected ... this is Jaghut sorcery—
'Can you defeat it, Tool?' Lady Envy asked.

The T'lan Imass turned to her. 'I am clanless. Weakened. Lady, unless you can negate it, we shall have to cross as best we can, and it will build all the while, striving to deny us.'

The Lady's expression was troubled. Her frown deepened as she studied the emanation to the north. 'K'Chain Che'Malle . . . and Jaghut together. Is there precedence for such an alliance?'

'There is not,' Tool said.

Sleet swept down on the small group, swiftly turning into hail. Toc felt the stinging impacts through Baaljagg's hide as the animal hunched lower. A moment later they began moving once more, leaning against the blistering wind.

Before them, the mountains thickened with a mantle of green-veined white . . .

Toc blinked. He was in the tower, crouched before the meat-laden table. The Seer's back was to him, suffused with Jaghut sorcery – the creature within the old man's carcass was now entirely visible, thin, tall, hairless, tinted green. But no, there's more – grey roots roped down from the body's legs, chaotic power, plunging down through the stone floor, twisting with something like pain or ecstasy. The Jaghut draws on another sorcery, something older, far more deadly than Omtose Phellack.

The Seer turned. 'I am ... disappointed, Toc the Younger. Did you think you could reach out to your wolf kin without my knowing it? So, the one within you readies for its rebirth.'

'The one within me?'

'Alas,' the Seer went on, 'the Beast Throne is vacant – neither you nor that beast god can match my strength. Even so, had I remained ignorant, you might well have succeeded in assassinating me. You lied!'

This last accusation came as a shriek, and Toc saw, not an old man, but a child standing before him.

'Liar! Liar! And for that you shall suffer!' The Seer gestured wildly.

Pain clenched Toc the Younger, wrapped iron bands around his body, his limbs, lifted him into the air. Bones snapped. The Malazan screamed.

'Break! Yes, break into pieces! But I won't kill you, no, not yet, not for a long, long time! Oh, look at you writhe, but what do you know of true pain, mortal? Nothing. I will show you, Toc the Younger. I will teach you-' He gestured again.

Toc found himself hovering in absolute darkness. The agony clutching him did not cease, yet drew no tighter. His gasps echoed dully in heavy, stale air. He – he sent me away. My god sent me away . . . and now I'm truly alone. Alone . . .

Something moved nearby, something huge, hard skin rasping against stone. A mewing sound reached Toc's ears, growing louder, closer.

With a shriek, leathery arms wrapped around the Malazan, pulled him into a suffocating, desperate embrace. Pinned against a flabby, pebble-skinned bosom, Toc found himself in the company of a score or more corpses, in various stages of decomposition – all within the yearning hug of giant, reptilian arms.

Broken ribs ground and tore in Toc's chest. His skin was slippery with blood, yet whatever healing sorcery the Seer had gifted to him persisted, slowly mending, knitting, only to have the bones break yet again within the savage embrace of the creature who now held him.

The Seer's voice filled his skull. I tired of the others . . . but you I shall keep alive. You are worthy to take my place in that sweet, motherly hug. Oh, she is mad. Mindless with insanity, yet the sparks of need reside within her. Such need. Beware, or it will devour you, as it did me – until I grew so foul that she spat me back out.
Need, when it overwhelms, becomes poison, Toc the Younger. The great corrupter of love, and so it shall corrupt you. Your flesh. Your mind. Can you feel it? It has begun. Dear Malazan, can you feel it?

He had no breath with which to scream, yet the arms holding him felt his shudder, and squeezed tighter.

Soft whimpers filled the chamber, the twin voices of Toc and his captor.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Onearm's Host, in that time, was perhaps the finest army the Malazan Empire had yet to produce, even given the decimation of the Bridgeburners at the Siege of Pale. Drawn from disparate regiments that included companies from Seven Cities, Falar, and Malaz Island, these ten thousand soldiers were, by roll, four thousand nine hundred and twelve women, the remaining men; one thousand two hundred and sixty-seven under the recorded age of twenty-five years, seven hundred and twenty-one over the age of thirty-five years; the remaining in between.

Remarkable indeed. More so when one considers this: among its soldiers could be found veterans of the Wickan Wars (see Coltaine's Rebellion), the Aren Uprising (on both sides), and Blackdog Forest and Mott Wood.

How does one measure such an army? By their deeds; and that which awaited them in the Pannion Domin would make of Onearm's Host a legend carved in stone.

East of Saltoan, a History of the Pannion Wars
Gouridd Palah

Midges swarmed the tall-grass prairie, the grainy black clouds tumbling over the faded, wavering green. Oxen bellowed and moaned in their yokes, their eyes covered with clusters of the frenzied insects. The Mhybe watched her Rhivi kin move among the beasts, their hands laden with grease mixed with the crushed seeds of lemon grass, which they smeared around the eyes, ears, nose and mouth. The unguent had served the bhederin well for as long as the huge bison had been under the care of the Rhivi; a slighter thinner version was used by the Rhivi themselves. Most of Brood's soldiers had taken to the pungent yet effective defence as well, whilst the Tiste Andii had proved evidently unpalatable to the biting insects. What had drawn the midges this time was the rank upon rank of unprotected Malazan soldiers.

Yet another march across this Hood-forsaken continent for that weary army of foreigners, these strangers who had been, for so many years, unwelcome, detested, feared. Our new allies, their surcoats dyed grey, their colourless standards proclaiming an unknown loyalty. They follow one man, and ask nothing of justification, or cause.

She drew the rough weave of her hood over her head as the slanting sun broke through the clouds gathered to the southwest. Her back was to the march; she sat in the bed of a Rhivi wagon, eyes on the trailing baggage train and the companies of Malazan soldiers flanking it.

Does Brood command such loyalty? He was the warlord who delivered the first defeat to the Malazan army. Our lands were being invaded. Our cause was clear, and we fought for the commander who could match the enemy. And even now, we face a new threat to our homeland, and Brood has chosen to lead us. Still, should he command us into the Abyss – would we follow? And now, knowing what I know, would I?

Her thoughts travelled from the warlord to Anomander Rake and the Tiste Andii. All strangers to Genabackis, yet they fought in its defence, in the name of its people's liberty. Rake's rule over his Tiste Andii was absolute. Aye, they would stride unblinking into the Abyss. The fools.

And now, marching at their sides, the Malazans. Dujek Onearm. Whiskeyjack. And ten thousand unwavering souls. What made such men and women so intractable in their sense of honour?

She had come to fear their courage. Within the husk of her body, there was a broken spirit. Dishonoured by its own cowardice, bereft of dignity, a mother no longer. Lost, even, to the Rhivi. I am no more than food to the child. I have seen her, from a distance now and no closer – she is taller, she has filled out, her hips, her breasts, her face. This Tattersail was no gazelle. She devours me, this new woman, with her sleepy eyes, her
A horseman rode to the wagon's rear, his armour clanking, his dusty cloak flapping as he slowed his charger. The visor on his burnished helm was raised, revealing a grey-shot beard, trimmed close, beneath hard eyes.

'Will you send me away as well, Mhybe?' he growled, his horse slowing to a walk to keep pace.

'Mhybe? That woman is dead,' she replied. 'You may leave here, Whiskeyjack.'

She watched him pull the tanned leather gloves from his wide, scarred hands, studied those hands as they finally came to a rest on the saddlehorn. There is a mason's brutality about them, yet they are endearing none the less. Any woman still alive would desire their touch . . .

'An end to the foolishness, Mhybe. We've need of your counsel. Korlat tells me you are racked with dreams. You cry out against a threat that approaches us, something vast and deadly. Woman, your terror is palpable – even now, I see that my words have rekindled it in your eyes. Describe your visions, Mhybe.'

Struggling against a painfully hammering heart, she barked a rough, broken laugh. 'You are all fools. Would you seek to challenge my enemy? My deadly, unopposable foe? Will you draw that sword of yours and stand in my stead?'

Whiskeyjack scowled. 'If that would help.'

'There is no need. What comes for me in my dreams comes for us all. Oh, perhaps we soften its terrible visage, the darkness of a cowl, a vague human shape, even a skull's grin which only momentarily shocks yet remains, none the less, deeply familiar – almost comforting. And we build temples to blunt the passage into its eternal domain. We fashion gates, raise barrows—'

'Your enemy is death?' Whiskeyjack glanced away, then met her eyes again. 'This is nonsense, Mhybe. You and I are both too old to fear death.'

'Face to face with Hood!' she snapped. 'That is how you see it – you fool! He is the mask behind which hides something beyond your ability to comprehend. I have seen it! I know what awaits me!'

'Then you no longer yearn for it—'

'I was mistaken, back then. I believed in my tribe's spirit-world. I have sensed the ghosts of my ancestors. But they are but memories made manifest, a sense of self desperately holding itself together by strength of its own will and naught else. Fail in that will, and all is lost. For ever.'

'Is oblivion so terrible, Mhybe?'

She leaned forward, gripping the wagon's sides with fingers that clawed, nails that dug into the weathered wood. 'What lies beyond is not oblivion, you ignorant man! No, imagine a place crowded with fragmented memories – memories of pain, of despair – all those emotions that carve deepest upon our souls.' She fell back, weakened, and slowly sighed, her eyes closing. 'Love drifts like ashes, Whiskeyjack. Even identity is gone. Instead, all that is left of you is doomed to an eternity of pain and terror – a succession of fragments from everyone – every thing – that has ever lived. In my dreams ... I stand upon the brink. There is no strength in me – my will has already shown itself weak, wanting. When I die ... I see what awaits me, I see what hungered for me, for my memories, for my pain.' She opened her eyes, met his gaze. 'It is the true Abyss, Whiskeyjack. Beyond all the legends and stories, it is the true Abyss. And it lives unto itself, consumed by rapacious hunger.'

'Dreams can be naught but an imagination's fashioning of its own fears, Mhybe,' the Malazan said. 'You are projecting a just punishment for what you perceive as your life's failure.'

Her eyes narrowed on him. 'Get out of my sight,' she growled, turning away, drawing her hood tighter about her head, cutting off the outside world – all that lay beyond the warped, stained planks of the wagon's bed. Begone, Whiskeyjack, with your sword-thrust words, the cold, impervious armour of your ignorance. You cannot answer all that I have seen with a simple, brutal statement. I am not a stone for your rough hands. The knots within me defy your chisel.
Your sword-thrust words shall not cut to my heart.

I dare not accept your wisdom. I dare—

Whiskeyjack. You bastard.

The commander rode at a gentle canter through the dust until he reached the vanguard of the Malazan army. Here, he found Dujek, flanked by Korlat on one side and the Daru, Kruppe, on the other, the latter tottering uneasily on a mule, hands waving about at the swarming midges.

'A plague on these pernicious gnats! Kruppe despairs!'

'The wind will pick up soon enough,' Dujek growled. 'We're approaching hills.'

Korlat drew closer alongside Whiskeyjack. 'How does she fare, Commander?'

He grimaced. 'No better. Her spirit is as twisted and shrunken as her body. She has fashioned a vision of death that has her fleeing it in terror.'

'Tat— Silverfox feels abandoned by her mother. This leads to bitterness. She no longer welcomes our company.'

'Her too? This is turning into a contest of wills, I think. Isolation is the last thing she needs, Korlat.'

'In that she is like her mother, as you have just intimated.'

He let out a long sigh, shifted in his saddle. His thoughts began to drift; he was weary, his leg aching and stiff. Sleep had been eluding him. They had heard virtually nothing of the fate of Paran and the Bridgeburners. The warrens had become impassable. Nor were they certain if the siege of Capustan was under way, or of the city's fate. Whiskeyjack had begun to regret sending the Black Moranth away. Dujek and Brood's armies were marching into the unknown; even the Great Raven Crone and her kin had not been seen for over a week.

It's these damned warrens and the sickness now filling them . . .

'They're late,' Dujek muttered.

'And no more than that, Kruppe assures one and all. Recall the last delivery. Almost dusk, it was. Three horses left on the lead wagon, the others killed and cut from the traces. Four shareholders gone, their souls and earnings scattered to the infernal winds. And the merchant herself! Near death, she was. The warning was clear, my friends – the warrens have been compromised. And as we march ever closer to the Domin, the foulment grows ever more ... uh, foul.'

'Yet you insist they'll make it through again.'

'Kruppe does, High Fist! The Trygalle Trade Guild honours its contracts. They are not to be underestimated. 'Tis the day of their delivery of supplies. Said supplies shall therefore be delivered. And, assuming Kruppe's request has been honoured, among those supplies will be crates of the finest insect repellent ever created by the formidable alchemists of Darujhistan!'

Whiskeyjack leaned towards Korlat. 'Where in the line does she walk?' he asked quietly.

'At the very rear, Commander—'

'And is anyone watching her?'

The Tiste Andii woman glanced over and frowned. 'Is there need?'

'How in Hood's name should I know?' he snapped. A moment later he scowled. 'Your pardon, Korlat. I shall seek her out myself.' He swung his mount around, nudged it into a canter.
'Tempers grow short,' Kruppe murmured as the commander rode away. 'But not as short as Kruppe, for whom all nasty words whiz impactless over his head, and are thus lost in the ether. And those darts aimed lower, ah, they but bounce from Kruppe's ample equanimity—'

'Fat, you mean,' Dujek said, wiping dust from his brow then leaning over to spit onto the ground.

'Ahem, Kruppe, equably cushioned, blithely smiles at the High Fist's jibe. It is the forthright bluntness of soldiers that one must bathe in whilst on the march leagues from civilization. Antidote to the snipes of gutter rats, a refreshing balm to droll, sardonic nobles – why prick with a needle when one can use a hammer, eh? Kruppe breathes deep – but not so deep as to cough from the dust-laden stench of nature – such simple converse. The intellect must needs shift with alacrity from the intricate and delicate steps of the court dance to the tribal thumping of boots in grunting cadence—'

'Hood take us,' Korlat muttered to the High Fist, 'you got under his skin after all.'

Dujek's answering grin was an expression of perfect satisfaction.

Whiskeyjack angled his horse well to one side of the columns, then drew rein to await the rearguard. There were Rhivi everywhere in sight, moving singly or in small groups, their long spears balanced on their shoulders. Brown-skinned beneath the sun, they strode with light steps, seemingly immune to the heat and the leagues passing under their feet. The bhederin herd was being driven parallel to the armies, a third of a league to the north. The intervening gap revealed a steady stream of Rhivi, returning from the herd or setting off towards it. The occasional wagon joined the to-and-fro, unladen on its way north, burdened with carcasses on the way back.

The rearguard came within sight, flanked by outriders, the Malazan companies in sufficient strength to blunt a surprise attack long enough for the main force to swing round and come to their relief. The commander lifted the water-bladder from his saddle and filled his mouth, eyes narrowed as he studied the disposition of his soldiers.

Satisfied, he urged his mount into a walk, squinting into the trailing clouds of dust at the rearguard's tail-end.

She walked in that cloud as if seeking obscurity, her stride so like Tattersail's that Whiskeyjack felt a shiver dance up his spine. Twenty paces behind her marched a pair of Malazan soldiers, crossbows slung over their shoulders, helms on and visors lowered.

The commander waited until the trio had passed, then guided his horse into their wake. Within moments he was alongside the two marines.

The soldiers glanced up. Neither saluted, following standard procedure for battlefields. The woman closest to Whiskeyjack offered a curt nod. 'Commander. Here to fill your quota of eating dust, are ya?'

'And how did you two earn the privilege?'

'We volunteered, sir,' the other woman said. 'That's Tattersail up there. Yeah, we know, she calls herself Silverfox now, but we ain't fooled. She's our Cadre Mage, all right.'

'So you've elected to guard her back.'

'Aye. Fair exchange, sir. Always.'

'And are the two of you enough?'

The first woman grinned beneath her half-visor. 'We're Hood-damned killers, me and my sister, sir. Two quarrels every seventy heartbeats, both of us. And when time's run out for that, why, then, we switch to longswords, one for each hand. And when they're all busted, it's pig-stickers—'

'And,' the other growled, 'when we're outa iron we use our teeth, sir.'
'How many brothers did you two grow up with?'

'Seven, only they all ran away as soon as they was able. So did Da, but Mother was better off without 'im and that wasn't just bluster when she said so, neither.'

Whiskeyjack edged closer, rolling up his left sleeve. He leaned down and showed the two marines his forearm. 'See those scars – no, these ones here.'

'A nice even bite,' the nearest woman observed. 'Pretty small, though.'

'She was five, the little banshee. I was sixteen. The first fight I ever lost.'

'Did the lass grow up to be a soldier, Commander?'

He straightened, lowering his sleeve. 'Hood, no. When she was twelve, she set off to marry a king. Or so she claimed. That was the last any of us ever saw or heard of her.'

'I'd bet she did just that, sir,' the first woman said. 'If she was anything like you.'

'Now I'm choking on more than just dust, soldier. Carry on.'

Whiskeyjack trotted ahead until he reached Silverfox.

'They'll die for you now,' she said as soon as he came alongside. 'I know,' she continued, 'you don't do it on purpose. There's nothing calculated when you're being human, old friend. That's what makes you so deadly.'

'No wonder you're walking here on your own,' he replied.

Her smile was sardonic. 'We're very much alike, you know. All we need do is cup our hands and ten thousand souls rush in to fill them. And every now and then one of us recognizes that fact, and the sudden, overwhelming pressure hardens us a little more deep down inside. And what was soft gets a little smaller, a little weaker.'

'Not weaker, Silverfox. Rather, more concentrated, more selective. That you feel the burden at all is proof that it remains alive and well.'

'There is a difference, now that I think on it,' she said. 'For you, ten thousand souls. For me, a hundred thousand.'

He shrugged.

She was about to continue, but a sharp crack filled the air behind them. They spun to see a savage parting in their wake, a thousand paces away, from which poured a crimson river. The two marines backpedalled as the torrent tumbled towards them.

The high grasses blackened, wavered, then sank down on all sides. Distant shouts rose from the Rhivi who had seen the conflagration.

The Trygalle wagon that emerged from the fissure burned with black fire. The horses themselves were engulfed, their screams shrill and horrible as they plunged madly onto the flooded plain. The beasts were devoured in moments, leaving the wagon to roll forward of its own momentum in the spreading red stream. One front wheel collapsed. The huge contrivance pitched, pivoted, burnt bodies falling from its flanks, then careened onto its side in an explosion of ebon flames.

The second wagon that emerged was licked by the same sorcerous fire, though not yet out of control. A nimbus of protective magic surrounded the eight horses in the train, fraying even as they thundered into the clear, splashing through the river of blood that continued to spread out from the portal. The driver, standing like a mad apparition with his cloak streaming black fire, bellowed a warning to the two marines before leaning hard to one side and sawing the traces. The horses swerved, pulling the huge wagon onto two wheels a moment before it came crunching back down. A guardsman who had been clinging to its side was thrown by the impact, landing with a turgid splash in the spreading river. A red-sheathed arm rose above the tide, then sank back
...and out of sight.

The horses and wagon missed the two marines by a dozen paces, slowing as they cleared the river, its fires dying.

A third wagon appeared, followed by another, and another. The vehicle that then emerged was the size of a house, rolling on scores of iron-spoked wheels, caged by shimmering sorcery. Over thirty dray horses pulled it, but, Whiskeyjack guessed, even that many of the powerful beasts would be insufficient if not for the visible magic carrying much of the enormous wagon's weight.

Behind it the portal closed abruptly in a spray of blood.

The commander glanced down to see his horse's legs ankle-deep in the now-slowing flow. He glanced over at Silverfox. She stood motionless, looking down at the liquid as it lapped against her bared shins. 'This blood,' she said slowly, almost disbelieving, 'is his.'

'Who?'

She looked up, her expression one of dismay. 'An Elder God's. A – a friend's. This is what is filling the warrens. He has been wounded. Somehow. Wounded ... perhaps fatally – gods! The warrens!'

With a curse, Whiskeyjack collected his reins and kicked his horse into a splashing canter towards the giant wagon.

Massive gouges had been ripped from its ornate sides. Blackened smears showed where guards had once clung. Smoke drifted above the entire train. Figures had begun emerging, staggering as if blind, moaning as if their souls had been torn from their bodies. He saw guards fall to their knees in the sludgy blood, weeping or simply bowing in shuddering silence.

The side door nearest Whiskeyjack opened as he rode up.

A woman climbed weakly into view, was helped down the steps. She pushed her companions away once her boots sank into the crimson, grass-matted mud and found purchase.

The commander dismounted.

The merchant bowed her head, her red-rimmed eyes holding steady as she drew herself straight. 'Please forgive the delay, sir,' she said in a voice that rasped with exhaustion.

'I take it you will find an alternate route back to Darujhistan,' Whiskeyjack said, eyeing the wagon behind her.

'We shall decide once we assess the damage.' She faced the dustcloud to the east. 'Has your army encamped for the night?'

'No doubt the order's been given.'

'Good. We're in no condition to chase you.'

'I've noticed.'

Three guards – shareholders – approached from one of the lead wagons, struggling beneath the weight of a huge, bestial arm, torn at the shoulder and still dripping blood. Three taloned fingers and two opposable thumbs twitched and waved a hand's breath away from the face of one of the guards. All three men were grinning.

'We figured it was still there, Haradas! Lost the other three, though. Still, ain't it a beauty?'

The merchant, Haradas, briefly closed her eyes and sighed. 'The attack came early on,' she explained to Whiskeyjack. 'A score of demons, probably as lost and frightened as we were.'

'And why should they attack you?'
'Wasn't an attack, sir,' one of the guards said. 'They just wanted a ride outa that nightmare. We would've obliged, too, only they was too heavy—'

'And they didn't sign a waiver neither,' another guard pointed out. 'We even offered a stake—'

'Enough, gentlemen,' Haradas said. 'Take that thing away.'

But the three men had come too close to the lead wheel of the huge wagon. As soon as the demonic hand made contact with the rim it closed with a snap around it. The three guards leapt back, leaving the arm hanging from the wheel.

'Oh, that's just terrific!' Haradas snapped. 'And when-ever will we get that off?'

'When the fingers wear through, I guess,' a guard replied, frowning at the arm. 'Gonna be a lumpy ride for a while, dear. Sorry about that.'

A troop of riders approached from the army's train.

'Your escort's arrived,' Whiskeyjack noted. 'We will ask for a detailed report of the journey, mistress – I suggest you stand down until this evening, and leave the details of distribution to your second.'

She nodded. 'Good idea.'

The commander searched for Silverfox. She had resumed her march, the two marines trailing. The blood of the god had stained the marines' boots and the Rhivi's legs.

Across the plain, for two hundred or more paces, the earth looked like a red matted, tattered blanket, plucked and torn into dissolving disarray.

As ever, Kallor's thoughts were dark.

*Ashes and dust. The fools prattle on and on in the command tent, a vast waste of time. Death flows through the warrens – what matter? Order ever succumbs to chaos, broken unto itself by the very strictures it imposes. The world will do better with out mages. I for one will not rue the demise of sorcery.*

The lone candle, streaked with the crushed fragments of a rare sea-worm, gusted thick, heavy smoke, filling the tent. Shadows crawled beneath the drifting plumes. Flickering yellow light glinted off ancient, oft-mended armour.

Seated on the ornate, ironwood throne, Kallor breathed deep of the invigorating fumes. *Alchemy is not magic. The arcana of the natural world holds far more wonders than any wizard could conjure in a thousand lifetimes. These Century Candles, for one, are well named. Upon my life, yet another layer seeps into my flesh and bone – I can feel it with each breath. A good thing, too. Who would want to live for ever in a body too frail to move? Another hundred years, gained in the passage of a single night, in the depth of this one reach of columned wax. And I have scores more . . .*

No matter the stretch of decades and centuries, no matter the interminable boredom of inactivity that was so much a part of living, there were moments ... *moments when I must act, explosively, with certainty. And all that seemed nothing before was in truth preparation. There are creatures that hunt without moving; when they become perfectly still, perfectly motionless, they are at their most dangerous. I am as such a creature. I have always been so, yet all who know me are . . . gone. Ashes and dust. The children who now surround me with their gibbering worries are blind to the hunter in their midst. Blind . . .*

Pale hands gripping the arms of the throne, he sat unmoving, stalking the landscape of his own memories, dragging them forth like corpses pulled from the ground, drawing their visages close for a moment before casting them away and moving on.

*Eight mighty wizards, hands linked, voices rising in unison. Desperate for power. Seeking it from a distant, unknown realm. Unsuspecting, curious, the strange god in that strange place edged closer, then the trap was*
sprung. Down he came, torn to pieces yet remaining alive. Brought down, shattering a continent, obliterating warrens. Himself broken, damaged, crippled . . .

Eight mighty wizards, who sought to oppose me and so loosed a nightmare that rises once more, millennia later. Fools. Now, they are dust and ashes . . .

Three gods, assailing my realm. Too many insults delivered by my hand. My existence had gone beyond irritation, and so they banded together to crush me once and for all. In their ignorance, they assumed I would play by their rules. Either fight, or yield my realm. My, weren't they surprised, striding into my empire, only to find . . . nothing left alive. Nothing but charred bones and lifeless ash.

They could not comprehend – nor did they ever – that I would yield nothing. Rather than surrender all I had fashioned, I destroyed it. That is the privilege of the creator – to give, then to take away. I shall never forget the world's death cry – for it was the voice of my triumph . . .

And one of you remains, pursuing me once more. Oh, I know it is you, K'rul. But, instead of me, you have found another enemy, and he is killing you. Slowly, deliciously. You have returned to this realm, only to die, as I said you would. And did you know? Your sister has succumbed to my ancient curse as well. So little left of her, will she ever recover? Not if I can help it.

A faint smile spread across his withered, pallid face.

His eyes narrowed as a portal began to take shape before him. Miasmic power swirled from it. A figure emerged, tall, gaunt, a face shattered – massive cuts gaping red, the shards of broken bone glimmering in the candlelight. The portal closed behind the Jaghut, who stood relaxed, eyes flickering pools of darkness.

'I convey greetings from the Crippled God,' the Jaghut said, 'to you, Kallor' – he paused to survey the tent's interior – 'and your vast empire.'

'You tempt me,' Kallor rasped, 'to add to your ... facial distress, Gethol. My empire may be gone, but I shall not yield this throne. You, of all people, should recognize that I am not yet done in my ambitions, and I am a patient man.'

Gethol grunted a laugh. 'Ah, dear Kallor. You are to me the exception to the rule that patience is a virtue.'

'I can destroy you, Jaghut, no matter who you call master these days. I can complete what your capable punisher began. Do you doubt me?'

'Most certainly not,' Gethol replied easily. 'I've seen you wield that two-handed sword of yours.'

'Then withdraw your verbal knives and tell me what you do here.'

'Apologies for disrupting your ... concentration. I shall now explain. I am Herald to the Crippled God – aye, a new House has come to the Deck of Dragons. The House of Chains. The first renditions have been fashioned. And soon every Reader of the Deck will be seeking their likenesses.'

Kallor snorted. 'And you expect this gambit to work? That House shall be assailed. Obliterated.'

'Oh, the battle is well under way, old man. You cannot be blind to that, nor to the fact that we are winning.'

Kallor's eyes thinned to slits. 'The poisoning of the warrens? The Crippled God is a fool. What point in destroying the power he requires to assert his claim? Without the warrens, the Deck of Dragons is nothing.'

'The appellation "poison" is erroneous, Kallor. Rather, consider the infection one of enforcing a certain ... alteration ... to the warrens. Aye, those who resist it view it as a deadly manifestation, a "poison" indeed. But only because its primary effect is to make the warrens impassable to them. Servants of the Crippled God, however, will find themselves able to travel freely in the paths.'

'I am servant to no-one,' Kallor growled.

'The position of High King is vacant within the Crippled God's House of Chains.'
Kallor shrugged. 'None the less requiring that I stain my knees before the Chained One.'

'No such gestures are demanded of the High King. The House of Chains exists beyond the Crippled God's influence – is that not obvious? He is chained, after all. Trapped in a lifeless fragment of a long-dead warren. Bound to the flesh of the Sleeping Goddess – aye, that has proved his singular means of efficacy, but it is limited. Understand, Kallor, that the Crippled God now casts the House of Chains into the world, indeed, abandons it to its fate. Survival depends on those who come to the titles it contains. Some of those the Chained One can influence – though never directly – whilst others, such as that of King of High House Chains, must be freely assumed.'

'If so,' Kallor rumbled after a long moment, 'why are you not the King?'

Gethol bowed his head. 'You honour me, sir,' he said drily. 'I am, however, content to be Herald—'

'Under the delusion that the messenger is ever spared, no matter what the message? You were never as smart as your brother, were you? Somewhere, Gothos must be laughing.'

'Gothos never laughs. But, given that I know where he languishes, I do. Often. Now, should I remain here much longer awaiting your answer, my presence may well be detected. There are Tiste Andii nearby—'

'Very near. Not to mention Caladan Brood. Lucky for you Anomander Rake has left – returned to Moon’s Spawn, wherever it is—'

'Its location must be discovered, revealed to the Crippled God.'

The grey-haired warrior raised an eyebrow. 'A task for the King?'

'Does betrayal sting your sense of honour, Kallor?'

'If you call it a sudden reversal of strategy, the sting fades. What I require, in exchange, is an opportunity, arranged howsoever the Crippled God pleases.'

'What is the nature of this opportunity, High King?'

Kallor smiled, then his expression hardened. 'The woman Silverfox ... a moment of vulnerability, that is all I ask.'

Gethol slowly bowed. 'I am your Herald, sire, and shall convey your desires to the Crippled God.'

'Tell me,' Kallor said, 'before you go. Does this throne suit the House of Chains, Gethol?'

The Jaghut studied the battered, iron-coloured wood, noted the cracks in its frame. 'It most certainly does, sire.'

'Begone, then.'

The Herald bowed once more, the portal opening behind him. A moment later he stepped back, and was gone.

Smoke from the candle swirled in the wake of the vanishing portal. Kallor drew a deep breath. Adding years and years of renewed vigour. He sat motionless ... a hunter on the edge of ambush. Suitably explosive. Suitably deadly.

Whiskeyjack stepped out of the command tent, stood gazing up at the sweep of stars overhead. It had been a long time since he'd felt so weary.

He heard movement behind him, then a soft, long-fingered hand settled on his shoulder, the touch sending waves through him. 'It would be nice,' Korlat murmured, 'to hear good news for a change.'

He grunted.
'I see the worry in your eyes, Whiskeyjack. It's a long list, isn't it? Your Bridgeburners, Silverfox, her mother, and now this assault on the warrens. We are marching blind. So much rests on unknowns. Does Capustan still hold, or has the city fallen? And what of Trotts? And Paran? Quick Ben?'

'I am aware of that list, Korlat,' he rumbled.

'Sorry. I share them, that is all.'

He glanced at her. 'Forgive me, but why? This is not your war -- gods below, it's not even your world! Why are you yielding to its needs?' He sighed loudly and shook his head, returning his gaze to the night sky. 'That's a question we asked often, early in the campaigns. I remember, in Blackdog Forest, stumbling over a half-dozen of your kin. A Moranth cusser had taken them out. A squad of regulars was busy looting the bodies. They were cursing -- not finding anything of worth. A few knotted strips of coloured cloth, a stream-polished pebble, plain weapons -- the kind you could pick up in any market in any city.' He was silent for a moment, then he continued, 'And I remember wondering -- what was the story of their lives? Their dreams, their aspirations? Would their kin miss them? The Mhybe once mentioned that the Rhivi took on the task of burying the Tiste Andii fallen ... well, we did the same, there in that wood. We sent the regulars packing with boots to the backside. We buried your dead, Korlat. Consigned their souls in the Malazan way ...'

Her eyes were depthless as she studied him. 'Why?' she asked quietly.

Whiskeyjack frowned. 'Why did we bury them? Hood's breath! We honour our enemies -- no matter who they might be. But the Tiste Andii most of all. They accepted prisoners. Treated those that were wounded. They even accepted withdrawal -- not once were we pursued after hightailing it from an unwinnable scrap.'

'And did not the Bridgeburners return the favour, time and again, Commander? And indeed, before long, so did the rest of Dujek Onearm's soldiers.'

'Most campaigns get nastier the longer they drag on,' Whiskeyjack mused, 'but not that one. It got more ... civilized. Unspoken protocols ...'

'Much of that was undone when you took Pale.'

He nodded. 'More than you know.'

Her hand was still on his shoulder. 'Come with me back to my tent, Whiskeyjack.'

His brows rose, then he smiled and said in a dry tone, 'Not a night to be alone—'

'Don't be a fool!' she snapped. 'I did not ask for company -- I asked for you. Not a faceless need that must be answered, and anyone will do. Not that. Am I understood?'

'Not entirely.'

'I wish us to become lovers, Whiskeyjack. Beginning tonight. I wish to awaken in your arms. I would know if you have feelings for me.'

He was silent for a long moment, then he said, 'I'd be a fool not to, Korlat, but I had also considered it even more foolish to attempt any advance. I assumed you were mated to another Tiste Andii -- a union no doubt centuries long—'

'And what would be the point of such a union?'

He frowned, startled. 'Well, uh, companionship? Children?'

'Children arrive. Rarely, as much a product of boredom as anything else. Tiste Andii do not find companionship among their own kind. That died out long ago, Whiskeyjack. Yet even rarer is the occasion of a Tiste Andii emerging from the darkness, into the mortal world, seeking a reprieve from ... from—'

He set a finger to her lips. 'No more. I am honoured to accept you, Korlat. More than you will ever realize, and I will seek to be worthy of your gift.'
She shook her head, eyes dropping. ‘It is a scant gift. Seek my heart and you may be disappointed in what you find.’

The Malazan stepped back and reached for his belt-pouch. He untied it, upended the small leather sack into one cupped hand. A few coins fell out, then a small, bedraggled, multicoloured knot of cloth strips, followed by a lone dark, smooth pebble. ‘I’d thought,’ he said slowly, eyes on the objects in his hand, ‘that one day I might have the opportunity to return what was clearly of value to those fallen Tiste Andii. All that was found in that search ... I realized – even then – that I could do naught but honour them.’

Korlat closed her hand over his, trapping the objects within their joined clasp. She led him down the first row of tents.

The Mhybe dreamed. She found herself clinging to the edge of a precipice, white-knuckled hands gripping gnarled roots, the susurration of trickling dirt dusting her face as she strained to hold on.

Below waited the Abyss, racked with the storm of dismembered memories, streamers of pain, fear, rage, jealousy and dark desires. That storm wanted her, was reaching up for her, and she was helpless to defend herself.

Her arms were weakening.

A shrieking wind wrapped around her legs, yanked, snatched her away, and she was falling, adding her own scream to the cacophony. The winds tossed her this way and that, twisting, tumbling—

Something hard and vicious struck her hip, glanced away. Air buffeted her hard. Then the hard intrusion was back – talons closing around her waist, scaled, cold as death. A sharp tug snapped her head back, and she was no longer falling, but rising, carried higher and higher.

The storm's roar faded below her, then dwindled away to one side.

The Mhybe twisted her head, looked up.

An undead dragon loomed above her, impossibly huge. Desiccated, dried flaps of skin trailing from its limbs, its almost translucent wings thundering, the creature was bearing her away.

She turned to study what lay below.

A featureless plain stretched out beneath her, dun brown. Long cracks in the earth were visible, filled with dully glowing ice. She saw a darker patch, ragged at its edges, flow over a hillside. A herd. I have walked that land before. Here, in my dreams . . . there were footprints . . .

The dragon banked suddenly, crooked its wings, and began a swift spiral earthward.

She found herself wailing – was shocked to realize that it was not terror she was feeling, but exhilaration. Spirits above, this is what it is to fly! Ah, now I know envy in truth!

The land rushed up to meet her. Moments before what would have been a fatal impact, the dragon's wings snapped wide, caught the air, then, the leg directly above curling upward to join its twin, the creature glided silently an arm's length above the loamy ground. Forward momentum abated. The leg lowered, the talons releasing her.

She landed with barely a thump, rolled onto her back, then sat up to watch the enormous dragon rising once more, wings thundering.

The Mhybe looked down and saw a youthful body – her own. She cried out at the cruelty of this dream. Cried out again, curling tight on the cool, damp earth.

Oh, why did you save me! Why? Only to awaken – spirits below – to awaken—

‘She was passing through.’ A soft voice – a stranger's voice, in the language of the Rhivi – spoke in her mind.
The Mhybe's head snapped up. She looked around. 'Who speaks? Where are you?'

'We're here. When you are ready to see us, you shall. Your daughter has a will to match yours, it seems. To have so commanded the greatest of the Bonecasters – true, she comes in answer to the child's summons. The Gathering. Making the detour a minor one. None the less ... we are impressed.'

'My daughter?'

'She still stings from harsh words – we can feel that. Indeed, it is how we have come to dwell here. That small, round man hides obsidian edges beneath his surfeit of flesh. Who would have thought? "She has given to you all she has, Silverfox. The time has come for you to gift in answer, lass. Kruppe is not alone in refusing to abandon her to her fate." Ah, he opened her eyes, then, swept away her obsessing with her selves, and she only a child at the time, but she heeded his words – though in truth he spoke only within her dreams at that time. Heeded. Yes indeed.

'So,' the voice continued, 'will you see us now?' She stared down at her smooth hands, her young arms, and screamed. 'Stop torturing me with this dream! Stop! Oh, stop—'

Her eyes opened to the musty darkness of her tent. Aches and twinges prodded her thinned bones, her shrunken muscles. Weeping, the Mhybe pulled her ancient body into a tight ball. 'Gods,' she whispered, 'how I hate you. How I hate you!'
BOOK THREE

CAPUSTAN
The Last Mortal Sword of Fener's Reve was Fanald of Cawn Vor, who was killed in the Chaining. The last Boar-cloaked Destriant was Ipshank of Korelri, who vanished during the Last Flight of Manask on the Stratem Icefields. Another waited to claim that title, but was cast out from the temple before it came to him, and that man's name has been stricken from all records. It is known, however, that he was from Unta; that he had begun his days as a cutpurse living on its foul streets, and that his casting out from the temple was marked by the singular punishment of Fener's Reve . . .

Temple Lives
Birrin Thund
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

If you can, dear friends, do not live through a siege.

Ubilast (the Legless)

The inn commanding the southeast corner of old Daru Street held no more than half a dozen patrons, most of them visitors to the city who, like Gruntle, were now trapped. The Pannion armies surrounding Capustan’s walls had done nothing for five days and counting. There had been clouds of dust from beyond the ridgeline to the north, the caravan captain had heard, signalling ... something. But that had been days ago and nothing had come of it.

What Septarch Kulpath was waiting for, no-one knew, though there was plenty of speculation. More barges carrying Tenescowri had been seen crossing the river, until it seemed that half the empire's population had joined the peasant army. ’With numbers like that,’ someone had said a bell earlier, ’there'll be barely a mouthful of Capan citizen each.’ Gruntle had been virtually alone in appreciating the jest.

He sat at a table near the entrance, his back to the rough-plastered, double-beamed door-frame, the door itself on his right, the low-ceiled main room before him. A mouse was working its way along the earthen floor beneath the tables, scampering from shadow to shadow, slipping between the shoes or boots of whatever patron its path intersected. Gruntle watched its progress with low-lidded eyes. There was still plenty of food to be found in the kitchen – or so its nose was telling it. That bounty, Gruntle well knew, would not last if the siege drew out.

His gaze flicked up to the smoke-stained main truss spanning the room, where the inn’s cat slept, limbs dangling from the crossbeam. The feline hunted only in its dreams, for the moment at least.

The mouse reached the foot-bar of the counter, waddled parallel to it towards the kitchen entrance.

Gruntle took another mouthful of watered wine – more water than wine after almost a week's stranglehold on the city by the Pannions. The six other patrons were each sitting alone at a table or leaning up against the counter. Words were exchanged among them every now and then, a few desultory comments, usually answered by little more than a grunt.

Over the course of a day and night, the inn was peopled by two types, or so Gruntle had observed. The ones before him now virtually lived in the common room, nursing their wine and ale. Strangers to Capustan and seemingly friendless, they’d achieved a kind of community none the less, characterized by a vast ability to do nothing together for long periods of time. Come the night the other type would begin to assemble. Loud, boisterous, drawing the street whores inside with their coins which they tumbled onto the tabletops with no thought of tomorrow. Theirs was a desperate energy, a bluff hail to Hood. We’re yours, you scything bastard, they seemed to say. But not till the dawn!

They’d churn like a foaming sea around the immovable, indifferent rocks that were the silent, friendless patrons.

The sea and the rocks. The sea celebrates in the face of Hood as soon as he looms close. The rocks have stared the bastard in the eye for so long they’re past budging, much less celebrating. The sea laughs uproariously at its own jokes. The rocks grind out a terse line that can silence an entire room. A Capan mouthful. . .

Next time, I’ll keep my tongue to myself.

The cat rose on the crossbeam, stretching, its banded black stripes rippling across its dun fur. Cocked its head downward, ears pricking.
The mouse was at the edge of the kitchen entrance, frozen.

Gruntle hissed under his breath.

The cat looked his way.

The mouse darted into the kitchen and out of sight.

With a loud creak, the inn door swung inward. Buke stepped inside, crossed Gruntle's view then sank down into the chair beside him.

'You're predictable enough,' the old man muttered, gesturing for two of the same when he caught the barkeep's eye.

'Aye,' Gruntle replied. 'I'm a rock.'

'A rock, huh? More like a fat iguana clinging to one. And when the big wave comes—'

'Whatever. You've found me, Buke. Now what?'

'Just wanted to thank you for all the help, Gruntle.'

'Was that subtle irony, old man? A little honing—'

'Actually, I was almost serious. That muddy water you made me drink – Keruli's concoction – it's done wonders.' His narrow face revealed a slightly secretive smile. 'Wonders ...'

'Glad to hear you're all better. Any more earth-shattering news? If not ...'

Buke leaned back as the barkeep delivered the two tankards, then said after the man shambled away, 'I've met with the elders of the Camps. At first they wanted to go straight to the prince—'

'But then they came to their senses.'

'With a little prodding.'

'So now you've got all the help you need in keeping that insane eunuch from playing doorman to Hood's gate. Good. Can't have panic in the streets, what with a quarter-million Pannions laying siege to the city.'

Buke's eyes thinned on Gruntle. 'Thought you'd appreciate the calm.'

'Now that's much better.'

'I still need your help.'

'Can't see how, Buke. Unless you want me to kick down the door and separate Korbal Broach's head from his shoulders. In which case you'll need to keep Bauchelain distracted. Set him on fire or something. I only need a moment. Of course, timing's everything. Once the walls have been breached, say, and there's Tenescowri mobbing the streets. That way we can all go hand in hand to Hood singing a merry tune.'

Buke smiled behind his tankard. 'That'll do,' he said, then drank.

Gruntle drained his own cup, reached for the new one. 'You know where to find me,' he said after a moment.

'Until the wave comes.'

The cat leapt down from the crossbeam, pounced forward, trapping a cockroach between its paws. It began playing.

'All right,' the caravan captain growled after a moment, 'what else do you want to say?'

Buke shrugged offhandedly. 'I hear Stonny has volunteered. Latest rumours have it the Pannions are finally
ready for the first assault – any time now.’

'The first? Likely they'll only need the one. As for being ready, they've been ready for days, Buke. If Stonny wants to throw away her life defending the indefensible, that's her business.'

'What's the alternative? The Pannions won't take prisoners, Gruntle. We'll all have to fight, sooner or later.'

That's what you think.

'Unless,' Buke continued after a moment as he raised his tankard, 'you plan on switching sides. Finding faith as a matter of expedience—'

'What other way is there?'

The old man's eyes sharpened. 'You'd fill your belly with human flesh, Gruntle? Just to survive? You'd do that, would you?'

'Meat is meat,' Gruntle replied, his eyes on the cat. A soft crunch announced that it had finished playing.

'Well,' Buke said, rising, 'I didn't think you were capable of shocking me. I guess I thought I knew you—'

'You thought.'

'So this is the man Harllo gave his life for.'

Gruntle slowly raised his head. Whatever Buke saw in his eyes made him step back. 'Which Camp are you working with right now?' the caravan captain calmly asked.

'Uldan,' the old man whispered.

'I'll look in on you, then. In the meantime, Buke, get out of my sight.'

The shadows had retreated across most of the compound, leaving Hetan and her brother, Cafal, in full sunlight. The two Barghast were squatting on a worn, faded rug, heads bowed. Sweat – blackened with ash – dripped from them both. Between them was a broad, shallow brazier, perched on three hand-high iron legs and filled with smouldering coals.

Soldiers and court messengers flowed around them on all sides.

Shield Anvil Itkovian studied the siblings from where he stood near the headquarters entrance. He had not known the Barghast as a people enamoured of meditation, yet Hetan and Cafal had done little else, it seemed, since their return from the Thrall. Fasting, uncommunicative, inconveniently encamped in the centre of the barracks compound, they had made of themselves an unapproachable island.

Theirs is not a mortal calm. They travel among the spirits. Brukhalian demands that I find a way through – by any means. Does Hetan possess yet one more secret? An avenue of escape, for her, her brother, and for the bones of the Founding Spirits? An unknown weakness in our defence? A flaw in the Pannion investiture?

Itkovian sighed. He had tried before, without success. He would now try once again. As he prepared to step forward, he sensed a presence at his side and turned, to find Prince Jelarkan.

The young man's face was etched deep with exhaustion. His long-fingered, elegant hands trembled despite being knitted together just above his robe's belt. His gaze was fixed on the swirling activity in the compound as he said, 'I must know, Shield Anvil, what Brukhalian intends. He holds what you soldiers call a shaved knuckle in the hole – that much is clear. And so I have come, once again, seeking audience with the man in my employ.' He made no effort to hide the sardonic bitterness of that statement. 'To no avail. The Mortal Sword has no time for me. No time for the Prince of Capustan.'

'Sir,' Itkovian said, 'you may ask your questions of me, and I shall do all I can to answer you.'
The young Capan swung to the Shield Anvil. ‘Brukhalian has given you leave to speak?’

‘He has.’

‘Very well. The Kron T’lan Imass and their undead wolves. They have destroyed the Septarch’s K’Chain demons.’

‘They have.’

‘Yet the Pannion Domin has more. Hundreds more.’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why do the T’lan Imass not march into the empire? An assault into the Seer’s territory may well achieve the withdrawal of Kulpath’s besieging forces. The Seer would have no choice but to pull them back across the river.’

‘Were the T’lan Imass a mortal army, the choice would indeed be obvious, and consequently beneficial to our own needs,’ Itkovian replied. ‘Alas, Kron and his undead kin are bound by unearthly demands, of which we know virtually nothing. We have been told of a gathering, a silent summoning for purposes unknown. This, for the moment, takes precedence over all else. Kron and the T’lan Ay destroyed the Septarch’s K’Chain Che’Malle because their presence was deemed a direct threat to the gathering.’

‘Why? That explanation is insufficient, Shield Anvil.’

‘I do not disagree with your assessment, sir. There does appear to be another reason – for Kron’s reluctance to march southward. A mystery concerning the Seer himself. It seems the word “Pannion” is Jaghut. The Jaghut were the mortal enemies of the T’lan Imass, as you may know. It is my personal belief that Kron awaits the arrival of ... allies. Other T’lan Imass, come to this impending gathering.’

‘You are suggesting that Kron is intimidated by the Pannion Seer—’

‘Aye, in his belief that the Seer is Jaghut.’

The prince was silent for a long moment, then he shook his head. ‘Even should the T’lan Imass decide to march upon the Pannion Domin, the decision will come too late for us.’

‘That seems likely.’

‘Very well. Now, another question. Why is this gathering occurring here?’

Itkovian hesitated, then slowly nodded to himself. ‘Prince Jelarkan, the one who has summoned the T’lan Imass is approaching Capustan ... in the company of an army.’

‘An army?’

‘An army marching to wage war against the Pannion Domin; indeed, with the additional aim of relieving the siege here at Capustan.’

‘What?’

‘Sir, they are five weeks away.’

‘We cannot hold—’

‘This truth is known, Prince.’

‘And does this summoner command that army?’

‘No. Command is shared between two men. Caladan Brood and Dujek Onearm.’

‘Dujek – High Fist Onearm? The Malazan? Lords below, Itkovian! How long have you known this?’
The Shield Anvil cleared his throat. 'Preliminary contact was established some time ago, Prince. Through sorcerous avenues. These have since grown impassable—'

'Yes, yes, I know that well enough. Continue, damn you.'

'The presence of the summoner among their company was news only recently told us – by a Bonecaster of the Kron T'lan Imass—'

'The army, Itkovian! Tell me more of this army!'

'Dujek and his legions have been outlawed by Empress Laseen. They are now acting independently. His complement numbers perhaps ten thousand. Caladan Brood has under his command a number of small mercenary companies, three Barghast clans, the Rhivi nation and the Tiste Andii – a total number of combatants of thirty thousand.'

Prince Jelarkan's eyes were wide. Itkovian watched the information breach the man's inner defences, watched as the host of hopes flowered then withered in swift succession.

'On the surface,' the Shield Anvil said quietly, 'all that I have told you seems of vital import. Yet, as I see you now comprehend, it is in truth all meaningless. Five weeks, Prince. Leave them to their vengeance, if you will, for that is all they might manage. And even then, given their limited numbers—'

'Are these Brukhalian's conclusions, or yours?'

'Both, I regret to say.'

'You fools,' the young man grated. 'You Hood-damned fools.'

'Sire, we cannot withstand the Pannions for five weeks.'

'I know that, damn you! The question now is: why do we even try?'

Itkovian frowned. 'Sir, such was the contract. The defence of the city—'

'Idiot – what do I care about your damned contract? You've already concluded you will fail in any case! My concern is for the lives of my people. This army comes from the west? It must. Marching beside the river—'

'We cannot break out, Prince. We would be annihilated.'

'We will concentrate everything to the west. A sudden sortie, that flows into an exodus. Shield Anvil—'

'We will be slaughtered,' Itkovian cut in. 'Sire, we have considered this. It will not work. The Septarch's wings of horsemen will surround us, grind us to a halt. Then the Beklites and Tenescowri will arrive. We will have yielded a defensible position for an indefensible one. It would all be over within the span of a single bell.'

Prince Jelarkan stared at the Shield Anvil with undisguised contempt and, indeed, hatred. 'Inform Brukhalian of the following,' he rasped. 'In the future, it is not the task of the Grey Swords to do the prince's thinking for him. It is not their task to decide what he needs to know and what he doesn't. The prince is to be informed of all matters, regardless of how you judge their relevance. Is this understood, Shield Anvil?'

'I shall convey your words precisely, sire.'

'I must presume,' the prince continued, 'that the Mask Council knows even less than I did a bell ago.'

'That would be an accurate assumption. Sire, their interests—'

'Save me from any more of your learned opinions, Itkovian. Good day.'

Itkovian watched the prince stalk away, towards the compound's exit, his gait too stiff to be regal. Yet noble in its own way. You have my regret, dear prince, though I would not presume to voice it. I am the will of the Mortal Sword. My own desires are irrelevant. He pushed away the surge of bitter anger that rose beneath these
thoughts, returned his gaze to the two Barghast still seated on the rug.

The trance had broken. Hetan and Cafal were now leaning close to the brazier, where white smoke rose in twisting coils into the sunlit air.

Startled, it was a moment before Itkovian stepped forward.

As he approached, he saw that an object had been placed on the brazier's coals. Red-tinged on its edges, flat and milky white in the centre. A fresh scapula, too light to be from a bhederin, yet thinner and longer than a human's. A deer's shoulder blade, perhaps, or an antelope's. The Barghast had begun a divination, employing the object that gave meaning to the tribal name of their shamans.

More than just warriors, then. I should have guessed. Cafal's chant in the Thrall. He is a shoulderman; and Hetan is his female counterpart.

He stopped just beyond the edge of the rug, slightly to Cafal's left. The shoulder blade had begun to show cracks. Fat bubbled up along the thick edges of the bone, sizzled and flared like a ring of fire.

The simplest divination was the interpretation of the cracks as a map, a means of finding wild herds for the tribe's hunters. In this instance, Itkovian well knew, the sorcery under way was far more complex, the cracks more than simply a map of the physical world. The Shield Anvil stayed silent, tried to catch the mumbled conversation between Hetan and her brother.

They were speaking Barghast, a language of which Itkovian had but passing knowledge. Even stranger, it seemed the conversation was three-way, the siblings cocking their heads or nodding at replies only they could hear.

The scapula was a maze of cracks now, the bone showing blue, beige and calcined white. Before too long it would begin to crumble, as the creature's spirit surrendered to the overwhelming power flowing through its dwindling lifeforce.

The eerie conversation ended. As Cafal fell back into a trance, Hetan sat back, looked up and met Itkovian's eyes. 'Ah, wolf, I am pleased by the sight of you. There have been changes to the world. Surprising changes.'

'And are these changes pleasing to you, Hetan?'

She smiled. 'Would it give you pleasure if they were?'

_Do I step over this precipice?_ 'That possibility exists.'

The woman laughed, slowly climbed to her feet. She winced as she stretched her limbs. 'Spirits take me, my bones ache. My muscles cry out for caring hands.'

'There are limbering exercises—'

'Don't I know it, wolf. Will you join me in such endeavours?'

'What news do you have, Hetan?'

She grinned, hands on her hips. 'By the Abyss,' she drawled, 'you are clumsy. Yield to me and learn all my secrets, is that the task set before you? It is a game you should be wary of playing. Especially with me.'

'Perhaps you are right,' he said, drawing himself up and turning away.

'Hold, man!' Hetan laughed. 'You flee like a rabbit? And I called you wolf? I should change that name.'

'That is your choice,' he replied over a shoulder as he set off.

Her laugh rang out behind him once more. 'Ah, now this is a game worth playing! Go on, then, dear rabbit! My elusive quarry, hai!'
Itkovian re-entered the headquarters, walked down the hallway skirting the outer wall until he came to the
tower entrance. His armour shifted and clanked as he made his way up the steep stone stairs. He tried to drive
out images of Hetan, her laughing face and bright, dancing eyes, the runnels of sweat tracking her brow through
the layer of ash, the way she stood, back arched, chest thrown out in deliberate, provocative invitation. He
resented the rebirth of long-buried desires now plaguing him. His vows were crumbling, his every prayer to
Fener meeting with naught but silence, as if his god was indifferent to the sacrifices Itkovian had made in his
name.

And perhaps that is the final, most devastating truth. The gods care nothing for ascetic impositions on mortal
behaviour. Care nothing for rules of conduct, for the twisted morals of temple priests and monks. Perhaps
indeed they laugh at the chains we wrap around ourselves – our endless, insatiable need to find flaws within
the demands of life. Or perhaps they do not laugh, but rage at us. Perhaps our denial of life's celebration is our
greatest insult to those whom we worship and serve.

He reached the arms room at the top of the circular stairs, nodded distractedly at the two soldiers stationed
there, then made his way up the ladder to the roof platform.

The Destriant was already there. Karnadas studied Itkovian as the Shield Anvil joined him. 'Yours, sir, is a
troubled mien.'

'Aye, I do not deny it. I have had discourse with Prince Jelarkan, which closed with his displeasure.
Subsequently, I spoke with Hetan. Destriant, my faith is assailed.'

'You question your vows.'

'I do, sir. I admit to doubting their veracity.'

'Has it been your belief, Shield Anvil, that your rules of conduct existed to appease Fener?'

Itkovian frowned as he leaned on the merlon and stared out at the smoke-wreathed enemy camps. 'Well, yes —'

'Then you have lived under a misapprehension, sir.'

'Explain, please.'

'Very well. You found a need to chain yourself, a need to enforce upon your own soul the strictures as
defined by your vows. In other words, Itkovian, your vows were born of a dialogue with yourself – not with
Fener. The chains are your own, as is the possession of the keys with which to unlock them when they are no
longer required.'

'No longer required?'

'Aye. When all that is encompassed by living ceases to threaten your faith.'

'You suggest, then, that my crisis is not with my faith, but with my vows. That I have blurred the distinction.'

'I do, Shield Anvil.'

'Destriant,' Itkovian said, eyes still on the Pannion encampments, 'your words invite a carnal flood.'

The High Priest burst out laughing. 'And with it a dramatic collapse of your dour disposition, one hopes!'

Itkovian's mouth twitched. 'Now you speak of miracles, sir.'

'I would hope—'

'Hold.' The Shield Anvil raised a gauntleted hand. 'There is movement among the Beklites.'

Karnadas joined him, suddenly sober.
'And there,' Itkovian pointed, 'Urdomen. Scalandi to their flanks. Seerdomin moving to positions of command.'

'They will assail the redoubts first,' the Destriant predicted. 'The Mask Council’s vaunted Gidrath in their strongholds. That may earn us more time—'

'Find me my messenger corps, sir. Alert the officers. And a word to the prince.'

'Aye, Shield Anvil. Will you stay here?'

Itkovian nodded. 'A worthy vantage point. Go, then, sir.'

Beklite troops were massing in a ring around the Gidrath stronghold out on the killing ground. Spearpoints glittered in the sunlight.

Now alone, Itkovian's eyes narrowed as he studied the preparations. 'Ah, well, it has begun.'

The streets of Capustan were silent, virtually empty beneath a cloudless sky, as Gruntle made his way down Calmanark Alley. He came to the curved wall of the self-contained Camp known as Ulden, kicked through the rubbish cluttering a stairwell leading down below street level and hammered a fist on the solid door cut into the wall's foundations.

After a moment it creaked open.

Gruntle stepped through into a narrow corridor, its floor a sharply angled ramp leading back up to ground level twenty paces ahead, where bright sunlight showed, revealing a central, circular courtyard.

Buke shut the massive door behind him, struggled beneath the weight of the bar as he lowered it back into the slots. The gaunt, grey-haired man then faced Gruntle. 'That was quick. Well?'

'What do you think?' the caravan captain growled. 'There's been movement. The Pannions are marshalling. Messengers riding this way and that—'

'Which wall were you on?'

'North, just this side of Lektar House, as if it makes any difference. And you? I forgot to ask earlier. Did the bastard go hunting the streets last night?'

'No. I told you, the Camps are helping. I think he's still trying to figure out why he came up empty the night before last – it's got him rattled, enough for Bauchelain to notice.'

'Not good news. He'll start probing, Buke.'

'Aye. I said there'd be risks, didn't I?'

'Aye, trying to keep an insane murderer from finding victims – without his noticing – with a siege about to begin . . . Abyss take you, Buke, what you're trying to drag me into. Gruntle glanced up the ramp. 'Help, you said. How are your new friends taking this?'

The old man shrugged. 'Korbal Broach prefers healthy organs when collecting for his experiments. It's their children at risk.'

'Less so if they'd been left ignorant.'

'They know that.'

'Did you say children?'

'Aye, we've got at least four of the little watchers on the house at all times. Homeless urchins – there's plenty enough of the real kind for them to blend in. They're keeping their eyes on the sky, too—' He stopped abruptly,
and a strangely furtive look came into his eyes.

The man, Gruntle realized, had a secret. 'On the sky? What for?'

'Uh, in case Korbal Broach tries the rooftops.'

*In a city of widely spaced domes?*

'The point I was trying to make,' Buke continued, 'is that there's eyes on the house. Luckily, Bauchelain's still holed up in the cellar, which he's turned into some kind of laboratory. He never leaves. And Korbal sleeps during the day. Gruntle, what I said earlier—'

Gruntle cut him off with a sharply raised hand. 'Listen,' he said.

The two men stood unmoving.

Distant thunder beneath their feet, a slowly rising roar from beyond the city's walls.

Buke, suddenly pale, cursed and asked, 'Where's Stonny? And don't try telling me you don't know.'

'Port Road Gate. Five squads of Grey Swords, a company of Gidrath, a dozen or so Lestari Guard—'

'It's loudest there—'

Scowling, he grunted. 'She figured it'd start with that gate. Stupid woman.'

Buke stepped close and gripped his arm. 'Then why,' he hissed, 'in Hood's name are you still standing here? The assault's begun, and Stonny's got herself right in the middle of it!'

Gruntle pulled free. 'Sing me the Abyss, old man. The woman's all grown up, you know – I told her – I told you! This isn't my war!'

'Won't stop the Tenescowri from lopping off your head for the pot!'

Sneering, Gruntle pushed Buke clear of the door. He gripped the weighted bar in his right hand and in a single surge lifted it clear of the slots and let it drop with a clang that echoed up the corridor. He pulled the door open, ducking to step through onto the stairwell.

The sound of the assault was a thunderous roar once he reached street level and emerged to stand in the alley.

Amidst the muted clangour of weapons were screams, bellows, and that indefinable, stuttering shiver that came from thousands of armoured bodies in motion – outside the walls, along the battlements, on either side of the gate – which he knew would be groaning beneath repeated impacts from battering rams.

At long last, the siege had unsheathed its sharp iron. The waiting was Over.

*And they won't hold those walls. Nor the gates. This will be over by dusk.* He thought about getting drunk, was comforted by the familiar track of that thought.

Movement from above caught his attention. He looked up to see, arcing in from the west, half a hundred balls of fire, ripping paths through the sky. Flames exploded within sight and beyond as the missiles struck buildings and streets with hammering concussions.

He turned to see a second wave, coming in from the north, one of them growing larger than the others. Still larger, a raging sun, flying directly towards him.

With a curse, Gruntle flung himself back down the stairwell.

The tarry mass struck the street, bounced in a storm of fire, and struck the curved wall of the Camp not ten paces to one side of the stairwell.

The stone core punched through the wall, drawing its flames after it.
Rubble showered the burning street.

Bruised, half deafened, Gruntle scrambled free of the stairwell. Screams sounded from within the Uldan Camp. Smoke was billowing from the hole. Damned things are fire-traps. He turned as the door at the bottom of the stairwell banged open. Buke appeared, dragging an unconscious woman into the clear.

‘How bad?’ Gruntle shouted.

Buke glanced up. ‘You still here? We’re fine. Fire’s almost out. Get out of here – go run and hide or something.’

‘Good idea,’ he growled.

Smoke cloaked the sky, rising in black columns from the entire east side of Capustan, spreading a pall as the wind carried it westward. Flames were visible in the Daru quarter, among the temples and tenements. Judging that the area safest from the burning missiles would be close to the walls, Gruntle set off east down the street.

It ain’t our fight, dammit. If I’d wanted to be a soldier I’d have joined some Hood-damned army. Abyss take them all—

Another wave from the distant catapults clawed paths through the smoke. He picked up his pace, but the balls of fire were already past him, descending into the city’s heart and landing with a staccato drum-roll. They keep that up and I’m liable to get mad. Figures ran through the smoke ahead. The sound of clashing weapons was louder, susurrating like waves flaying a pebble beach. Fine. I’ll just find the gate and pull the lass out. Won’t take long. Hood knows, I’ll beat her un-conscious if she objects. We’re going to find a way out of here, and that’s that.

He approached the back of the row of market stalls facing Inside Port Street. The alleys between the ramshackle stalls were narrow and knee-deep in refuse. The street beyond was invisible behind a wall of smoke. Kicking his way through the rubbish, Gruntle arrived at the street. The gate was to his left, barely visible. The massive doors were shattered, the passageway and threshold heaped with bodies. The block towers flanking the aperture, their blackened sides bearing white scars made by glancing arrows, quarrels and ballista bolts, were both issuing smoke from their arrow-slits. Screams and the clash of swords echoed from within them. Along the wall platforms to either side, soldiers in the garb of the Grey Swords were pushing their way into the top floors of the block towers.

Thumping boots approached from Gruntle’s right. A half-dozen Grey Sword squads emerged from the smoke, the front two ranks with swords and shields, the rear two with cocked crossbows. They crossed in front of the caravan captain and took position behind the pile of bodies at the gateway.

A wayward wind swept the smoke from the street’s length to Gruntle’s right, revealing more bodies – Capanthall, Lestari, and Pannion Betaklites, continuing down the street to a barricaded intersection sixty paces distant, where there was yet another mound of slain soldiers.

Gruntle jogged towards the troop of Grey Swords. Seeing no obvious officer, he elected the crossbow-woman nearest him. ‘What’s the situation here, soldier?’

She glanced at him, her face a flat, expressionless mask covered in soot, and he was surprised to realize she was Capan. ‘We’re clearing out the towers up top. The sortie should be back soon – we’ll let them through then hold the gateway.’

He stared at her. Sortie? Gods, they’ve lost their minds! ‘Hold, you said.’ He glanced at the arched passage. ‘For how long?’

She shrugged. ‘Sappers are on their way with work crews. There’ll be a new gate in a bell or two.’

‘How many breaches? What’s been lost?’

‘I wouldn’t know, citizen.’
'Cease your chatter over there,' a male voice called out. 'And get that civilian out of here—'

'Movement ahead, sir!' another soldier shouted.

Crossbows were readied over the shoulders of the crouching swordsmen.

Someone called from outside the passageway, 'Lestari Troop – hold your fire! We're coming in!

There was no relaxing evident among the Grey Swords. A moment later the first elements of the sortie trundled into view. Cut and battered and bearing wounded, the heavily armoured foot-soldiers began shouting for the Grey Swords to clear a path.

The waiting squads split to form a corridor.

Every Lestari among the first thirty who passed through was encumbered by a wounded comrade. From beyond the gateway the sound of fighting drew Gruntle's attention. It was getting closer. There was a rearguard, protecting those bearing the wounded, and the pressure on them was building.

'Counterattack!' someone bellowed. 'Scalandi skirmishers—'

A horn moaned from high atop the wall to the right of the southside block tower.

The roar was growing from the killing field beyond the gateway. The cobbles beneath Gruntle's boots trembled. *Scalandi. They engage in legions of no less than five thousand—*

Ranks of Grey Swords were assembling further down Inside Port Street, swordsmen, crossbowmen, and Capanthall archers, forming a fall-back line. An even larger company was gathering beyond them, along with ballistae, trebuchets and hurlers – the latter with their buckets of scalding gravel steaming like cauldrons.

The rearguard stumbled into the passage. Javelins sliced among them, glancing off armour and shield, only one finding its mark, sending a soldier wheeling with the barbed shaft through his neck. The first of the Pannion Scalandi appeared, lithe, leather-shirted and leather-helmed, wielding spears and scavenged swords, a few with wicker shields, pushing against the yielding line of Lestari heavy infantry, dying one after another, yet still more came on, voicing a keening warcry.

'Break! Break!'

The bellowed command had an instant effect, as the Lestari rearguard suddenly disengaged, spun round and bolted down the corridor, leaving their fallen behind – to be claimed by the Scalandi, dragged back, vanishing from sight. Then the skirmishers boiled down the passageway.

The first line of Grey Swords re-formed in the wake of the Lestari. Crossbows snapped. Scores of Scalandi fell, their writhing bodies fouling the efforts of those behind them. Gruntle watched as the Grey Swords calmly reloaded.

A few from the front line of skirmishers reached the mercenary swordsmen, and were summarily cut down.

A second wave, clawing past their fallen kin, surged towards the line.

They withered beneath another flight of quarrels. The passageway was filling with bodies. The next mob of Scalandi to appear were unarmed. Whilst the Grey Swords loaded their crossbows once more, the skirmishers began dragging their dead and dying kin back through the passageway.

The door to the left-side block tower slammed open, startling Gruntle. He spun, hands reaching for his Gadrobi cutlasses, to see a half-dozen Capanthall stumbling into view, coughing, blood-smeared. Among them: Stonny Menackis.

Her rapier was snapped a hand's length down from the tip; the rest of the weapon, down to and including the bell-hilt and its projecting quillons, was thick with human gore, as was her gloved hand and vambraced forearm. Something slick and ropy hung skewered on the thin blade of the main gauche in her other hand, dripping brown sludge. Her expensive leather armour was in tatters, one crossing slash having penetrated deep
enough to cut through the padded shirt underneath. Leather and shirt had fallen away to reveal her right breast, the soft, white skin bearing bruises left behind by someone's hand.

She did not see him at first. Her gaze was fixed on the gateway, where the last of the corpses had been cleared, and yet another wave of Scalandi was pouring through. The front ranks fell to the quarrels, as before, but the surviving attackers rushed on, a frenzied, shrieking mob.

The four-deep line of Grey Swords split once more, wheeled and ran, each half sprinting for the nearest alley to either side of Port Street, where Capanthall archers stood, waiting for a cleared line of sight on the Scalandi pursuers.

Stonny barked a command to her few comrades, and the small troop backed away, parallel to the wall. She then saw Gruntle.

Their eyes locked.

'Get over here, you ox!' she hissed.

Gruntle jogged up to them. 'Hood's balls, woman, what—'

'What do you think? They boiled over us, through the gate, up the towers, over the damned walls.' Her head snapped back, as if she had just taken an invisible blow. A flat calm settled over her eyes. 'It was room by room. One on one. A Seerdomin found me—' Another jolt ran through her. 'But the bastard left me alive. So I hunted him down. Come on, let's move!' She snapped her main gauche back at Gruntle as they hurried on, spraying his chest and face with bile and watery shit. 'I carved him inside out, and damn if he didn't beg.' She spat. 'Didn't work for me – why should it have for him? What a fool. A pathetic, whimpering...'

Hurrying in her wake, it was a moment before Gruntle understood what she was saying. Oh, Stonny . . .

Her steps slowed suddenly, her face turning white. She twisted round, met his eyes with a look of horror. 'This was supposed to be a fight. A war. That bastard—' She leaned against the wall. 'Gods!'

The others continued on, too dazed to notice, or perhaps too numb to care.

Gruntle moved to her side. 'Carved him from the inside out, did you?' he asked softly, not daring to reach out and touch her.

Stonny nodded, her eyes squeezed shut, her breath coming in harsh, pained gasps.

'Did you save any of him for me, lass?'

She shook her head.

'That's too bad. Then again, one Seerdomin's as good as another.'

Stonny stepped forward, pressing her face into his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her. 'Let's get out of this fight, lass,' he murmured. 'I got a clean room, with a basin in it and a stove and a jug of water. A room, close enough to the north wall for it to be safe. It's at the end of a hallway. Only one way in. I'll stand outside the door, Stonny, for as long as you need. No-one gets past. That's a promise.' He felt her nod. He reached down to lift her up.

'I can walk.'

'But do you want to, lass? That's the question.'

After a long moment, she shook her head.

Gruntle lifted her easily. 'Nap if you've mind to,' he said. 'You're safe enough.'

He set off, skirting the wall, the woman curling up in his arms, her face pressed hard against his tunic, the rough cloth growing wetter there.
Behind them, the Scalandi were dying by the hundreds, the Grey Swords and Capanthall delivering dread slaughter.

He wanted to be there with them. In the front line. Taking life after life.

One Seerdomin was not enough. A thousand would not be enough.

*Not now.*

He felt himself grow cold, as if the blood within him was now something else, flowing a bitter course along his veins, reaching out to fill his muscles with a strange, unyielding strength. He had never before felt such a thing, but he was beyond thinking about it. There were no words for this.

Nor, he would soon discover, were there words to describe what he would become, what he would do.

The slaughter of the K'Chain Che'Malle by the Kron T'lan Imass and the undead ay had thrown the Septarch and his forces into disarray, as Brukhalian had predicted. The confusion and the immobility it engendered had added days to Shield Anvil Itkovian's preparations for the siege to come. But now, the time for preparing had ended, and Itkovian was left with the command of the city's defences.

There would be no T'lan Imass, no T'lan Ay, to come to their rescue. And no relieving army to arrive with the last grain of the hourglass. Capustan was on its own.

The destruction of the Tenescowri

And so it shall be. Fear, anguish and despair.

From his position atop the highest tower on the Barracks Wall, after Destriant Karnadas had left and the stream of messengers began its frenzied flow, he had watched the first concerted movement of enemy troops to the east and southeast, the rumbling appearance of siege weapons. Beklites and the more heavily armoured Betaklites marshalling opposite Port Gate, with a mass of Scalandi behind and to either side of them. Knots of Seerdomin shock troops, scurrying bands of Desandi – sappers – positioning still more siege weapons. And, waiting in enormous, sprawling encampments along the river and the coast, the seething mass of the Tenescowri.

He had watched the assault on the outside fortification of the Gidrath's East Watch redoubt, already isolated and surrounded by the enemy; had seen the narrow door battered down, the Beklites pushing into the passageway, three steps, two steps, one, then a standstill, and moments later, a step back, then another, bodies being pulled clear. Still more bodies. The Gidrath – the elite guards of the Mask Council – had revealed their discipline and determination. They expelled the intruders, raised yet another barricade in place of the door.

The Beklites outside had milled for a time, then they renewed their assault.

The battle continued through the afternoon, yet each time that Itkovian pulled his attention away from other events he saw that the Gidrath still held. Taking enemy lives by the score. **Twisting that thorn in the Septarch's midst.**

Finally, near dusk, siege weapons were wheeled about. Huge boulders were hurled against the fortress's walls. The pounding concussions continued as the last of daylight fell away.

Beyond this minor drama, the assault against the city's walls had begun on all sides. The north attack proved a feint, poorly executed and so quickly recognized as insignificant. Messengers relayed to the Shield Anvil that a similar cursory engagement was under way at the west wall.

The true assaults were delivered upon the south and east walls, concentrated at the gates. Itkovian, positioned directly between them, was able to directly oversee the defence on both sides. He was visible to the enemy, and more than one missile had been fired in his direction, only a few coming close. This was the first day. Range and accuracy would improve in the days to come. Before long, he might have to yield his vantage point; in the meantime, he would let his presence mock the attackers.

As the Beklites and Betaklites rushed the walls, the ladder-bearing Desandi among them, Itkovian gave the
command for counterfire from the walls and block towers. The ensuing slaughter was horrific. The attackers had not bothered with turtles or other forms of cover, and so died in appalling droves.

Yet such were their numbers that the gates were reached, battering rams deployed, and breaches effected. The Pannions, however, after pushing through the passageways, found themselves in open concourses that became killing grounds as Grey Swords and Capanthall archers launched a withering crossfire from behind barricades blocking side streets, intersections and alley mouths.

The Shield Anvil's strategy of layered defence was proving murderously efficient. Subsequent counterattacks had been so effective as to permit sorties beyond the gates, a vicious pursuit of fleeing Pannions. And, this day at least, none of the companies he'd sent out had gone too far. Discipline had held among the Capanthall, the Lestari and the Coralessian companies.

The first day was over, and it belonged to Capustan's defenders.

Itkovian stood on trembling legs, the coastal breeze building to dry the sweat from his face, sending cool tendrils through the half-visor's grille to brush his smoke-reddened eyes. As darkness closed around him, he listened to the rocks pounding the East Watch redoubt, and turned for the first time in hours to view the city.

Entire blocks were aflame, the fires reaching into the night sky, lighting the underbelly of a turgid canopy of solid smoke. *I knew what I would see. Why then does it shock me? Drive the blood from my veins? Suddenly weak, he leaned against the merlon behind him, one hand pressed against the rough stone.

A voice spoke from the shadows of the tower's doorway. 'You need rest, sir.'

Itkovian closed his eyes. 'Destriant, you speak the truth.'

'But there will be no rest,' Karnadas resumed. 'The other half of the attacking force is assembling. We can expect assaults through the night.'

'I know, sir.'

'Brukhalian—'

'Aye, it must be done. Come forward, then.'

'Such efforts are increasingly difficult,' Karnadas murmured as he strode up to stand before the Shield Anvil. He laid a hand against Itkovian's chest. 'The illness of the warrens threatens me,' he continued. 'Soon it will be all I can do to fend against it.'

The weariness drained from the Shield Anvil, vigour returning to his limbs. He sighed. 'I thank you, sir.'

'The Mortal Sword has just been called to the Thrall to give account of the first day's battle. And no, we were not fortunate enough to hear of the Thrall's destruction beneath a few hundred balls of fire. It stands intact. However, given those that it now houses, we would no longer wish such a fiery end.'

Itkovian pulled his gaze from the streets, studied the Destriant's red-lit face. 'Your meaning, sir?'

'The Barghast, Hetan and Cafal, have taken up residence in the Main Hall.'

'Ah, I see.'

'Before he left, Brukhalian asked me to enquire of your efforts to discover the means by which the bones of the Founding Spirits will be spared the coming conflagration.'

'I have failed, sir. Nor does it seem likely that I will have opportunity to renew my efforts in that direction.'

'That is understandable, sir. I will convey to the Mortal Sword your words, if not your obvious relief.'

'Thank you.'
The Destriant strode to look out upon the east killing field. 'Gods below, do the Gidrath still hold the redoubt?'

'Uncertain,' Itkovian murmured as he joined the man. 'At the very least, the bombardment has not ceased. There may be little but rubble there now – it’s too dark to make out, but I believe I heard a wall collapse half a bell ago.'

'The legions are marshalling once more, Shield Anvil.'

'I need more messengers, sir. My last troop—'

'Aye, exhausted,' Karnadas said. 'I shall take my leave and do as you ask, sir.'

Itkovian listened to the man make his way down the ladder, but held his gaze on the enemy positions to the east and south. Hooded lanterns flashed here and there among what appeared to be troops arrayed in squares, the figures jostling and shifting behind wicker shields. Smaller companies of Scalandi skirmishers emerged, moving cautiously forward.

Bootssteps behind the Shield Anvil announced the arrival of the messengers. Without turning, Itkovian said, 'Inform the captains of the archers and trebuchets that the Pannions are about to renew their assault. Soldiers to the walls and battlements. Gate companies assembled, full complement, including sappers.'

A score of fiery balls rose skyward from behind the massed ranks of the Pannions. The missiles arced, their sizzling roar audible as they passed high over Itkovian's head. Explosions lit the city, shook the bronze-sheathed floorboards beneath his feet. The Shield Anvil faced his cadre of messengers. 'Go.'

Karnadas rode his horse at a canter across Tura'l Concourse. The huge arch fifty paces to his left had just taken a hit on one corner of the pedestal, spraying broken masonry and burning pitch onto the cobbles and onto the rooftops of the scatter of tenements beside it. Flames billowed, and the Destriant saw figures pouring from the building. Somewhere to the north, at the very edge of the Temple District, another tenement block was engulfed in fire.

He reached the far side of the concourse, not slackening his mount's pace as he rode up Shadows Street – the Temple of Shadow on his left, the Temple of the Queen of Dreams on his right – then angled his horse again to the left as they reached Daru Spear – the district's main avenue. Ahead loomed the dark stones of the Thrall, the ancient keep towering over the lower structures of the Daru tenements.

Three squads of Gidrath commanded the gate, fully armoured and with weapons drawn. Recognizing the Destriant, they waved him through.

He dismounted in the courtyard, leaving his horse to a stabler, then made his way to the Great Hall, where he knew he would find Brukhalian.

As he strode down the main aisle towards the double doors he saw that another man was ahead. Robed, hooded, he was without the usual escort provided strangers to the Thrall, yet he approached the entrance with a graceful assurance. Karnadas wondered how he had managed to get past the Gidrath, then his eyes widened as the stranger gestured with one hand and the huge doors swung open before him.

Voices raised in argument drifted out from the Great Hall, quickly falling silent as the stranger entered.

Karnadas increased his pace, and arrived in time to catch the end of a Rath' priest's expostulation.

'—this instant!'

The Destriant slipped through the entrance in the stranger's wake. He saw the Mortal Sword standing near the centre millstone, now turned to regard the newcomer. The Barghast, Hetan and Cafal, were sitting on their rug a few paces to Brukhalian's right. The priests and priestesses of the Mask Council were one and all leaning forward in their seats – their masks conveying caricatures of extreme displeasure – with the exception of Rath'Hood who was standing, the wooden skull visage of his mask arched with outrage.
The stranger, hands clasped within the folds of his dun-coloured robe's sleeves, seemed unperturbed by the hostile welcome.

From where the Destrian stood, he could not see the man's face, but he saw the hood shift as the stranger scanned the masked assembly.

'Will you ignore my command?' Rath'Hood asked, visibly bridling his tone. The priest glared about. 'Where are our Gidrath? Why in the gods' names haven't they heard our summons?'

'Alas,' the stranger murmured in Daru, 'they have for the moment heeded the call of their dreams. Thus, we avoid any unnecessary interruptions.' The man turned to Brukhalian, allowing Karnadas – who now stood at the Mortal Sword's side – to see his face for the first time. Round, strangely unlined, unmemorable barring the expression of calm equanimity. _Ah, the merchant retrieved by Ikovian. His name . . . Keruli._ The man's pale eyes fixed on Brukhalian. 'My apologies to the commander of the Grey Swords, but I fear I must make address to the Mask Council. If he would be so kind as to temporarily yield the floor?'

The Mortal Sword tilted his head. 'By all means, sir.'

'We do not agree to this!' Rath'Shadowthrone hissed.

The stranger's eyes hardened as he swung his attention on the priest. 'You, unfortunately, have no choice. I look upon you all, and find the representation woefully inadequate.'

Karnadas choked back a laugh, and recovered in time to meet Brukhalian's raised eyebrow with an expression of innocent enquiry.

'By the Abyss,' Rath'Burn said, 'who are you to make such judgement?'

'I need make no claim as to my true name, Priestess, only to the title I now demand.'

'Title?'

'Rath'K'rul. I have come to take my place among the Mask Council, and to tell you this: there is one among you who will betray us all.'

She sat on the flatboard bed, long hair in disarray, hanging down her face. Gruntle reached out and slowly combed the tresses back.

Stonny's sigh was ragged. 'This is stupid. Things happen. There's no rules to battle. I was an idiot, trying to take on a Seerdomin with naught but a rapier – he'd batted it aside with a laugh.' She looked up. 'Don't stay with me, Gruntle. I can see what's there in your eyes. Go.' She glanced around the room. 'I just need to get... to get cleaned up. I don't want you here, not outside the door, either. If you took that position, Gruntle, you'd never leave it. Go. You're the best fighter I have ever seen. Kill some Pannions – Hood take me, kill them all.'

'Are you sure—'

Her laugh was harsh. 'Don't even try.'

He grunted, began checking his armour's straps and fittings. Adjusted the padding beneath. Dropped the visor on his helm. Loosened the heavy cutlasses in their scabbards.

Stonny watched him in silence.

Finally, he was ready. 'All right. Take your time, lass. There'll be plenty left whenever you're done here.'

'Aye, there will.'

Gruntle faced the door.

'Do some damage.'
He nodded. 'I will.'

The Beklites and Scalandi reached the east wall in their thousands. In the face of withering arrow fire, ladders were raised, figures swarmed upward, poured over the battlements. The East Gate was taken yet again, the enemy surging down the passageway to spill out onto the square of New East Market.

To the south, the city's Main Gate fell to a concerted barrage of catapult fire. A legion of Betaklites swept into Jelarkan Concourse. A well-aimed ball of burning pitch struck the Capanthall West Barracks – the building rose in a conflagration that lit the entire city a lurid red.

Shock troops of Urdomen and Seerdomin breached North Gate and entered the nearest Daru streets after destroying Nildar Camp and slaying everyone within it. The enemy was within the city on every side.

The battle, Itkovian concluded, was not going well.

With each report that a messenger delivered, the Shield Anvil issued commands in a soft, calm voice. 'Fourth Wing to the Ninth Barricade, between East Inside and Ne'ror towers. Resupply the Capanthall in the two towers ... Seventh Wing to West Inside tower and wall. I need a report on the status of Jehbar Tower. There were five hundred Capanthall in the West Barracks – likely they've been routed ... Fifth and Third Manes into the streets around Tular Concourse to rally the Capanthall... First, Seventh and Sixth Manes doubletime to North Temple District – block and strike until North Gate is retaken ... Fourth, Second and Eighth Manes to New East Market. Once the East Gate is recovered, I want Wings One, Three and Five to sortie. Their rally point is the East Watch redoubt – I want the siege engines assailing it neutralized, then any Gidrath survivors retrieved. Have the Trimaster report to me ...'

In between commands and the coming and going of messengers, Itkovian watched the engagement at New East Market – what he could see of it in the glare of fires through seething clouds of smoke. The Scalandi were pushing hard to break the barricades preventing them from reaching the prince's palace. Boulders had been hammering the palace's outer walls incessantly, all to no effect – the thin, glistening stone walls did not so much as tremble. Burning pitch roared itself to extinction yet achieved nothing more than black stains marring the unknown stone's surface. The palace would have to be taken the hard way, step by step, every room, every level, and the Pannions were eager to begin the task.

The Grey Sword Trimaster commanding the First, Third and Fifth Wings arrived on the parapet. He was one of the Shield Anvil's oldest officers, lean and tall, grey-bearded to hide countless scars. 'My assignment has been conveyed to me, Shield Anvil.'

'So why have I sent for you? I see the question in your eyes, sir. You do not require any stirring words to cleave you to what could be a suicidal mission. 'It will be unexpected,' Itkovian said.

The man's eyes narrowed, then he nodded. 'Aye, sir, it will. With all the breaches the enemy's front lines have lost their cohesion. Chaos claims all, this night. We shall destroy the siege engines as ordered. We shall retrieve the survivors in the redoubt.'

'Aye, old friend. I am the one who needs stirring words.' Keep your eyes open, sir. I would know the positioning of the Pannion forces to the rear. Specifically, the Tenescowri.'

'Understood, sir.'

A messenger arrived, stumbling as he cleared the ladder. 'Shield Anvil!' she gasped.

'Your report, sir,' Itkovian said.

'From the Trimaster of the First, Seventh and Sixth Manes, sir.'

North Gate. He looked to the north. Most of the Daru tenements there were burning. 'Proceed.'

'The Trimaster reports that he has encountered the shocktroops of Urdomen and Seerdomin, They're all dead, sir.'
'Dead?'

The young woman nodded, paused to wipe ash-smeared sweat from her brow. Her helm, Itkovian noted, was too large. 'A citizen rallied the remnants of the Capanthall Guard, as well as other civilians and some caravan guards. Sir, they engaged the Urdomen and Seerdomin in a succession of street battles – and drove them back. The Trimaster now controls North Gate, to which his company of sappers are effecting repairs."

'And this impromptu militia and its commander?'

'Only a few wounded were there to greet the Trimaster, sir. The, uh, militia has set off westward, in pursuit of an Urdomen company that sought to storm Lektar House."

'Messenger, send the First Wing to their aid. Upon delivering my command, take some rest, sir."

'Yes, Shield Anvil."

'That is not the helmet you were issued with, is it, sir?"

Abashed, she shook her head. 'I, uh, lost it, Shield Anvil."

'Have the quartermaster find you one that fits."

'Yes, sir."

'Go."

The two veterans watched the young woman depart.

'Careless, the Trimaster murmured, 'losing her helm."

'Indeed."

'Clever, finding another one."

The Shield Anvil smiled.

'I shall take my leave now, sir."

'Fener go with you, Trimaster."

Karnadas drew a long, quiet breath, the hairs of his neck rising at the sudden, heavy silence in the Great Hall. Betrayal? His eyes were drawn to one priest in particular. Rath'K'rul's words were fuel to suspicions the Destriant already held, and the bias led him to mistrust his own conclusions. He held his tongue, but his gaze remained fixed on Rath'Fener.

'The boar mask was without expression, yet the man stood as if he had just taken a blow.

'The age of K'rul, Rath'Shadowthrone hissed, 'is long past."

'He has returned, the robed man replied. 'A fact that should give every one of you a certain measure of relief. It is K'rul's blood, after all, that has been poisoned. The battle now begun shall spare no-one, including the gods whom you serve. If you doubt my words, take your inner journeys – hear the truth from your gods. Aye, the words might well be reluctant, indeed, resentful. But they will be spoken none the less."

'Your suggestion, Rath'Queen of Dreams said, 'cannot be achieved in haste."

'I am amenable to reconvening, Rath'K'rul said with a slight bow. 'Be warned, however, we've little time."

'You spoke of betrayal—'"

'Aye, Rath'Queen of Dreams, I did.'
'You wound us with divisiveness.'

The robed man cocked his head. 'Those who know your own conscience to be clear, brothers and sisters, will thereby be united. The one who cannot make that claim, will likely be dealt with by his god.'

'His?'

Rath'K'rul shrugged.

Brukhalian cleared his throat in the subsequent silence. 'With the leave of the Mask Council, I shall now depart. My Shield Anvil has need of me.'

'Of course,' Rath'Hood said. 'Indeed, from the sounds beyond the Thrall, it would appear that the walls are breached and the enemy is within.'

*And Hood stalks Capustan's streets. Ambivalence, sufficient to cool your tone.*

The Mortal Sword smiled. 'It was our expectation from the very beginning, Rath'Hood, that the walls and gates would be taken. Periodically.' He swung to Karnadas. 'Join me, please. I require the latest information.'

The Destriant nodded.

Hetan suddenly rose, eyes flashing as she glared at Rath'K'rul. 'Sleeping Man, is your god's offer true? Will he in truth aid us?'

'He will. Which of you volunteers?'

The Barghast woman, eyes wide, jerked her head towards her brother.

The robed man smiled.

Rath'Shadowthrone seemed to spit out his words, 'What now? What now? What now?'

Karnadas turned to study Cafal, was shocked to see the man still seated cross-legged, with his head bowed in slumber.

'To all here,' Rath'K'rul said in a low voice, 'awaken him not, if you value your lives.'

An even dozen Capanthall remained of the sixty-odd followers Gruntle had led westward from North Gate, and only one Lestari guardsman, a short-legged, long-armed sergeant who had stepped into the role of second-in-command without a word.

Lestari House was one of the few well-fortified private residences in Capustan, the home of Kalan D'Arle, a merchant family with links to the Council in Darujhistan as well as the now fallen noble house of the same name in Lestari itself. The solid stone structure abutted the north wall and its flat roof had become a strongpoint and rallying position for the wall's defenders.

At street level, the grand entrance consisted of a thick bronze door set in a stone frame, the hinges recessed. A broad pediment overhung the entrance, held up by twin marble columns, its ceiling crowded with the carved heads of demons, their mouths open and now dripping with the last of the boiling water that had gushed down on the screaming Scalandi who had been hammering on the door.

Gruntle and his troop, still reeling from a savage clash with fifteen Urdomen that had seen most of the militia chopped to pieces – before Gruntle had personally cut down the last two Pannions – had come upon the Scalandi mob from behind.

The engagement was swift and brutal. Only the Lestari sergeant revealed any mercy when he slit the throats of those Scalandi who had been badly scalded by the boiling water. The cessation of their shrieks brought sudden silence to the scene.
Gruntle crouched beside a body and used its tunic to clean the blades of his cutlasses. The muscles of his arms and shoulders were leaden, trembling.

The night’s breeze had strengthened, smelling of salt, sweeping the smoke inland. Enough fires still raged on all sides to drive back the darkness.

‘Look at that, will you?’

The caravan captain glanced over at the Lestari sergeant, then followed the man's gaze.

The Thrall loomed to the southeast, only a few streets away. The entire keep was faintly glowing.

‘What do you figure?’ the grizzled soldier muttered.

*Sorcery of some kind.*

‘I'd guess that's ritual magic,’ the sergeant went on. ‘Probably protective. Hood knows, we could do with some of that ourselves. We're cut to pieces, sir – I ain't got much left and as for the rest...' Eyeing the dozen battered, bleeding Capanthall crouched or kneeling, or leaning against the house's walls, he shook his head. ‘They're done for.’

Sounds of fighting neared from the southwest.

The scraping of armour from the roof of Lestari House drew Gruntle's attention. A half-dozen Capanthall regulars were looking down on them. ‘Nicely done, whoever you all are!' one shouted.

‘What can you see up there?’ the sergeant called up.

‘We've retaken the North Gate! Grey Swords, damn near a thousand of them. The Pannions are reeling!’

‘Grey Swords,’ the Lestari muttered under his breath. He glared across at Gruntle. ‘We was the ones who retook that gate—’

‘But we're not holding it, are we?’ Gruntle growled, straightening. He faced his meagre troop. ‘Look alive, you spineless Capans. We ain't finished.’

Dull, disbelieving eyes fixed on him.

‘Sounds like the West Gate’s down. Sounds like our defenders are back-pedalling. Meaning they've lost their officers, or their officers ain't worth shit. Sergeant, you're now a lieutenant. The rest of you, you're sergeants. We've got some scared soldiers to rally. Let's move, doubletime – don't want you all stiffening up.’ Glaring at them, Gruntle rolled his shoulders, clashed his cutlasses. ‘Follow me.’

He jogged down the street, towards West Gate. After a moment, the others fell in step.

Two bells before dawn. To the north and to the west, the roar of battle was diminishing. Itkovian's counterattacks had reclaimed the gates and walls there; the fight was out of the attackers on those sides, for the rest of this night at least.

Brukhalian had returned from the Thrall, Karnadas in tow, a bell earlier. The Mortal Sword had assembled the six hundred recruits the Shield Anvil had been holding in reserve, along with two Manes and two Wings, and set off towards the Jelarkan Concourse, where it was rumoured over a thousand Beklites had pushed their way in, threatening to overwhelm the inner defences.

The situation around the West Gate was even more dire. Three of Itkovian's messengers had not returned after being sent that way. The West Barracks was a massive fist of raging fire, revealing in lurid flashes the rubble that was the West Gate itself. This breach, should it prove able to reach through to the west side of Jelarkan Concourse, could see the fall of half the city.

The Shield Anvil paced with frustration. He was out of reserve forces. For a while there, it looked as if the
Capanthall and Grey Sword detachments assigned to the West Gate had simply ceased to exist, the wound gushing into a flood. Then, inexplicably, resolve had stiffened. The flood had encountered a human wall, and though it rose, it had yet to pour over.

The fate of Capustan lay with those defenders, now. And Itkovian could only watch, as all hung in the balance.

Karnadas was below, in the barracks compound. Exhausting his Denul warren, struggling against whatever sorcerous infection plagued it, yet still managing to effect healing of wounded Grey Swords. Something had happened in the Thrall, was happening even now – the entire keep was glowing, a colourless penumbra. Itkovian wanted to ask the Destriant about it, but the opportunity had yet to arise.

Boots on the ladder. The Shield Anvil swung about.

The messenger who emerged was horribly burned along one side of his face, the red, blistered skin covering his jaw and upward, forming a ridge beneath the rim on his helm. His eye on that side was puckered, wrinkled and dark as a raisin.

He climbed clear of the ladder, and Itkovian saw Karnadas behind him.

The Destriant spoke first, halfway out of the hatch. 'He insisted he give his report to you first, sir. I can do nothing for the eye, but the pain—'

'In a moment,' Itkovian snapped. 'Messenger, make your report.'

'Apologies,' the young man gasped, 'for taking so long.'

The Shield Anvil's eyes widened. 'You humble me, sir. It has been a bell and more since I sent you to the West Gate.'

'The Pannions had reached through to Tular Camp, Shield Anvil. Senar Camp had fallen – its inhabitants slaughtered. Everyone. Children – sir – I am sorry, but the horror remains with me ...'

'Go on.'

'Jehbar Tower was surrounded, its defenders besieged. Such was the situation upon my arrival, sir. Our soldiers were scattered, fighting in clumps, many of them surrounded. We were being cut down, everywhere I looked.' He paused, drew a ragged breath, then continued, 'Such was the situation upon my arrival. As I prepared to return to you with said news, I was ... absconded—'

'You were what?'

'Apologies, sir. I can think of no other word. A foreigner appeared, with but half a score of Capan followers, a militia of sorts, sir. And a Lestari sergeant. The man took charge – of everyone, myself included. Shield Anvil, I argued—'

'Clearly this man was persuasive. Resume your tale, sir.'

'The foreigner had his own soldiers break down the door into Tular Camp. He demanded that its inhabitants come out and fight. For their children—'

'And he convinced them?'

'Sir, he held in his arms what was left of a child from Senar Camp. The enemy, sir – the Pannions – someone had begun to eat that child—'

Karnadas moved up behind the young man, hands settling on his shoulders.

'He convinced them,' Itkovian said.

The messenger nodded. 'The foreigner – he then ... he then took what was left of the child's tunic, and has
made of it a standard. I saw it myself. Sir, I ceased arguing, then – I'm sorry—'

'I understand you, sir.'

'There was no shortage of weapons. The Tular Capanthall armed themselves – four, five hundred came out. Men and women. The foreigner had sent out his own followers, and they began returning. With them, surviving bands of Capanthall soldiery, a few Gidrath, Coralessian, and Grey Swords, sir. The Trimaster had been killed, you see—'

'The foreigner rallied them,' Itkovian cut in. 'Then what?

'We marched to the relief of Jehbar Tower, sir. Shield Anvil, behind that horrible banner, we delivered slaughter.'

'The condition of the tower?'

'Ruined, sir. Alas. There were but twenty survivors among the Capanthall defending it. They are now with the foreigner. I, uh, I returned to my responsibilities then, sir, and was given leave to report to you—'

'Generous of this stranger. What was the disposition of this militia at that time?'

'They were about to sortie through the rubble of West Gate, sir—'

'What?'

'A Beklite company was coming up to reinforce the attackers inside the city. But those attackers were all dead. The foreigner planned on surprising them with that fact.'

'Twin Tusks, who is this man?'

'I know not his name, sir. He wields two cutlasses. Fights like a ... like a boar, sir, with those two cutlasses ...'

Itkovian stared at the young man for a long moment, seeing the pain diminishing as the Destriant continued gripping his shoulders, seeing the blisters shrink, the welt fading, new skin closing around the ruined eye. The Shield Anvil swung about in a clank of armour, faced west. The fire of the West Barracks reached its crimson light only so far. Beyond, darkness ruled. He shifted his attention to the Jelarkan Concourse. No further breaches were evident, as far as he could determine. The Mortal Sword had matters well in hand, as Itkovian knew would be the case.

'Less than a bell,' Karnadas murmured, 'before dawn. Shield Anvil, the city holds.'

Itkovian nodded.

More boots on the ladder. They all turned as another messenger arrived.

'Shield Anvil, from the third sortie to East Watch redoubt. The surviving Gidrath have been recovered, sir. Movement to the southeast was discerned. The Trimaster sent a scout. Shield Anvil, the Tenescowri are on the move.'

Itkovian nodded. *They will arrive with the dawn. Three hundred thousand, maybe more.* 'Destriant, open the tunnels. Begin with the inner Camps, sir. Every citizen below. Take charge of the barracks Manes and Wings and whoever else you come across to effect swift directions and control of the entranceways.'

Karnadas's lined face twisted into a wry smile. 'Shield Anvil, it is my duty to remind you that the Mask Council has yet to approve the construction of said tunnels.'

Itkovian nodded again, 'Fortunately for the people of Capustan we proceed without awaiting that approval.' Then he frowned. 'It seems the Mask Council has found its own means of self-defence.'

'Not them, sir. Hetan and Cafal. And a new priest, indeed, the very "merchant" whom you rescued out on the
The Shield Anvil slowly blinked. 'Did he not have a caravan guard – a large man with a pair of cutlasses belted to his hips? *Cutlasses? More like Fener's own tusks.*

The Destriant hissed. 'I believe you are right, sir. In fact, only yesterday I spared a moment to heal him.'

'He was wounded?'

'Hungover, Shield Anvil. Very.'

'I see. Carry on, sir.' Itkovian looked to his two messengers. 'Word must be sent to the Mortal Sword ... and to this foreigner . . .'

The Beklite's wicker shield exploded from the man's arm to Gruntle's backhand swing. The notched, gore-smeared cutlass in the caravan guard's other hand chopped straight down, through helm, then skull. Brain and blood sprayed down over his gauntlet. The Beklite fell to one side, limbs jerking.

Gruntle spun, whipping the ragged mess from his blade. A dozen paces behind him, looming above the feral ranks of his followers, was the Child's Standard, a torn, brightly dyed yellow tunic now splashed with a red that was drying to deep magenta.

The Beklite company had been crushed. Gruntle's victim had been the last. The caravan captain and his militia were forty paces outside what was left of the West Gate, on the wide main avenue of what had been a shanty town. The structures were gone, their wooden walls and slate roofs dismantled and taken away. Patches of stained earthen floors and the scatter of broken pottery were all that remained. Two hundred paces further west ran the pickets of the besiegers, swarming in the dawn's growing light.

Gruntle could see half a thousand Betaklites marshalling along its edge, flanked by companies of Urdomen and Betrullid light cavalry. Beyond them, a vast veil of dust was rising, lit gold by the slanting sun.

The lieutenant had dropped to one knee beside Gruntle, struggling to regain control of his breathing. 'Time's – time's come – to – withdraw, sir.'

Scowling, the caravan captain swung to survey his militia. *Fifty, sixty still standing. What did I start with last night? About the same. Is that right? Gods, can that be right? Where are our sergeants?*

'They're there, most of them, anyway. You want me to call them forward, sir?'

*No, yes, I want to see their faces. I can't remember their faces.* 'Have them assemble the squads.'

'Sir, if that cavalry rushes us—'

'They won't. They're masking.'

'Masking what?'

'Tenescowri. Why throw more veteran soldiers at us only to see them killed? Those bastards need a rest in any case. No, it's time for the starving horde.'

'Beru fend,' the lieutenant whispered.

'Don't worry,' Gruntle replied, 'they die easy.'

'We need to rest – we're sliced to pieces, sir. I'm too old for a suicide stand.'

'Then what in Hood's name are you doing in Capustan? Never mind. Let's see the squads. I want armour stripped from these bodies. Leathers only, and helms and gauntlets. I want my sixty to look like soldiers.'

'Sir—'
'Then we withdraw. Understood? Best be quick about it, too.'

Gruntle led his battered company back towards Capustan. There was activity amidst the ruin of West Gate. The plain grey cloaks of the Grey Swords dominated the crowd, though others – masons and ragtag crews of labourers – were present as well. The frenzied activity slowed as heads turned. Conversations fell away.

Gruntle's scowl deepened. He hated undue attention. What are we, ghosts?

Eyes were pulled to the Child's Standard.

A figure strode forward to meet them, an officer of the mercenaries. 'Welcome back,' the woman said with a grave nod. Her face was caked with dust, runnels of sweat tracking down from under her helm. 'We've got some weaponsmiths set up outside Tular Camp. I imagine your Tusks need sharpening—'

'Cutlasses.'

'As you say, sir. The Shield Anvil – no, we all would know your name—'

But Gruntle had already stepped past her. 'Sharpeners. Good idea. Lieutenant, you think we all need to get our tusks sharpened?'

The Grey Swords officer spun round. 'Sir, the reference is not to be taken lightly.'

He continued on. Over his shoulder, he said, 'Fine, let's call them tiger-claws, why don't we? Looks to me you've got a gate to rebuild. Best get to it, lass. Them Tenescowri want breakfast, and we're it.'

He heard her hiss in what might have been angry frustration.

Moments later, the workers resumed their efforts.

The weaponsmiths had set up their grindstone wheels in the street. Beyond them, in the direction of the Jelarkan Concourse, the sounds of battle continued. Gruntle waved his soldiers forward. 'Line up all of you. I want those blades so sharp you can shave with them.'

The lieutenant snorted. 'Most of your troop's women, sir.'

'Whatever.'

A rider was driving his horse hard down the street. He reined in with a clatter of hooves, dismounted and paused to adjust his armoured gauntlets before striding to Gruntle.

'Are you Keruli's caravan captain? he asked, face hidden behind a full-visored helm.

'Was. What do you want, mercenary?'

'Compliments from the Shield Anvil, sir.' The voice was hard, deep. 'The Tenescowri are massing—'

'I know.'

'It is the Shield Anvil's belief that their main assault will be from the east, for it is there that the First Child of the Dead Seed has assembled his vanguard.'

'Fine, what of it?' The messenger was silent for a moment, then he continued. 'Sir, Capustan's citizens are being removed—'

'Removed where?'

'The Grey Swords have constructed tunnels beneath the city, sir. Below are amassed sufficient supplies to support twenty thousand citizens—'
'For how long?'

'Two weeks, perhaps three. The tunnels are extensive. In many cases, old empty barrows were opened as well, as storage repositories – there were more of those than anyone had anticipated. The entranceways are well hidden, and defensible.'

*Two weeks. Pointless.* 'Well, that takes care of the non-combatants. What about us fighters?'

The messenger's eyes grew veiled between the black-iron bars of the visor. 'We fight. Street by street, building by building. Room by room, sir. The Shield Anvil enquires of you, which section of the city do you wish to assume? And is there anything you require? Arrows, food ...'

'We've no archers, but food and watered wine, aye. Which section?' Gruntle surveyed his troop. 'More like which building. There's a tenement just off Old Daru Street, the one with the black-stone foundations. We'll start at North Gate, then fall back to there.'

'Very good. Supplies will be delivered to that tenement house, sir.'

'Oh, there's a woman in one of the rooms on the upper floor – if your evacuation of citizens involved a house-by-house search——'

'The evacuation was voluntary, sir.'

'She wouldn't have agreed to it.'

'Then she remains where she is.'

Gruntle nodded.

The lieutenant came to the captain's side. 'Your cutlasses – time to hone your tiger-claws, sir.'

'Aye.' Turning away, Gruntle did not notice the messenger's head jerk back at the Lestari lieutenant's words.

Through the dark cage of his visor, Shield Anvil Itkovian studied the hulking caravan captain who now strode towards a swordsmith, the short-legged Lestari trailing a step behind. The blood-stained cutlasses were out, the wide, notched, tip-heavy blades the colour of smoky flames.

He had come to meet this man for himself, to take his fullest measure and fashion a face to accompany the man's extraordinary talents.

Itkovian already regretted the decision. He muttered a soft, lengthy curse at his own impetuosity. *Fights like a boar? Gods, no, this man is a big, plains-hunting cat. He has bulk, aye, but it passes unnoticed behind a deadly grace. Fener save us all, the Tiger of Summer's ghost walks in this man's shadow.*

Returning to his horse, Itkovian drew himself up into the saddle. He gathered the reins. Swinging his mount round, he tilted his head back and stared at the morning sun. *The truth of this has burst like fire in my heart. On this, our last day, I have met this unnamed man, this servant of Treach, the Tiger of Summer . . . Treach ascending.*

*And Fener? The brutal boar whose savage cunning rides my soul – what of my lord?*

*Fener . . . descending. On this, our last day.*

A susurrating roar rose in the distance, from all sides. The Tenescowri were on the move.

'Twin Tusks guard us,' Itkovian rasped, driving his heels into the horse's flanks. The animal surged forward, sparks raining as its hooves struck the cobbles.

Grey-faced with exhaustion, Buke made his way towards the necromancers' estate. It was a large edifice,
commanding a long, low hill that looked too regular to be natural, surrounded by a high wall with mock guard towers at the corners. A grand entrance faced onto Kilsban Way, set back from the street itself with a ramped approach. The gate was a miniature version of the Thrall's, vertically raised and lowered by countersunk centre-holed millstones.

A fireball had struck the gate, blasting it into ruin. The flames had raged for a time, blackening the stone frame and cracking it, but somehow the structure remained upright.

As the old caravan guard limped his way up the ramp towards it, he was startled by the sudden exit of a tall, gaunt, black-robed man. Stumbling, half hopping like a huge ebon-winged vulture, the man spun round to glare at Buke. His face twisted. 'I am second only to Rath'Shadowthrone himself! Do you not know me? Do they not know me? I am Marble! Also known as the Malefic! Feared among all the cowering citizens of Capustan! A sorcerer of powers unimagined! Yet they ...' He sputtered with fury. 'A boot to the backside, no less! I will have my revenge, this I swear!'

'Ill-advised, priest,' Buke said, not unkindly. 'My employers—'

'Are arrogant scum!'

'That may be, but they're not ones to irritate, sir.'

'Irritate? When my master hears of this – this – insult delivered to his most valued servant, then, oh then shall the shadows flow!' With a final snarl, the priest stamped down the walkway, black robe skirling dramatically in his wake.

Buke paused for a long moment, watching until the man named Marble disappeared around a corner.

The sound of fighting was on all sides, but getting no closer. Hours earlier, in the deep of the night when Buke had been helping people from the Camps and from Daru District's tenements make their way to the Grey Swords' places of mustering – from which they would be led to the hidden tunnel entrances – the Pannions had reached all the way to the street Buke had just walked. Somehow, Capustan's motley collection of defenders had managed to drive them back. Bodies from both sides littered Kilsban Way.

Buke pushed himself into motion once more, passing beneath the scorched lintel of the entrance with a firm conviction that he would never again leave Bauchelain and Korbal Broach's estate. Even as his steps slowed to a sudden surge of self-preservation, he saw it was too late.

Bauchelain stood in the courtyard. 'Ah, my erstwhile employee. We'd wondered where you'd gone.'

Buke ducked his head. 'My apologies, sir. I'd delivered the tax exemption writ to the Daru civic authorities as requested—'

'Excellent, and was our argument well received?'

The old guard winced. 'The event of siege, alas, offers no relief from property taxes, master. The monies are due. Fortunately, with the evacuation, there is no-one at Daru House to await their arrival.'

'Yes, the evacuation. Tunnels. Very clever. We declined the offer, of course.'

'Of course.' Buke could no longer hold his gaze on the cobbles before him, and found his head turning, lifting slightly to take in the half-score Urdomen bodies lying bloodless, faces mottled black beneath their visors, on all sides.

'A precipitous rush of these misguided soldiers,' Bauchelain murmured. 'Korbal was delighted, and makes preparations to recruit them.'

'Recruit them, master? Oh, yes sir. Recruit them.'

The necromancer cocked his head. 'Odd, dear Emancipor Reese uttered those very words, in an identical tone, not half a bell ago.'
'Indeed, master.'

The two regarded each other for a brief span, then Bauchelain stroked his beard and turned away. 'The Tenescowri are coming, did you know? Among them, Children of the Dead Seed. Extraordinary, these children. A dying man's seed... Hmm. It's said that the eldest among them now commands the entire peasant horde. I look forward to meeting him.'

'Master? Uh, how, I mean—'

Bauchelain smiled. 'Korbal is most eager to conduct a thorough examination of this child named Anaster. What flavour is his biology? Even I wonder at this.'

The fallen Urdomen lurched, twitched as one, hands clawing towards dropped weapons, helmed heads lifting.

Buke stared in horror.

'Ah, you now have guards to command, Buke. I suggest you have them position themselves at the entrance. And perhaps one to each of the four corner towers. Tireless defenders, the best kind, yes?'

Emancipor Reese, clutching his mangy cat tight against his chest, stumbled out from the main house. Bauchelain and Buke watched as the old man rushed towards one of the now standing Urdomen. Reese came up to the hulking warrior, reached out and tugged frantically at the undead's chain collar and the jerkin beneath it. The old man's hand reached down beneath both layers, down, down.

Emancipor started gibbering. He pulled his hand clear, staggered back. 'But—' His lined, pebbled face swung to Bauchelain. 'That... that man, Korbal—he has—he said—I saw! He has their hearts! He's sewn them together, a bloody, throbbing mass on the kitchen table! But—' He spun and thumped the Urdomen on the chest. 'No wound!'

Bauchelain raised one thin eyebrow. 'Ah, well, with you and friend Buke here interfering with Korbal Broach's normal nightly activities, my colleague was forced to modify his habits, his modus operandi, if you will. Now, you see, my friends, he has no need to leave his room in order to satisfy his needs of acquisition. None the less, it should be said, please desist in your misguided efforts.' The necromancer's flat grey eyes fixed on Buke. 'And as for the priest Keruli's peculiar sorcery now residing within you, unveil it not, dear servant. We dislike company when in our Soletaken forms.'

Buke's legs came close to giving out beneath him.

'Emancipor,' Bauchelain murmured, 'do lend your shoulder to our guard.'

The old man stepped close. His eyes were so wide that Buke could see white all around them. Sweat beaded his wrinkled face. 'I told you it was madness!' he hissed. 'What did Keruli do to you? Damn you, Buke—'

'Shut up, Mancy,' Buke growled. 'You knew they were Soletaken. Yet you said nothing—' His lined, pebbled face swung to Bauchelain. 'How—' He spun and thumped the Urdomen on the chest. 'No wound!'

Emancipor paled. 'The Tenescowri...'
But Buke's attention had been drawn to the main building's square tower, to the open shutters of the top, third floor's room. Where two rooks now perched. 'Oh yes,' he muttered, baring his teeth, 'I see you. You're going after him, aren't you? That first child of the Dead Seed. Anaster. You're going after him.'

The rooks dropped from the ledge, wings spreading, swooped low over the compound, then, with heavy, audible flaps, lifted themselves clear of the compound wall. Flying southeast.

Buke pushed Reese away. 'I can follow them! Oh yes. Keruli's sweet gift... My own Soletaken form, the shape of wings, the air sliding over and beneath me. Gods, the freedom! What I will... finds form—He felt his body veering, sweet warmth filling his limbs, the spice of his skin's breath as it assumed a cloak of feathers. His body dwindling, changing shape. Heavy bones thinning, becoming lighter.

Keruli's sweet gift, more than he ever imagined. Flight! Away from what I was! From all that I had been! Burdens, vanishing! Oh, I can follow those two dread creatures, those winged night-mares. I can follow, and where they strain and lumber on the unseen currents in the sky, I twist, dart, race like lightning!

Standing in the courtyard, Emancipor Reese watched through watering eyes Buke's transformation. A blurring of the man, a drawing inward, the air filling with pungent spice. He watched as the sparrowhawk that had been Buke shot upward in a cavorting climbing spiral.

'Aye,' he muttered. 'You can fly circles around them. But, dear Buke, when they decide to swat you down, it won't be a duel on the wing. It'll be sorcery. Those plodding rooks have no need for speed, no need for agility—and those gifts will avail you nothing when the time comes. Buke... you poor fool...'

High above Capustan, the sparrowhawk circled. The two rooks, Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, were far below yet perfectly visible to the raptor's eyes. Flapping ponderously through wreaths of smoke, southeast, past the East Gate...

The city still burned in places, thrusting columns of black smoke skyward. The sparrowhawk studied the siege from a point of view that the world's generals would die for. Wheeling, circling, watching.

The Tenescowri ringed the city in a thick, seething band. A third of a million, maybe more. Such a mass of people as Buke had never seen before. And the band had begun to constrict. A strangely colourless, writhing noose, drawing ever closer to the city's feeble, crumbled walls and what seemed but a handful of defenders.

There would be no stopping this assault. An army measured not by bravery, but by something far deadlier, something unopposable: hunger. An army that could not afford to break, that saw only wasting death in retreat. Capustan was about to be devoured.

The Pannion Seer is a monster in truth. A tyranny of need. And this will spread. Defeat him? You would have to kill every man, woman and child on this world who are bowed to hunger, everyone who faces starvation's grisly grin. It has begun here, on Genabackis, but that is simply the heart. This tide will spread. It will infect every city, on every continent, it will devour empires and nations from within.

I see you now, Seer. From this height. I understand what you are, and what you will become. We are lost. We are all truly lost.

His thoughts were scattered by a virulent bloom of sorcery to the east. A knot of familiar magic swirled around a small section of the Tenescowri army. Black waves shot through with sickly purple streamed outward, cut down screaming peasants by the hundreds. Grey-streaming sorcery answered.

The sparrowhawk's eyes saw the twin corbies now, there, in the midst of the magical storm. Demons burst from torn portals on the plain, tore mayhem through the shrieking, flinching ranks. Sorcery lashed back, swarmed over the creatures.

The two rooks swept down, converged on a figure sitting on a bucking roan horse. Waves of magic collided with a midnight flash, the concussion a thunder that reached up to where Buke circled.
The sparrowhawk’s beak opened, loosing a piercing cry. The rooks had peeled away. Sorcery hammered them, battered them as they flapped in hasty retreat.

The figure on the stamping horse was untouched. Surrounded by heaps of bodies, into which fellow Tenescowri now plunged. To feed.

Buke screamed another triumphant cry, dipped his wings, plummeted earthward.

He reached the estate’s courtyard well ahead of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, spiralling, slowing, wings buffeting the air. To hover the briefest of moments, before sembling, returning to his human form.

Emancipor Reese was nowhere to be seen. The undead Urdomen still stood in the positions where they had first arisen.

Feeling heavy and awkward in his body, Buke turned to study them. ‘Six of you to the gate – you’ – he pointed – ‘and the ones directly behind you. And you, to the northwest tower.’ He continued directing the silent warriors, placing them as Bauchelain had suggested. As he barked the last order, twin shadows tracked weaving paths across the cobbles. The rooks landed in the courtyard. Their feathers were in tatters. Smoke rose from one of them.

Buke watched the sembling, smiled at seeing, first Korbal Broach – his armour in shreds, rank tendrils of smoke wreathed around him – then Bauchelain, his pale face bruised along one side of his long jaw, blood crusting his moustache and staining his silver beard.

Korbal Broach reached up to the collar of his cloak, his pudgy, soft hands trembling, fumbling at the clasp. The black leather fell to the ground. He began stamping on it to kill the last of its smouldering patches.

Brushing dust from his arms, Bauchelain glanced over at Buke. ‘Patient of you, to await our return.’

Wiping the smile from his lips, Buke shrugged. ‘You didn’t get him. What happened?’

‘It seems,’ the necromancer muttered, ‘we must needs refine our tactics.’

The instinct of self-preservation vanished, then, as Buke softly laughed.

Bauchelain froze. One eyebrow arched. Then he sighed. ‘Yes, well. Good day to you, too, Buke.’

Buke watched him head inside.

Korbal Broach continued stomping on his cloak long after the smouldering patches had been extinguished.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In my dreams I come face to face
with myriad reflections of myself,
all unknown and passing strange.
They speak unending
in languages not my own
and walk with companions
I have never met, in places
my steps have never gone.

In my dreams I walk worlds
where forests crowd my knees
and half the sky is walled ice.
Dun herds flow like mud,
vast floods tusked and horned
surging over the plain,
and lo, they are my memories,
the migrations of my soul.

In the Time before Night
D’arayans of the Rhivi

Whiskeyjack rose in the saddle as his horse leapt over the spiny ridge of outcroppings cresting the hill. Hooves thumped as the creature resumed its gallop, crossing the mesa’s flat top, then slowing as the Malazan tautened the reins and settled back in the saddle. At a diminishing canter, he approached the summit’s far side, then drew up at its edge.

A rumpled, boulder-strewn slope led down into a broad, dry riverbed. At its base two 2nd Army scouts sat on their horses, backs to Whiskeyjack. Before them, a dozen Rhivi were moving on foot through what seemed to be a field of bones.

Huge bones.

Clicking his mount into motion, Whiskeyjack slowly worked it down onto the ancient slide. His eyes held on the scatter of bones. Massive iron blades glinted there, as well as crumpled, oddly shaped armour and helmets. He saw long, reptilian jaws, rows of jagged teeth. Clinging to some of the shattered skeletons, the remnants of grey skin.

Clearing the scree, Whiskeyjack rode up to the nearest scout.

The man saluted. 'Sir. The Rhivi are jabbering away – can’t quite follow what they’re talking about. Looks to have been about ten of the demons. Whatever tore into them was nasty. Might be the Rhivi have gleaned more, since they’re crawling around among the corpses.'

Nodding, Whiskeyjack dismounted. 'Keep an eye out,' he said, though he knew the scouts were doing just that, but feeling the need to say something. The killing field exuded an air of dread, old yet new, and – even more alarming – it held the peculiar tension that immediately followed a battle. Thick silence, swirling as if not yet settled by the sounds of violence, as if somehow still trembling, still shivering. . .

He approached the Rhivi and the sprawl of bones.

The tribal scouts were indeed jabbering.

'Dead wolves ...'
"Twice tracks, the touches heavy yet light, wider than my hand. Big."

"Big dead wolves."

"No blood, agreed? Barrow stench."

"Black stone dust. Sharp."

"Glittering beneath forearms – the skin ..."

"Black glass fragments."

"Obsidian. Far south ..."

"Southwest. Or far north, beyond Laederon Plateau."

"No, I see no red or brown. Laederon obsidian has wood-coloured veins. This is Morn."

"If of this world ..."

"The demons are here, are they not? Of this world. In this world."

"Barrow stench."

"Yet in the air, ice stench, tundra wind, the smell of frozen peat."

"The wake of the wolves, the killers—"

Whiskeyjack growled, 'Rhivi scouts, attend to me, please.'

Heads lifted, faces turned. Silence.

'I will hear your report, now. Which of you commands this troop?'

Looks were exchanged, then one shrugged. 'I can speak this Daru you use. Better than the others. So, for this that you ask, me.'

'Very well. Proceed.'

The young Rhivi swept back the braided strands of his grease-laden hair, then waved expansively at the bones around them. 'Undead demons. Armoured, with swords instead of hands. Coming from the southeast, more east than south.' He made an exaggerated frown. 'Damaged. Pursued. Hunted. Fleeing. Driven like bhederin, this way and that, loping, silent followers four-legged and patient—'

'Big undead wolves,' Whiskeyjack cut in.

'Twice as big as the native wolves of this plain. Yes. Then his expression cleared as if with revelation. 'They are like the ghost-runners of our legends. When the eldest shouldermen or women dream their farthest dreams, the wolves are seen. Never close, always running, all ghostly except the one who leads, who seems as flesh and has eyes of life. To see them is great fortune, glad tiding, for there is joy in their running."

'Only they're no longer running just in the dreams of your witches and warlocks,' Whiskeyjack said. 'And this run was far deadlier."

'Hunting. I said these wolves are like those in the dreams. I did not say they were those in the dreams.' His expression went blank, his eyes the eyes of a cold killer. 'Hunting. Driving their quarry, down to this, their trap. Then they destroyed them. A battle of undead. The demons are from barrows far to the south. The wolves are from the dust in the north winds of winter.'

'Thank you,' Whiskeyjack said. The Rhivi manner of narrative – the dramatic performance – had well conveyed the events this valley had witnessed.
More riders were approaching from the main column, and he turned to watch them.

Three. Korlat, Silverfox, and the Daru, Kruppe, the latter bobbing and weaving on his mule as it raced with stiff, short-legged urgency in the wake of the two horse-riding women. His cries of alarm echoed in the narrow valley.

'Yes.'

The commander swung round, eyes narrowing on the Rhivi scoutleader who, along with all his kin, was now studying the three riders. 'Excuse me?'

The Rhivi shrugged, expressionless, and said nothing.

The scree of boulders had forced the newcomers to slow, except for Kruppe who was thrown forward then back on his saddle as the mule pitched headlong down the slope. Somehow the beast kept its footing, plummeting past a startled Korlat and a laughing Silverfox, then, reaching the flat, slowing its wild charge and trotting up to where Whiskeyjack stood, its head lifted proudly, ears up and forward-facing.

Kruppe, on the other hand, remained hugging the animal's neck, eyes squeezed shut, face crimson and streaming sweat. 'Terror!' he moaned. 'Battle of wills, Kruppe has met his match in this brainless, delusional beast! Aye, he is defeated! Oh, spare me . . .'

The mule halted.

'You can climb off, now,' Whiskeyjack said.

Kruppe opened his eyes, looked around, then slowly sat straight. He shakily withdrew a handkerchief. 'Naturally. Having given the creature its head, Kruppe now reacquires the facility of his own.' Pausing a moment to pat his brow and daub his face, he then wormed off the saddle and settled to the ground with a loud sigh. 'Ah, here come Kruppe's lazy dust-eaters. Delighted you could make it, dear ladies! A fine afternoon for a trot, yes?'

Silverfox had stopped laughing, her veiled eyes now on the scattered bones.

Hood take me, that fur cloak becomes her indeed. Mentally shaking himself, Whiskeyjack glanced up to meet Korlat's steady, faintly ironic gaze. But oh, she pales beside this Tiste Andii. Dammit, old man, think not of the nights past. Do not embrace this wonder so tightly you crush the life from it.

'The scouts,' he said to both women, 'have come upon a scene of battle—'

'K'Chain Che'Malle,' Korlat nodded, eyeing the bones. 'K'ell Hunters, fortunately undead rather than enlivened flesh. Likely not as fast as they would have been. Still, to have been torn apart in such fashion—'

'T'lan Ay,' Silverfox said. 'They are why I have come.'

Whiskeyjack studied her. 'What do you mean?'

She shrugged. 'To see for myself, Commander. We are all drawing close. You to your besieged city, and I to the destiny to which I was born. Convergence, the plague of this world. Even so,' she added as she swung down from the saddle and strode among the bones, 'there are gifts. Dearest of such gifts . . . the T'lan Ay.' She paused, the wind caressing the fox fur on her shoulders, then whispered the name once more. 'T'lan Ay.'

'Kruppe shivers when she so names them, ah ... gods bless this grim beauty in its barrenland tableau, from which starry dreams so dimmed with time are as rainbow rivers in the sky!' He paused, blinked at the others. 'Sweet sleep, in which hidden poetry resides, the flow of the disconnected, so smooth as to seem entwined. Yes?'

'I'm not the man,' Whiskeyjack growled, 'to appreciate your abstractions, Kruppe, alas.'

'Of course, blunt soldier, as you say! But wait, does Kruppe see in your eyes a certain ... charge? The air veritably crackles with imminence – do you deny your sensitivity to that, Malazan? No, say nothing, the truth
resides in your hard gaze and your gauntleted hand where it edges closer to the grip of your sword.'

Whiskeyjack could not deny the hairs rising on the back of his neck. He looked around, saw a similar alertness among the Rhivi, and in the pair of Malazan scouts who were scanning the hill-lines on all sides.

'What comes?' Korlat whispered.

'The gift,' Kruppe murmured with a beatific smile as he rested his eyes upon Silverfox.

Whiskeyjack followed the Daru's gaze.

To see the woman, so much like Tattersail, standing with her back to them, arms raised high.

Dust began swirling, rising in eddies on all sides.

The T'lan Ay took form, in the basin, on the slopes and the crests of the surrounding hills.

_In their thousands . . ._

Grey dust into grey, matted fur, black shoulders, throats the hue of rain clouds, thick tails silver and black-tipped; while others were brown, the colour of rotted, powdered wood, faded to tan at throat and belly. Wolves, tall, gaunt, their eyes shadowed pits. Huge, long heads were turned, one and all, to Silverfox.

She glanced over a shoulder, her heavy-lidded eyes fixing on Whiskeyjack. She smiled. 'My escort.'

The commander, struck silent, stared at her. _So like Tattersail. Yet not. Escort, she says, but I see more – and her look tells me she is aware . . . so very aware, now._

Escort . . . and bodyguard. Silverfox may no longer require us. And, now that her need for our protection has passed, she is free to do . . . whatever she pleases. . .

A cold wind seemed to rattle through Whiskeyjack's mind. _Gods, what if Kallor was right all along! What if we've all missed our chance?_ With a soft grunt, he shook off the unworthy thoughts. _No, we have shown our faith in her, when it mattered most – when she was at her weakest. Tattersail would not forget that_ . . .

_So like . . . yet not. Nightchill, dismembered by betrayal. Is it Tayschrenn her remnant soul hates? Or the Malazan Empire and every son and daughter of its blood? Or the one she had been called upon to battle: Anomander Rake, and by extension Caladan Brood? The Rhivi, the Bar ghost . . . does she seek vengeance against them?_

Kruppe cleared his throat. 'And a lovely escort they are, my dear lass. Alarming to your enemies, reassuring to your loyal friends! We are charmed, for we can see that you are as well, so very deeply charmed by these silent, motionless T'lan Ay. Such well-behaved pups, Kruppe is impressed beyond words, beyond gestures, beyond suitable response entire!'

'If only,' Korlat murmured, 'that were the case.' She faced Whiskeyjack, her expression closed and professional. 'Commander, I will take my leave now to report to our leaders—'

'Korlat,' Silverfox interrupted, 'forgive me for not asking earlier, but when did you last look upon my mother?'

'This morning,' the Tiste Andii replied. 'She can no longer walk, and this has been her condition for almost a week now. She weakens by the day, Silverfox. Perhaps if you were to come and see her...'

'There is no need for that,' the fur-cloaked woman said. 'Who attends her at this moment?'

'Councillor Coll and the Daru man, Murillio.'

'Kruppe's most loyal friends, Kruppe assures you all. She is safe enough.'

'Circumstances,' Silverfox said, her expression tight, 'are about to grow ... tense.'
And what has it been till now, woman? Kallor haunts your shadow like a vulture – I'm surprised he let you get away just now . . . unless he's lurking about on the other side of the nearest hill. . .

'Do you ask something of me, Silverfox?' Korlat enquired.

She visibly gathered herself. 'Aye, some of your kin, to guard my mother.'

The Tiste Andii frowned. 'It would seem, with your new guardians in such number, that you have some to spare——'

'She would not let them approach her, I'm afraid. She has ... nightmares. I am sorry, but I must ensure my T'lan Ay are kept out of her sight, and senses. She may look frail and seem powerless, but there is that within her that is capable of driving the T'lan Ay away. Will you do as I ask?'

'Of course, Silverfox.'

The woman nodded, attention shifting once more back to Whiskeyjack as Korlat wheeled her mount and rode back up the slope. She studied him in silence for a moment, then looked to Kruppe. 'Well, Daru? Are you satisfied thus far?'

'I am, dearest one.' Not Kruppe's usual tone, but spoken low, measured.

*Satisfied. With what?*

'Will she hold on, do you think?'

Kruppe shrugged. 'We shall see, yes? Kruppe has faith.'

'Enough for both of us?'

The Daru smiled. 'Naturally.'

Silverfox sighed. 'Very well. I lean heavily on you in this, you know.'

'Kruppe's legs are as pillars of stone. Your touch is so light as to pass unnoticed by worthy self. My dear, the sound of additional riders urges upon you a decision – what will you permit to be seen by those who now approach?'

'Nothing untoward,' the woman replied. She raised her arms again.

The T'lan Ay returned to the dust from which they had arisen.

With a soft grunt, Whiskeyjack strode back to his horse. There were too many mysteries roiling through the company of the two armies, secrets that seemed to hold promises of explosive revelation. *Probably violent ones at that.* He felt uneasy. *I wish Quick Ben was here . . . Hood knows, I wish I knew what was happening with him, and Paran and the Bridgeburners. Did they succeed? Or are they all now dead, their skulls surmounting poles around the Barghast camps?*

A substantial part of the column's vanguard reached the hill's crest, where they halted in a ragged line.

Whiskeyjack swung himself into the saddle and made his way towards the group.

Kallor, riding a gaunt, grey horse, had deliberately drawn rein apart from the others. His faded grey cloak was tight about his broad, armoured shoulders. Shadows deepened the lines of his ancient, weathered face. Long strands of his grey hair drifted to one side in the wind.

Whiskeyjack's gaze held on the man a moment longer, gauging, then shifted to the others lining the ridge. Brood and Dujek were side by side. On the warlord's right was the outrider, Hurlochel; on the Malazan's left, the standard-bearer, Artanthos. The Trygalle Trade Guild's merchant-mage, Haradas, was also present, and, of course, Korlat.
None were speaking as Whiskeyjack's horse reached the crest. Then Dujek nodded and growled, 'Korlat's described what the scouts found. Anything else to add?'

Whiskeyjack glanced at the Tiste Andii, but her expression was closed. He shook his head. 'No, High Fist. Korlat and her kin seem to know more about these K'Chain Che'Malle than the rest of us – what lies below are a jumble of shattered bones, some weapons and armour. I could not have identified them myself. The Rhivi scouts believe they were undead—'

'Fortunate for us all,' muttered Kallor. 'I am not so ignorant of these creatures as the rest of you, barring Korlat. Further, I am feeling unusually . . . loquacious. Thus. Remnants of the K'Chain Che'Malle civilization can be found on virtually every continent on this world. Indeed, in the place of my old empire, Jacuruku, their strange mechanisms filled pits and holes in the earth – whenever my people had to cut below the surface, they discovered such constructs. More, barrows were found. Scholars conducted careful examination of their contents. Do you wish to hear an account of their conclusions or am I boring you?'

'Go on,' Caladan drawled.

'Very well. Perhaps there is more wisdom present here than I had previously credited. The beasts appear to be reptilian, capable of breeding their own kind to specific talents. Those the Tiste Andii called K'ell Hunters, for example, were born as warriors. Undead versions are in the valley below, yes? They had no hands, but swords in their stead, somehow melded to the very bones of their forearms. The K'Chain Che'Malle were matriarchal, matrilineal. As a population of bees have their queen, so too these beasts. She is the breeder, the mother of every child. And within this Matron resided the sorcerous capacity of her entire family. Power to beggar the gods of today. Power to keep the Elder Gods from coming to this world, and were it not for the self-destruction of the K'Chain Che'Malle, they would rule unchallenged to this day.'

'Self-destruction,' Korlat said, a sharpness in her eyes as she studied Kallor. 'An interesting detail. Can you explain?'

'Of course. Among the records found, once the language was deciphered – and that effort alone is worthy of lengthy monologue, but seeing how you all shift about in your saddles like impatient children, I'll spare the telling. Among the records found, then, it was learned that the Matrons, each commanding the equivalent of a modern city, had gathered to meld their disparate ambitions. What they sought, beyond the vast power they already possessed, is not entirely clear. Then again, what need there be for reasons when ambition rules? Suffice to say, an ancient breed was . . . resurrected, returned from extinction by the Matrons; a more primitive version of the K'Chain Che'Malle themselves. For lack of a better name, my scholars at the time called them Short-Tails.'

Whiskeyjack, his eyes on Korlat, was the only one to see her stiffen at that. Behind him, he could hear Silverfox and Kruppe making their way back up the slope.

'For the singular reason,' Kallor went on in his dry monotone, 'that they physically deviated from the other K'Chain Che'Malle in having short, stubby tails rather than the normal, long, tapered ones. This made them not as swift – more upright, suited to whatever world and civilization they had originally belonged to. Alas, these new children were not as tractable as the Matrons were conditioned to expect among their brood – more explicitly, the Short-Tails would not surrender or merge their magical talents with their mothers'. The result was a civil war, and the sorceries unleashed were apocalyptic. To gauge something of the desperation among the Matrons, one need only travel south on this continent, to a place called Morn.'

'The Rent,' Korlat murmured, nodding.

'Kallor's smile was wintry. 'She sought to harness the power of a gate itself, but not simply a common warren's gate. Oh no, she elected to open the portal that led to the Realm of Chaos. Such hubris, to think she could control – could assert order – upon such a thing.' He paused, as if reconsidering his own words, then laughed. 'Oh, a bitter lesson or two in that tale, don't you think?''

Caladan Brood grunted. 'Let's bring this back to the present, shall we? In the valley below, undead K'ell Hunters. The question to address is: what are they doing here?'
'They are being used.'

Everyone's eyes fixed on Silverfox, who stood before her horse, reins in hand.

'I like not the sound of that,' Dujek growled.

'Used,' Silverfox repeated, 'by the Pannion Seer.'

'Impossible,' Kallor snapped. 'Only a K'Chain Che'Malle Matron could command a Ke'll Hunter – even when undead.'

'Then it would appear,' Korlat said, 'that we have more than one enemy.'

'The Pannion Seer has an ally?' Dujek leaned on his saddle and spat. 'There's not been even so much as a hint —'

'None the less,' Silverfox cut in. 'Proof lies before us, in the valley below.'

'A Matron cannot breed more of her kind without the seed of living males,' Kallor said. 'Therefore, with each Ke'll Hunter destroyed, there is one less for us to deal with.'

Brood turned at that, eyes thinning to slits. 'Easily swallowed, this revelation.'

Kallor shrugged.

'There is also before us,' the warlord continued, 'another truth. Regarding the destruction of the Ke'll Hunters, someone is doing it for us, it seems.'

Silence; then, slowly, attention focused on Silverfox.

She smiled. 'I did say, some time ago, that you would all need help.'

Kallor snarled. 'T'lan Imass! So tell us, bitch, why would they concern themselves with K'Chain Che'Malle? Are not the Jaghut their avowed enemies? Why task your undead followers with a new one? Why have you and the T'lan Imass joined this war, woman?'

'Ve have joined nothing,' she replied, her eyes heavy-lidded, standing as Tattersail would stand, hands clasped and resting on the folds of her belly, her body solid yet curvaceous beneath her deerhide tunic.

'Ah, I know that look. Sleight of hand. Careful, now . . .

'Do you deny, then,' Brood began slowly, his expression clouded, uncertain, 'that your T'lan Imass were responsible for destroying these Ke'll Hunters?'

'Have none of you ever wondered,' Silverfox said, looking at each of them, 'why the T'lan Imass warred with the Jaghut?'

'Perhaps an explanation,' Dujek said, 'will assist us in understanding.'

Silverfox gave a sharp nod. 'When the first Imass emerged, they were forced to live in the shadow of the Jaghut. Tolerated, ignored, but only in small, manageable numbers. Pushed to the poorest of lands. Then Tyrants arose among the Jaghut, who found pleasure in enslaving them, in forcing upon them a nightmarish existence – that successive generations were born into and so knew of no other life, knew nothing of freedom itself.

'The lesson was hard, not easily swallowed, for the truth was this: there were intelligent beings in the world who exploited the virtues of others, their compassion, their love, their faith in kin. Exploited, and mocked. How many Imass tribes discovered that their gods were in fact Jaghut Tyrants? Hidden behind friendly masks. Tyrants, who manipulated them with the weapon of faith.'

'The rebellion was inevitable, and it was devastating for the Imass. Weaker, uncertain even of what it was
they sought, or what freedom would show them should they find it... But we would not relent. We could not.'

Kallor sneered. 'There were never more than but a handful of Tyrants among the Jaghut, woman.'

'A handful was too many, and aye, we found allies among the Jaghut – those for whom the activities of the Tyrants were reprehensible. But we now carried scars. Scars born of mistrust, of betrayal. We could trust only in our own kind. In the name of our generations to come, all Jaghut would have to die. None could be left, to produce more children, to permit among those children the rise of new Tyrants.'

'And how,' Korlat asked, 'does this relate to the K'Chain Che'Malle?'

'Before the Jaghut ruled this world, the K'Chain Che'Malle ruled. The first Jaghut were to the K'Chain Che'Malle as the first Imass were to the Jaghut.' She paused, her heavy gaze moving among them all. 'In each species is born the seeds of domination. Our wars with the Jaghut destroyed us, as a living people, as a vibrant, evolving culture. That was the price we paid, to ensure the freedom you now possess. Our eternal sacrifice.' She fell silent once more, then continued in a harder tone, 'So, now, I ask you – all of you, who have taken upon yourselves the task of waging war against a tyrannical, all-devouring empire, of possibly sacrificing your own lives to the benefit of peoples who know nothing of you, of lands you have never and will never set foot upon – I ask you, what is there about us, about the T'lan Imass, that still escapes your understanding? Destroy the Pannion Domin. It must be done. For me, for my T'lan Imass, awaits the task of destroying the threat hiding behind the Pannion Seer, the threat that is the K'Chain Che'Malle.'

She slowly studied their faces. 'A Matron lives. Flesh and blood. Should she find a male of her kind, a flesh and blood male ... the tyranny of the Jaghut will be as nothing to that of the K'Chain Che'Malle. This, then, will be our sacrifice.'

Only the wind filled the silence following her words.

Then Caladan Brood turned to Kallor. 'And you find in this woman an abomination?'

'She lies,' he rasped in reply. 'This entire war is meaningless. Nothing more than a feint.'

'A feint?' Dujek repeated in disbelief. 'By whom?'

Kallor snapped his mouth shut, made no reply.

The Trygalle Trade Guild merchant-mage, Haradas, cleared her throat. 'There may be some truth in that. Not that the woman Silverfox is lying – I believe she speaks true, as far as she is willing to tell us. No, I meant the feint. Consider the infection of the warrens. Granted, its focus seems to emanate from the Pannion Domin, and granted, as well, that the poison's taint is that of the Warren of Chaos. Granted all of that, one must then ask: why would a K'Chain Che'Malle Matron, who is the repository of a vast wellspring of sorcery, seek to destroy the very conduits of her power? If she was present when Morn was destroyed – when the Rent was created – why would she then try to harness chaos again? Ambitious, perhaps, but a fool? That is hard to countenance.'

Even as the import of her words sank in to Whiskeyjack, there came to him another realization. There is another enemy indeed, and from the looks on most of the faces around me – barring Dujek and, no doubt, my own – the revelation is not as surprising as it should be. True, we’d caught a hint, but we’d failed to make the connection. Brood, Korlat, Kallor – gods, even Kruppe and Artanthos! Remind me to avoid every damn one of them the next time I join a game of bones! He jerked his gaze back to Silverfox, was met with that sleepy, knowing regard.

No, that won't work again. 'Silverfox,' he growled. 'You spin a tale to sting sympathy from our hearts, yet it seems that your effort was misdirected, and so you end up undermining all you sought to achieve. If there is a deeper threat, a third hand, deftly manipulating both us and the Pannion Seer . . . will you and your T'lan Imass then focus your attention on that hand?'

'No.'

'Why?'
He was surprised as her steady gaze wavered, then fell away. Her voice came out in a raw whisper. 'Because, Whiskeyjack, you ask too much of us.'

No-one spoke.

Dread swept through Whiskeyjack. He swung about, locked gazes with Dujek, saw in the old man's face a mirror to his own growing horror. Gods below, we are heading to our deaths. An unseen enemy – but one we've known about for a long time, one we knew was coming, sooner or later, one that – by the Abyss – makes the T'lan Imass recoil.

'Such palpable distraughtness!' Kruppe cried. 'Distraughtness? Is there such a word? If not, then among Kruppe's countless talents we must add linguistic invention! My friends! Attend! Hark! Listen! Take heart, one and all, in the knowledge that Kruppe has placed himself, feet square and ample girth firm, in the path of said – yet unmentioned – formidable enemy of all existence! Sleep calm at night in this knowledge. Slumber as babes in your mother's arms, as each of you once did – even Kallor, though the image shocks and dismays—'

'Dammit!' Caladan Brood roared, 'what in Hood's name are you talking about, little man? You claim to stand in the path of the Crippled God? By the Abyss, you are mad! If you do not,' he continued in a low tone as he swung down from his horse, 'give instant proof of your efficacy' – he strode towards Kruppe, one hand reaching for the wrapped handle of his hammer – 'I will not predict the extremity of my temper.'

'I wouldn't do that, Brood,' Silverfox murmured.

The warlord twisted to face her, teeth bared. 'You now extend your protection to this arrogant, fat toad?'

Her eyes widened and she looked to the Daru. 'Kruppe, do you make such a request?'

'Absurd! No offence, dear, in that expostulation, Kruppe sweetly assures you!'

Whiskeyjack stared, disbelieving, as the round little man in his food- and drink-stained clothes drew himself up as straight as he was able and fixed small, glittering eyes on Caladan Brood. 'Threaten Kruppe of Darujhistan, will you? Demand an explanation, do you? Fondling that hammer, are you? Baring those fa—'

'Silence!' the warlord bellowed, struggling to control his anger.

Gods below, what is Kruppe up to?

'Kruppe defies all threats! Kruppe sneers at whatever demonstration bristling warlord would attempt—'

The hammer was suddenly in Brood's hands, a smudged blur as it swung through the air, a downward arc, to strike the earth almost at Kruppe's feet.

The detonation threw horses down, sent Whiskeyjack and the others flying. A thunderous concussion cracked the air. The ground seemed to leap up to meet the Malazan commander, the impact like a fist when he struck, rolled, then tumbled his way down the boulder-strewn slope.

Above him, horses were screaming. A wind, hot, shrieking, shot dust and earth skyward.

The scree of boulders was moving beneath Whiskeyjack, flowing, sliding down into the valley at an ever quickening pace with a rumbling, growing roar. Rocks clanged against his armour, rapped into the helm on his head, leaving him stunned. He caught a flashing glimpse, through a jagged tear in the dustcloud, of the line of hills on the other side the valley. Impossibly, they were rising, fast, the bedrock splitting the grassy hide, loosing gouts of dust, rock-shards and smoke. Then the swarming dust swallowed the world around him. Boulders bounced over him, tumbling. Others struck him solid, painful blows that left him gasping, coughing, choking as he rolled.

Even now, the ground continued to heave beneath the sliding scree. Distant detonations shook the air, trembled through Whiskeyjack's battered bones.

He came to a rest, half buried in gravel and rocks. Blinking, eyes burning, he saw before him the Rhivi
scouts – dodging, leaping from the path of bounding boulders as if in some bizarre, deadly game. Beyond, black, steaming bedrock towered, the spine of a new mountain range, still growing, still rising, lifting and tilting the floor of the valley where the Malazan now lay. The sky behind it churned iron-grey with steam and smoke.

_Hood take me . . . poor Kruppe . . ._ Groaning, Whiskeyjack twisted round as far as he could. He was covered in scrapes, could feel the tender birth of huge bruises beneath his dented, torn armour, but his bones were, amazingly, intact. He strained his watering eyes to the hilltop behind him.

The scree was gone, leaving a gaping, raw cliff-face. Most of the mesa's summit was simply no longer there, obliterated, leaving a small, flat-topped island . . . where Whiskeyjack now saw figures moving, rising. Horses scrambling upright. Faintly, came the brazen complaint of a mule.

To the north, cutting a path down along the side of a distant valley, then through distant hills, a narrow, steaming crack was visible, a fissure in the earth that seemed depthless.

Whiskeyjack painfully pulled himself clear of the rubble, slowly straightened.

He saw Caladan Brood, hammer hanging down from his hands, motionless . . . and standing before the warlord, on an island of his own, was Kruppe. Brushing dust from his clothes. The crack that had been born where the hammer had struck the earth, parted neatly around the short, fat Daru, joining again just behind him.

Whiskeyjack struggled to hold back a laugh, knowing how desperate, how jarring it would sound. _So, we have seen Brood's fury. And Kruppe, that preposterous little man, has stood it down. Well, if proof was ever needed that the Daru was not as he appeared to be . . . He then frowned. A demonstration indeed – directed towards whom, I wonder?

A cry of dismay cut through his thoughts.

Korlat. She faced north, her posture somehow contracted, drawn in on itself.

The fissure, Whiskeyjack now saw – all amusement gone – was filling with blood.

_Fouled blood, rotten blood. Beru fend, the Sleeping Goddess . . . Burn sleeps the sleep of the dying, the poisoned. And this, he realized, was the day's final, most terrible revelation. Diseased . . . the hidden hand of the Crippled God . . ._

The Mhybe's eyes snapped open. The wagon rocked and pitched. Thunder shook the ground. The shouts of Rhivi were on all sides, a wailing chorus of alarm and consternation. Her bones and muscles protested as she was thrown about in the cataclysm, but she would not cry out. She wanted only to hide.

The rumbling faded, replaced by the distant lowing of the bhederin and, closer by, the soft footpads of her kin as they rushed past the wagon. The herd was close to panic, and a stampede was imminent.

_Bringing ruin to us all. Yet that would be a mercy. An end to the pain, to my nightmares . . ._

In her dreams she was young once more, but those dreams held no joy. Strangers walked the tundra landscape where she invariably found herself. They approached. She fled. Dashing like a snow hare. Running, always running.

Strangers. She did not know what they wanted, but they were seeking her – that much was clear. Tracking her, like hunters their quarry. To sleep was to awaken exhausted, limbs trembling, chest heaving with agonized breaths.

She had been saved from the Abyss, from those countless tattered souls lost in eternal, desperate hunger. Saved, by a dragon. _To what end? Leaving me in a place where I am hunted, pursued without surcease?_

Time passed, punctuated by the herd's calming words to the frightened bhederin. There would be no stampede after all. Rumbles still trembled through the earth, in diminishing ripples that grew ever farther apart.
The Mhybe moaned softly to herself as the wagon rocked once more, this time to the arrival of the two Daru, Coll and Murillio.

'You've awakened,' the councillor noted. 'It's no surprise.'

'Leave me be,' she said, drawing the hides around her shivering body and curling away from the two men. *It's so cold...*

'Any idea what's happened up ahead?' Murillio asked Coll.

'Seems Brood lost his temper.'

'Gods! With whom? Kallor? That bastard deserves—'

'Not Kallor, friend,' Coll growled. 'Make another guess – shouldn't take you long.'

Murillio groaned. 'Kruppe.'

'Hood knows he's stretched the patience of all of us at one time or another . . . only none of us was capable of splitting apart half the world and throwing new mountains skyward.'

'Did the little runt get himself killed? I can't believe—'

'Word is, he's come out unscathed. Typically. Complaining of the dust. No-one else was injured, either, though the warlord himself almost got his head kicked in by an angry mule.'

'Kruppe's mule? The one that sleeps when it walks?'

'Aye, the very one.'

*Sleeps. Dreams of being a horse, no doubt. Magnificent, tall, fierce . . .*

'That beast is a strange one, indeed. Never seen a mule so . . . so watchful. Of everything. Queen of Dreams, that's the oddest looking range of mountains I've ever seen!'

'Aye, Murillio, it *does* look bigger than it really is. Twists the eye. A broken spine, like something you'd see at the very horizon, yet there it is, not half a league from us. Doesn't bear thinking about, if you ask me ...'

*Nothing bears thinking about. Not mountains, not mules, not Brood's temper. Souls crowd my daughter, there, within her. Two women, and a Thelomen named Skullcrusher. Two women and a man whom I've never met . . . yet I carried that child within me. I, a Rhivi, young, in the bloom of my life, drawn into a dream then the dream made real. Yet where, within my daughter, am I? Where is the blood, the heart, of the Rhivi?*

*She has nothing of me, nothing at all. Naught but a vessel in truth – that is all I was – a vessel to hold then birth into the world a stranger.*

*She has no reason to see me, to visit, to take my hand and offer me comfort. My purpose is done, over. And here I lie, a discarded thing. Forgotten. A mhybe.*

A hand settled gently on her shoulder.

Murillio spoke. 'I think she sleeps once more.'

'For the best,' Coll murmured.

'I remember my own youth,' the Daru went on in a quiet, introspective tone.

'I remember your own youth, too, Murillio.'

'Wild and wasteful—'

'A different widow every night, as I recall.'
'I was a lodestone indeed, and, you know, it was all so effortless—'

'We'd noticed.'

The man sighed. 'But no longer. I've aged, paid the price for my younger days—'

'Nights, you mean.'

'Whatever. New rivals have arrived. Young bloods. Marak of Paxto, tall and lithe and turning heads wherever he saunters. The smug bastard. Then there's Perryl of M'ncea—'

'Oh, really, Murillio, spare me all this.'

'The point is, it was all a stretch of years. Full years. Pleasurable ones. And, for all that I'm on the wane, at least I can look back and recall my days – all right, my nights – of glory. But here, with this poor woman...'

'Aye, I hear you. Ever notice those copper ornaments she's wearing – there, you can see the pair on her wrist. Kruppe's gifts, from Darujhistan.'

'What about them?'

'Well, as I was saying. Ever noticed them? It's a strange thing. They get brighter, shinier, when she's sleeping.'

'Do they?'

'I'd swear it on a stack of Kruppe's handkerchiefs.'

'How odd.'

'They're kind of dull right now, though...'

There was silence from the two men crouched above her. After a long moment the hand resting on her shoulder squeezed slightly.

'Ah, my dear,' Murillio whispered, 'would that I could take back my words...'

'Why? They were truth. Words from your heart, and it is a generous one for all your irresponsible youth. You've given voice to my curse. That changes nothing. Am I to be pitied? Only when I'm asleep, it seems. To my face, you say nothing, and consider your silence a kindness. But it mocks me, for it arrives as indifference.

And this silence of mine? To these two kind men looking down on me right now? Which of my countless flaws does this reveal?

Your pity, it seems, is no match for my own.

Her thoughts trailed away, then. The treeless, ochre wasteland of her dreamworld appeared. And she within it.

She began running.

Dujek flung his gauntlets against the tent wall as he entered, his face dark with fury.

Whiskeyjack unstoppered the jug of ale and filled the two goblets waiting on the small camp table before him. Both men were smeared in sweaty dust.

'What madness is this?' the High Fist rasped, pausing only long enough to snatch up one of the goblets before beginning to pace.

Whiskeyjack stretched his battered legs out, the chair creaking beneath him. He swallowed a long draught of ale, sighed and said, 'Which madness are you referring to, Dujek?'
'Aye, the list is getting damned long. The Crippled God! The ugliest legends belong to that broken bastard—'

'Fisher Kel Tath's poem on the Chaining—'

'I'm not one for reading poetry, but Hood knows, I've heard bits of it spoken by tavern bards and the like. Fener's balls, this isn't the war I signed on to fight.'

Whiskeyjack's eyes narrowed on the High Fist. 'Then don't.'

Dujek stopped pacing, faced his second. 'Go on,' he said after a moment.

'Brood already knew,' he replied with a shrug that made him wince.

As did Korlat.

'With him, you could reasonably include Anomander Rake. And Kallor – though I liked not the avid glint in that man's eye. So, two ascendants and one would-be ascendant. The Crippled God is too powerful for people like you and me to deal with, High Fist. Leave it to them, and to the gods. Both Rake and Brood were there at the Chaining, after all.'

'Meaning it's their mess.'

'Bluntly, yes it is.'

'For which we're all paying, and might well pay the ultimate price before too long. I'll not see my army used as fodder in that particular game, Whiskeyjack. We were marching to crush the Pannion Domin, a mortal empire – as far as we could determine.'

'Manipulation seems to be going on on both sides, Dujek.'

'And I am to be comforted by that?' The High Fist's glare was fierce. He held it on his second for another moment, then quaffed his ale. He thrust the empty goblet out.

Whiskeyjack refilled it. 'We're hardly ones to complain of manipulation,' he rumbled, 'are we, friend?'

Dujek paused, then grunted.

Indeed. Calm yourself, High Fist. Think clear thoughts. 'Besides,' Whiskeyjack continued, 'I have faith.'

'In what?' his commander snapped. 'In whom? Pray, tell me!'

'In a certain short, corpulent, odious little man—'

'Kruppe! Have you lost your mind?'

Whiskeyjack smiled. 'Old friend, look upon your own seething anger. Your rage at this sense of being manipulated. Used. Possibly deceived. Now consider how an ascendant like Caladan Brood would feel, upon the realization that he is being manipulated? Enough to shatter the control of his temper? Enough to see him unlimber his hammer and seek to obliterate that smug, pompous puppet-master.'

Dujek stood unmoving for a long time, then a grin curved his lips. 'In other words, he took Krupp seriously ...'

'Darujhistan,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Our grand failure. Through it all, I had the sense that someone, somewhere, was orchestrating the whole damned thing. Not Anomander Rake. Not the Cabal. Not Vorcan and her assassins. Someone else. Someone so cleverly hidden, so appallingly ... capable ... that we were helpless, utterly helpless.

'And then, at the parley, we all discover who was responsible for Tattersail's rebirth. As Silverfox, a child of a Rhivi woman, the seed planted and the birth managed within an unknown warren. The drawing together of threads – Nightchill, Bellurdan, Tattersail herself. And, it now appears, an Elder God, returned to the mortal realm. And, finally and most remarkably, the T'lan Imass. So, Tattersail, Nightchill and Bellurdan – all of the Malazan Empire – reborn to a Rhivi woman, of Brood's army ... with a parley looming, the potential of a grand alliance ... how Hood-damned convenient that a child should so bridge the camps—'

'Barring Kallor,' Dujek pointed out.
Whiskeyjack slowly nodded. 'And Kallor's just been reminded of Brood's power – hopefully sufficiently to keep him in line.'

'Is that what all that was about?'

'Maybe. He demanded a demonstration, did he not? What Kruppe manipulates is circumstance. Somehow. I don't feel we are fated to dance as he wills. There is an Elder God behind the Daru, but even there, I think it's more an alliance of ... mutual benefit, almost between equals. A partnership, if you will. Now, I'll grant you, all this is speculation on my part, but I'll tell you this: I have been manipulated before, just have you. But this time it feels different. Less inimical. Dujek, I sense compassion this time.'

'An alliance of equals,' the High Fist muttered, then he shook his head. 'What, then, does that make this Kruppe? Is he some god in disguise? A wizard of magnitude, an archmage?'

Whiskeyjack shrugged. 'My best guess. Kruppe is a mortal man. But gifted with an intelligence that is singular in its prowess. And I mean that most literally. Singular, Dujek. If an Elder God was suddenly flung back into this realm, would he not seek out as his first ally the greatest of minds?'

Dujek's face revealed disbelieving wonder. 'But, Whiskeyjack ... Kruppe?'

'Kruppe. Who gave us the Trygalle Trade Guild, the only traders capable of supplying us on the route we chose to march. Kruppe, who brought to the Mhybe the surviving possessions of the First Rhivi, for her to wear and so diminish the pain she feels, and those ornaments are, I suspect, yet to fully flower. Kruppe, the only one Silverfox will speak with, now that Paran is gone. And, finally, Kruppe, who has set himself in the Crippled God's path.'

'If just a mortal, then how did he survive Brood's wrath?'

'Well, I expect his ally the Elder God would not wish to see the Daru killed. I'd guess there was intervention, then. What else could it have been?'

Dujek emptied his goblet. 'Damn,' he sighed. 'All right. We ignore, as best we can, the Crippled God. We remain focused on the Pannion Domin. Still, my friend, I mislike it. I can't help but be nervous in that we are not actively engaged in considering this new enemy ...'

'I don't think we are, High Fist.'

Dujek's glance was sharp, searching, then his face twisted. 'Quick Ben.'

Whiskeyjack slowly nodded. 'I think so. I'm not certain – Hood, I don't even know if he's still alive, but knowing Quick, he is. Very much alive. And, given his agitation the last time I saw him, he's without illusions, and anything but ignorant.'

'And he's all we've got? To outwit the Crippled God?'

'High Fist, if Kruppe is this world's foremost genius, then Quick Ben's but a step behind him. A very short step.'

They heard shouts outside the tent, then booted feet. A moment later the standard-bearer Artanthos pulled aside the flap and entered. 'Sirs, a lone Moranth has been spotted. Flying in from the northeast. It's Twist.'

Whiskeyjack rose, grunting at the cascade of aches and twinges the motion triggered. 'Queen of Dreams, we're about to receive some news.'

'Let's hope it's cheering news,' Dujek growled. 'I could do with some.'

*Her face was pressed against the lichen-skinned stones, the roughness fading as her sweat soaked the ragged plant. Heart pounding, breaths coming in gasps, she Jay whimpering, too tired to keep running, too tired to even so much as raise her head.*
The tundra of her dreams had revealed new enemies. Not the band of strangers pursuing her this time.

This time, she had been found by wolves. Huge, gaunt creatures, bigger than any she had ever seen in her waking life. They had loped into view on a ridge marking the skyline to the north. Eight long-legged, shoulder-hunched beasts, their fur sharing the muted shades of the landscape. The one in the lead had turned, as if catching her scent on the dry, cold wind.

And the chase had begun.

At first the Mhybe had revelled in the fleetness of her young, lithe legs. Swift as an antelope – faster than anything a mortal human could achieve – she had fled across the barren land.

The wolves kept pace, tireless, the pack ranging out to the sides, one occasionally sprinting, darting in from one side or the other, forcing her to turn.

Again and again, when she sought to remain between hills, on level land, the creatures somehow managed to drive her up' slope. And she began to tire.

The pressure never relented. Into her thoughts, amidst the burgeoning pain in her legs, the fire in her chest and the dry, sharp agony of her throat, came the horrifying realization that escape was impossible. That she was going to die. Pulled down like any other animal doomed to become a victim of the wolves' hunger.

For them, she knew, the sea of her mind, whipped now to a frenzied storm of panic and despair, meant nothing. They were hunters, and what resided within the soul of their quarry had no relevance. As with the antelope, the bhederin calf, the ranag, grace and wonder, promise and potential – reduced one and all to meat.

Life's final lesson, the only truthful one buried beneath a layered skein of delusions.

Sooner or later, she now understood, we are all naught but food. Wolves or worms, the end abrupt or lingering, it mattered not in the least.

Whimpering, half blind, she staggered up yet another hillside. They were closer. She could hear their paws crunching through wind-dried lichen and moss. To her right, to her left, closing, edging slightly ahead.

Crying out, the Mhybe stumbled, fell face first onto the rocky . summit. She closed her eyes, waited for the first explosion of pain as teeth ripped into her flesh.

The wolves circled. She listened to them. Circled, then began spiralling in, closer, closer.

A hot breath gusted against the back of her neck.

The Mhybe screamed.

And awoke. Above her, a fading blue sky, a passing hawk. Haze of dust from the herd, drifting. In the air, distant voices and, much closer, the ragged, rattling sound of her own breathing.

The wagon had stopped moving. The army was settling in for the night.

She lay huddled, motionless beneath the furs and hides. A pair of voices were murmuring nearby. She smelled the smoke of a dung cookfire, smelled a herbal, meaty broth – sage, a hint of goat. A third voice arrived, was greeted by the first two – all strangely indistinct, beyond her ability to identify. And not worth the effort. My watchers. My jailers.

The wagon creaked. Someone crouched beside her. 'Sleep should not leave you so exhausted.'

'No, Korlat, it should not. Please, now, let me end this myself—'

'No. Here, Coll has made a stew.'

'I've no teeth left with which to chew.'
'Just slivers of meat, easily swallowed. Mostly broth.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Nevertheless. Shall I help you sit up?'

'Hood take you, Korlat. You and the rest. Every one of you.'

'Here, I will help you.'

'Your good intentions are killing me. No, not killing. That's just it, isn't it—' She grunted, feebly trying to twist away from Korlat's hands as the Tiste Andii lifted her effortlessly into a sitting position. 'Torturing me. Your mercy. Which is anything but. No, look not at my face, Korlat.' She drew her hood tighter. 'Lest I grow avid for the pity in your eyes. Where is this bowl? I will eat. Leave me.'

'I will sit with you, Mhybe,' Korlat replied. 'There are two bowls, after all.'

The Rhivi woman stared down at her own wrinkled, pocked, skeletal hands, then at the bowl clutched between them, the watery broth with its slivers of wine-stained meat. 'See this? The butcher of the goat. The slayer. Did he or she pause at the desperate cries of the animal? Look into its pleading eyes? Hesitate with the knife? In my dreams, I am as that goat. This is what you curse me to.'

'The slaughterer of the goat was Rhivi,' Korlat said after a moment. 'You and I know that ritual well, Mhybe. Propitiation. Calling upon the merciful spirit whose embrace is necessity. You and I both know how that spirit comes upon the goat, or indeed any such creature whose body shall feed your people, whose skin shall clothe you. And so the beast does not cry out, does not plead. I have witnessed ... and wondered, for it is indeed a remarkable thing. Unique to the Rhivi, not in its intent, but in its obvious efficacy. It is as if the ritual's arriving spirit shows the beast a better future – something beyond the life it's known to that point—'

'Lies,' the Mhybe murmured. 'The spirit deceives the poor creature. To make the slaying easier.'

Korlat fell silent.

The Mhybe raised the bowl to her lips.

'Perhaps, even then,' the Tiste Andii resumed, 'the deception is a gift... of mercy.'

'There is no such thing,' the Mhybe snapped. 'Words to comfort the killer and his kin and naught else. Dead is dead, as the Bridgeburners are wont to say. Those soldiers know the truth of it. Children of the Malazan Empire hold no illusions. They are not easily charmed.'

'You seem to know much of them.'

'Two marines come to visit occasionally. They've taken it upon themselves to guard my daughter. And to tell me of her, since no-one else has a mind to, and I cherish them for that.'

'I did not know this ...'

'Yes alarms you? Have terrible secrets been revealed to me? Will you now put a stop to it?'

A hand closed on her shoulder. 'I wish you would at least look upon my face, Mhybe. No, I will do no such thing. Nor am I aware of any dire secrets being kept from you. Indeed, I now wish to seek out these two marines, to thank them.'

'Leave them be, Korlat. They do not ask for thanks. They are simple soldiers, two women of the Empire. Through them, I know that Kruppe visits Silverfox regularly. He's taken on the role of kindly uncle, perhaps. Such a strange man, endearing despite the terrible curse he has laid upon me.'

'Curse? Oh. Mhybe, of all that I have seen of Kruppe, I can tell you, he is not one to curse anyone. I do not believe he ever imagined what the rebirthing of Tattersail would mean to you.'
'So very true, that. I understand it well, you see. He was called upon by the Elder God – who either chose to become involved or was so already. An abomination had been created, as Kallor has called it, and it was an abomination in fact. The withered corpse of Nightchill, Tattersail's soul trapped within it, the apparition webbed by T'lan Imass sorcery. A nightmare creation. The Elder God sought to save it, somehow, in some form, and for that it seemed he needed Kruppe. Thus. The Daru did all he could, believing it to be a mercy. But make no mistake, now, Korlat. Kruppe and his Elder God have decided to make use of the child they fashioned. Opportunistic or deliberate from the start? Does it matter? And lo, Kruppe now walks with Silverfox. Do they conspire? Am I blind ...'

'Conspire? To what end, Mhybe?'

'You don't know? I find that hard to believe.'

'Clearly, you have concluded we are all conspiring ... against you.'

'Aren't you?' With all the strength she could muster, the Mhybe flung the bowl away, heard it splash, bounce off something, heard a shout of surprise from Murillio, who – it seemed – had the misfortune to be in its path of flight. 'Guard me!' she hissed. 'Feed me! Watch me so I don't take my own life! And this is not a conspiracy? And my daughter – my own daughter – does she visit? No! When have I last seen her face? When? I can barely remember the time!'

The hand tightened on her shoulder. Korlat's voice, when she spoke, was low yet taut. 'I hear you, my friend. I shall discover the truth, and then I shall tell you. This I promise, Mhybe.'

'Then tell me, what has happened? Earlier today. I felt ... something. An event. Coll and Murillio spoke of a scene between Kruppe and Brood. Tell me, where was Silverfox in all this?'

'She was there,' Korlat replied. 'She joined me as I rode forward in answer to Whiskeyjack's summons. I will be honest, Mhybe. Something indeed did occur, before the clash between Brood and Kruppe. Your daughter has found ... protectors, but she will not extend that protection to you – for some reason she believes you are in danger, now. I do not know the source.'

Yet I do. Oh, Korlat, your friendship for me has blinded you. I am in danger indeed. From myself. Protectors. Who? What?'

Korlat drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. 'Silverfox asked that I say nothing to you of them. I could not understand why, yet I acquiesced. I realize now that to do so was wrong. Wrong to you, Mhybe. A conspiracy, and I shall not be party to it. Your daughter's protectors were wolves. Ancient, giant beasts—'

Terror ripped through the Mhybe. Snarling, she flung a hand at Korlat's face, felt her nails tear through skin. 'My hunters!' she screamed as the Tiste Andii flinched away. 'They want to kill me! My daughter—' My daughter! Plaguing my dreams! Spirits below, she wants to kill me!

Coll and Murillio had leapt onto the wagon, were shouting in alarm even as Korlat hissed at them to calm down, but the Mhybe ceased hearing them, ceased seeing anything of the world surrounding her at that moment. She continued thrashing, nails clawing the air, betrayal searing through her chest, turning her heart into ashes. My daughter! My daughter!

And my voice, it whimpers.

And my eyes, they plead.

And that knife is in her hands, and in her gaze there is naught but cold, cold intent.

Whiskeyjack's half-smile vanished when he turned upon Korlat's arrival, to see that her eyes were as white hot iron, to see as she stalked through the tent's entrance four parallel slashes on her right cheek, wet with blood that had run down to the line of her jaw and now dripped onto the rushes covering the floor.

The Malazan almost stepped back as the Tiste Andii strode towards him. 'Korlat, what has happened?'
‘Hear my words, lover,’ the woman grated in an icy voice. ‘Whatever secrets you have withheld from me – about Tattersail reborn, about those damned T’lan Ay, about what you’ve instructed those two marines guarding the child to say to the Mhybe – you will tell me. Now.’

He felt himself grow cold, felt his face twitch at the full thrust of her fury. ‘Instructions?’ he asked quietly. ‘I have given them no instructions. Not even to guard Silverfox. What they’ve done has been their own decision. What they might have said, that it should lead to this – well, I shall accept responsibility for that, for I am their commander. And I assure you, if punishment is required—’

‘Stop. A moment, please.’ Something had settled within her, and now she trembled.

Whiskeyjack thought to take her in his arms, but held back. She needed comfort, he sensed, but his instincts told him she was not yet ready to receive it. He glanced around, found a relatively clean hand-cloth, soaked it in a basin, then held it out to her.

She had watched in silence, the shade of her eyes deepening to slate grey, but she made no effort to accept the cloth.

He slowly lowered his hand.

‘Why,’ Korlat asked, ‘did Silverfox insist that her mother not learn of the T’lan Ay?’

‘I have no idea, Korlat, beyond the explanation she voiced. At the time, I thought you knew.’

‘You thought I knew.’

He nodded.

‘You thought that I had been keeping from you ... a secret. Something to do with Silverfox and her mother ...’

Whiskeyjack shrugged.

‘Were you planning to confront me?’

‘No.’

Her eyes widened on him. Silence stretched, then, ‘For Hood’s sake, clean my wounds.’

Relieved, he stepped closer and began, with the gentlest of touches, to daub her cuts. ‘Who struck you?’ he asked quietly.

‘The Mhybe. I think I have just made a dreadful mistake, for all my good intentions ...’

‘That’s often the case,’ he murmured, ‘with good intentions.’

Korlat’s gaze narrowed searchingly. ‘Pragmatic Malazans. Clear-eyed indeed. Why do we keep thinking of you as just soldiers? Brood, Rake, Kallor ... myself, we all look upon you and Dujek and your army as something ... ancillary. A sword we hope to grasp in our hands when the need arrives. It seems now that we’re all fools. In fact, not one of us has come to realize the truth of how things now stand.’

He frowned. ‘And how do they now stand?’

‘You have become our backbone. Somehow, you are what gives us our strength, holds us together. Oh, I know you possess secrets, Whiskeyjack—’

He smiled wryly. ‘Not as many as you seem to think. I will tell you the biggest one. It’s this. We feel outmatched. By you – by Rake, by Caladan Brood, by Kallor. By the Tiste Andii army and that of the Rhivi and the Barghast. Hood, even that mob of mercenaries accompanying you makes us nervous. We don’t have your power. We’re just an army. Our best wizard isn’t even ranked. He’s a squad mage, and right now he’s very far away and, I suspect, feeling like a fly in a web. So, come the battles, we know we’ll be the spear’s head, and it’s going to cost us dear. As for the Seer himself, and whatever hides behind him, well, we’re now hoping you’ll
deal with that. Same goes for the Crippled God. You're right, Korlat, we're just soldiers. Tired ones, at that. If we're this combined army's backbone, then Hood help us, it's a bowed, brittle one.'

She reached up and laid her hand over his, pressed it against her cheek. Their eyes locked. 'Bowed and brittle? I think not.'

Whiskeyjack shook his head. 'I'm not being modest, Korlat. I speak the truth, though I fear you're not prepared to hear it.'

'Silverfox is manipulating her mother,' the Tiste Andii said after a moment. 'Somehow. Possibly even being responsible for the old woman's terrible nightmares.'

'I find that hard to countenance—'

'Not something Tattersail would do, right? But what of this Nightchill? Or the Thelomen? You knew them, Whiskeyjack. Better than any of us, at least. Is it possible that one of them – or both – are responsible for this?'

He said nothing while he completed wiping clean the wounds on her cheek. 'This will require a healer's touch, Korlat, lest infection—'

'Whiskeyjack.'

He sighed, stepped back. 'Nightchill, I fear, might well harbour feelings of betrayal. Her targets for vengeance could be chosen indiscriminately. Same for Bellurdan Skullcrusher. Both were betrayed, after all. If you are right, about what's happening to the Mhybe – that they're doing something to her – then I still think that Tattersail would be resisting them.'

'What if she's already lost the struggle?'

'I've seen no sign of—'

Korlat's eyes flashed and she jabbed a finger against his chest. 'Meaning your two marines have reported no sign of it!'

He grimaced. 'They are volunteers none the less, Korlat. Given the alarming extent of our ignorance in these matters, it pays to be watchful. Those two marines chose to guard Silverfox because they see in her Tattersail; Not just physically, but in the woman's personality as well. If anything had gone awry, they would've noticed it, and they would've come to me. Fast.'

Korlat lowered her hand. She sighed. 'And here I've come storming in to tear your head from your shoulders. Damn you, Whiskeyjack, how did I come to deserve you? And, the Abyss take me, why are you still here? After all my accusations ...'

'A few hours ago, Dujek made a similar entrance.' He grinned. 'It's just been that kind of day, I suppose. Now, we should call for a healer—'

'In a moment.' She studied him. 'Whiskeyjack. You've truly no idea of how rare a man you are, do you?'

'Rare?' His grin broadened. 'Of course I know. There's only one of me, thank Hood.'

'That's not what I meant.'

He moved closer and drew an arm about her waist. 'Time to find a healer, woman. I've got simple needs, and we're wasting time.'

'A soldier's reply,' she said. 'I'm not fooled, you know.'

Unseen by her, he closed his eyes. *Oh, but you are, Korlat. If you'd known the full extent of my fear... that I might lose you...*
Arms waving expansively, Kruppe, Eel of Darujhistan, occasional fence and thief, Defier of Caladan Brood the Warlord, ambled his way down the main avenue of tents towards the supply wagons. He had just come from the cook tent of the Mott Irregulars, and in each hand was a Nathi black-cake, dripping with syrup. A few paces in his wake, his mule kept pace, nose stretched out to those two cakes, ears pricked forward.

The second bell since midnight had just tolled through the camps, stirring the distant herds of bhederin to a mournful lowing, which faded as the beasts slipped back into slumber. As he reached the edge of the wagons – arranged rectangularly to form a wheeled fort – he noted two Malazan marines, cloaks wrapped about their bodies, sitting before a small dung-fire.

Kruppe altered his course and approached. 'Gentle friends,' he softly called. 'Tis late and no doubt your pretty selves are due for some sweetness.'

The two women glanced up. 'Huh,' one of them grunted. 'It's that fat Daru.'

'And his mule, hovering there in the shadows.'

'Unique indeed is Kruppe! Behold!' He thrust forward the dripping cakes. 'For you, darlings.'

'So which should we eat, the cakes or your hands?'

The other drew her knife at her companion's words. 'A couple of quick cuts and we can choose for ourselves, right?'

Kruppe stepped back. 'Queen of Dreams! Hard-bitten and distinctly unfeminine! Guardians of fair Silverfox, yes? Reassuring truth. Heart of Tattersail, shining so bright from the child-now-woman—'

'Aye, we seen you before plenty enough. Chatting with the lass. She's the sorceress, all right. Plain to see for them of us who knew her.'

'Extraordinary disconnectiveness, this exchange. Kruppe is delighted—'

'We getting them syrup cakes or what?'

'Naturally, though the flash of that blade still blinds generous Kruppe.'

'Y'ain't got no sense of humour, have ya? Join us, if you dare.'

The Daru smiled and strode forward. 'Nathi black-cakes, my dears.'

'We recognize 'em. The Mott Irregulars used to throw them at us when they ran out of arrows.'

'Jaybar got one full in the face, as I recall.'

'That he did, then he stumbled and when he came up he was like the forest floor with eyes.'

'Dreadful sap, deadly weapon,' Kruppe agreed, once more offering the cakes to the two marines.

They took them.

'Courageous task, protection of the Rhivi lass.'

'She ain't no Rhivi lass. She's Tattersail. That fur and the hides are just for show.'

'Ah, then you have spoken with her.'

'Not much and we don't need to. These cakes go down better without all the twigs and leaves, don't they just.'

Kruppe blinked, then slowly nodded. 'No doubt. Vast responsibility, being the eyes of your commander regarding said lass.'

Both women paused in their chewing. They exchanged a glance, then one of them swallowed and said, 'Who,
Dujek? If we're his eyes then he's blind as a mole.'

'Ah, Kruppe meant Whiskeyjack, of course.'

'Whiskeyjack ain't blind and he don't need us to see for him, either.'

'None the less,' the Daru smiled, 'he no doubt is greatly comforted by your self-appointed task and reports and such. Were Kruppe Whiskeyjack, he knows he would.'

'Would what?'

'Why, be comforted, of course.'

Both women grunted, then one snorted and said, 'That's a good one. If you were Whiskeyjack. Hah.'

'A figure of speech—'

'Ain't no such thing, fatty. You trying to walk in Whiskeyjack's footsteps? Trying to see through his eyes? Hah.'

'I'll say,' the other woman agreed. 'Hah.'

'And so you did,' Kruppe noted.

'Did what?'

'Agree.'

'Damned right. Whiskeyjack should've been Emperor, when the old one got knocked off. Not Laseen. But she knew who her rival was, didn't she just. That's why she stripped him of rank, turned him into a Hood-damned sergeant and sent him away, far away.'

'An ambitious man, this Whiskeyjack, then.'

'Not in the least, Daru. And that's the whole point. Would've made a good Emperor, I said. Not wanting the job is the best and only qualification worth considering.'

'A curious assertion, dear.'

'I ain't.'

'Pardon, you ain't what?'

'Curious. Listen, the Malazan Empire would be a far different thing if Whiskeyjack had taken the throne all those years ago. If he'd done what we all wanted him to do and grabbed Laseen by the scruff of the neck and sent her through a tower window.'

'And was he capable of such a remarkable feat?'

The two marines looked confused. One turned to her companion. 'Seen him out of his boots?'

The other shook her head. 'No. Still, they might be remarkable. Why not?'

'Then it'd be a boot to the backside, but I said by the scruff of the neck.'

'Well, feet that could do that would be remarkable, wouldn't they?'

'You got a point, friend.'

'Ahem,' Kruppe interrupted. 'A remarkable feat, dears. As in achievement.'

'Oh.'
'Oh yeah, right. Got it. So you're asking could he have done it if he'd a mind to? Sure. Not good to cross Whiskeyjack, and if that's not enough, he's got wits.'

'So, why then, Kruppe asks in wonder, did he not do so at the time?'

'Because he's a soldier, you idiot. Laseen's taking the throne was messy enough. The whole empire was shaky. People start stabbing and jumping into a blood-wet throne and sometimes it don't stop, sometimes it's like dominoes, right? One after another after another, and the whole thing falls apart. He was the one we all looked to, right? Waiting to see how he'd take it, Laseen and all that. And when he just saluted and said, "Yes, Empress," well, things just settled back down.'

'He was giving her a chance, you see.'

'Of course. And do you lasses now believe he made a mistake?'

The women shrugged in unison. 'Don't matter, now,' one said. 'We're here and here's here and that's that.'

'So be it and so be it,' Kruppe said, rising with a sigh. 'Wondrous conversation. Kruppe thanks you and will now take his leave.'

'Right. Thanks for the cakes.'

'Kruppe's pleasure. Good night, dears.'

He ambled off, back towards the supply wagons.

As he disappeared into the gloom the two marines said nothing for a time, busy as they were licking the sap from their fingers.

Then one sighed.

The other followed suit.

'Well?'

'Ah, that was damned easy.'

'Think so?'

'Sure. He came expecting to find two brains and found barely one.'

'Stil, it might've babbled too much.'

'That's the nature of half-brains, love. T'do otherwise would've made him suspicious.'

'What do you figure he and Tattersail talk about, anyway?'

'The old woman, is my guess.'

'I'd figured the same.'

'They got something in the works.'

'My suspicions exactly.'

'And Tattersail's in charge.'

'So she is.'

'Which is good enough for me.'

'Same here. You know, that black-cake wasn't quite the same without the twigs and leaves.'
'That's odd, I was just thinking the same thing ...'

Within the wheeled fort, Kruppe approached another campfire. The two men huddled around it looked up as he arrived.

'What's with your hands?' Murillio asked.

'All that Kruppe touches sticks to him, my friend.'

'Well,' Coll rumbled, 'we've known that for years.'

'And what's with that damned mule?' Murillio enquired.

'The beast haunts me in truth, but never mind that. Kruppe has had an interesting discourse with two marines. And he is pleased to inform that the lass Silverfox is in capable hands indeed.'

'Sticker as yours?'

'They are now, dear Murillio, they are now.'

'What you say is fine enough,' Coll said, 'but is it any help to us? There's an old woman sleeping in yon wagon whose broken heart is the least of her pains and it's bad enough to break the strongest man, let alone a frail ancient.'

'Kruppe is pleased to assure you that matters of vast mercy are in progress. Momentary appearances are to be discounted.'

'Then why not tell her that?' Coll growled, nodding towards the Mhybe's wagon.

'Ah, but she is not yet ready to receive such truths, alas. This is a journey of the spirit. She must begin it within herself. Kruppe and Silverfox can only do so much, despite our apparent omnipotence.'

'Omnipotence, is it?' Coll shook his head. 'Yesterday, and I'd laugh at that claim. So you faced down Caladan Brood, did you? I'm interested in precisely how you managed that, you damned toad.'

Kruppe's brows rose. 'Dear boon companion Coll! Your lack of faith crushes frail Kruppe to his very toes which are themselves wriggling in anguish!'

'For Hood's sake don't show us,' Murillio said. 'You've been wearing those slippers for as long as I've known you, Kruppe. Poleil herself would balk at what might lurk likely between them.'

'And well she should! To answer Coll with succinct precision, Kruppe proclaims that anger – nay, rage – has no efficacy against one such as himself, for whom the world is as a pearl nestled within the slimy confines of his honed and muscled brain. Uh, perhaps the allusion falters with second thought ... and worse with third. Kruppe tries again! For whom, it was said, the world is naught but a plumaged dream of colours and wonders unimagined, where even time itself has lost meaning, speaking of which, it's very late, yes? Sleep beckons, the stream of calm transubstantiation that metamorphoses oblivion into reparation and rejuvenation, and that alone is wonder enough for one and all to close this fitful night!' He fluttered his hands in a final wave and walked off. After a moment, the mule trotted in his wake.

The two men stared after them.

'Would that Brood's hammer connected with that oily pate,' Coll rumbled after a moment.

'It'd likely slip,' Murillio said.

'Aye, true enough.'

'Mussels and brains and cheesy toes, by the Abyss, I think I'm going to be sick.'
High above the camp, Crone crooked her weary, leaden wings and spiralled down towards the warlord's tent. Despite her exhaustion, shivers of excitement and curiosity ran through her. The fissure to the north of the encampment still bled Burn's fouled blood. The Great Raven had felt that detonation when still over the Vision Mountains far to the southeast, and had instantly known it for what it was.

Caladan Brood's anger.

Kiss of the hammer, and with it an explosive reshaping of the natural world. She could see despite the darkness, and the sharply defined spine of a basaltic mountain range loomed where no mountains belonged, here at the heart of the Catlin plain. And the sorcery emanating from the blood of the Sleeping Goddess – it, too, Crone recognized.

The touch of the Crippled God. Within Burn's veins, a transformation was taking place. The Fallen One was making her blood his own. And that is a taste I know well, for it was as mother's milk to me, so very long ago. To me, and to my kin.

Changes had come to the world below, and Crone revelled in changes. Her soul and that of her kin had been stirred once more to acute wakefulness. She never felt more alive.

Slipping beneath the warm thermals, she descended, bobbing on pockets of cool air – echoes of the traumatic disturbance that had churned through the atmosphere at the eruption of Brood's fury – then sliding down to land with a soft thump on the earth before the warlord's tent.

No lights showed within.

Faintly cackling, Crone hopped beneath the half-hitched entrance flap.

'Not a word,' Brood rumbled from the darkness, 'about my temper's snapped leash.'

The Great Raven cocked her head towards the cot. The warlord was seated on its edge, head in his hands. 'As you wish,' Crone murmured.

'Make your report.'

'I shall. First, from Anomander Rake. He has succeeded. Moon's Spawn has passed unseen and now ... hides. My children are ranging far over the lands of the Pannion Seer. Warlord, not just their eyes have witnessed the truth of all that lies below. I myself have seen—'

'Save those details for later. Moon's Spawn is in place. Good. Did you fly to Capustan as I requested?'

'I did, grave one. And was witness to the first day and first night of battle.'

'Your assessment, Crone?'

'The city will not hold, Warlord. Through no fault of the defenders. What opposes them is too vast.'

Brood grunted. 'Perhaps we should have reconsidered Dujek's disposition of the Black Moranth—'

'Ah, they too are emplaced, precisely where Onearm wanted them to be.' Crone hesitated, turning first one eye then the other towards Caladan Brood. 'One unusual detail must be uttered now, Warlord. Will you hear it?'

'Very well.'

'The Seer wages a war to the south.'

Brood's head snapped up.

'Aye,' Crone nodded. 'My children have seen Domin armies, routed and retreating north. To Outlook itself. The Seer has unleashed formidable sorceries against the unknown enemy. Rivers of ice, walls of ice. Blistering cold, winds and storms – it has been a long time since we have witnessed said particular warren unveiled.'
'Omtose Phellack. The warren of the Jaghut.'

'Even so. Warlord, you seem less surprised by that than I had anticipated.'

'Of a war to the south, I am indeed surprised, Crone.' He rose, drawing a fur blanket about his shoulders, and began pacing. 'Of Omtose Phellack ... no, I am not surprised.'

'Thus. The Seer is not as he seems.'

'Evidently not. Rake and I had suspicions...'

'Well,' Crone snapped, 'had I known them I would have more closely examined the situation at Outlook. Your recalcitrance wounds us all.'

'We'd no proof, Crone. Besides, we value your feathered hide too highly to risk your close approach to an unknown enemy's fastness. It is done. Tell me, does the Seer remain in Outlook?'

'My kin were unable to determine that. There are condors in the area, and they did not appreciate our presence.'

'Why should mundane birds cause you trouble?'

'Not entirely mundane. Aye, mortal birds are little more than feathered lizards, but these particular condors were more lizard than most.'

'The Seer's own eyes?'

'Possibly.'

'That could prove troublesome.'

Crone shrugged with her wings half crooked. 'Have you some slivers of meat? I hunger.'

'There's leftover goat from supper in the refuse pit behind the tent.'

'What? You would have me eat from a refuse pit V

'You're a damned raven, Crone, why not?'

'Outrage! But if that's all there is...'

'It is.'

Clucking to contain her fury, Crone hopped towards the tent's back wall. 'Take me as an example in the future,' she murmured as she began edging her way under the fabric.

'What do you mean?' Brood asked behind her.

She ducked her head back inside, opened her beak in a silent laugh, then replied, 'Did I lose my temper?'

Growling, he stepped towards her.

The Great Raven squawked and fled.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The First Child of the Dead Seed
dreams of a father's dying breath
and hears in eternal refrain
the scream trapped in his lungs –
Dare you step behind his eyes
even for a moment?

The First Child of the Dead Seed
leads an army of sorrow
down hunger's bone-picked road
where a mother dances and sings –
Dare you walk in his steps
and dearly hold her hand?

The First Child of the Dead Seed
is sheathed in the clutter of failed armour
defending him from the moment of birth
through years of dire schooling –
Do not dare judge him hard
lest you wear his skin.

Silba of the Shattered Heart
K'alass

The Tenescowri rose like an inexorable flood against every wall of the city. Rose, then swept over, a mass of humanity driven mad by hunger. Gate barricades buckled to the pressure, then gave way.

And Capustan drowned.

Four hundred paces from the barracks, Itkovian wheeled his blood-spattered mount. Figures reached up from below, clawed along the horse's armoured limbs. The beast, in cold fury, stamped down repeatedly, crushing bones, caving in chests and heads.

Three Manes of Grey Swords surrounded the Shield Anvil where they had been cut off from the barracks atop the gentle hill that was the cemetery of pillars. Most of those upright coffins had been toppled, shattering to spill their mouldy, cloth-wrapped contents, now jumbled among their cousins in death.

Itkovian could see the barracks gate, against which bodies were piled high – high enough to climb, which is what scores of Tenescowri were doing, clambering up towards the flanking revetments only to be met by the serrated blades of long-handled pikes. Pikes that killed, that wounded peasants who made no effort to defend themselves, that whipped back and forth trailing banners of blood and gore.

Itkovian had never witnessed such a horrifying sight. For all his battles, for all the terrors of combat and all that a soldier could not help but see, the vision before him swept all else from his mind.

As peasants fell back, tumbled their way down the slope of corpses, women leapt at the men among them, tore at their clothing, pinned them in place with straddled legs and, amidst blood, amidst shrieks and clawing fingers, they raped them.

Along the edges of the dead and dying, others fed on their kin.

Twin nightmares. The Shield Anvil was unable to decide which of the two shook him the most. His blood flowed glacial cold in his veins, and he knew, with dread verging on panic, that the assault had but just begun.
Another wave surged to close with the hapless band of Grey Swords in the cemetery. To all sides, the wide avenues and streets were packed solid with frenzied Tenescowri. All eyes were fixed on Itkovian and his soldiers. Hands reached out towards them, no matter what the distance, and hungrily clawed the air.

Locking shields, the Grey Swords reformed their tattered square surrounding the Shield Anvil. It would be swallowed, Itkovian well knew, as it had been only moments earlier, yet, if his silent soldiers could do as they had done once before, the square would rise again from the sea of bodies, cutting its way clear, flinging the enemy back, clambering atop a newly made hill of flesh and bone. And, if Itkovian could remain on his horse, he would sweep his sword down on all sides, killing all who came within his reach – and those whom he wounded would then die beneath his mount's iron-clad hooves.

He had never before delivered such slaughter, and it sickened him, filled his heart with an overwhelming hatred – for the Seer. To have done such a thing to his own people. And for Septarch Kulpath, for his bloodless cruelty in sending these hapless peasants into the maw of a desperate army.

Even more galling, the tactic looked likely to succeed. Yet at a cost beyond comprehension.

With a roar, the Tenescowri attacked.

The first to reach the bristling square were cut to pieces. Reeling, shrieking, they were pulled back by their comrades, into a devouring midst that was even more vicious than the enemy they'd faced when in the front line. Others pushed ahead, to suffer an identical fate. Yet still more came, climbing the backs of the ones before them, now, whilst others clambered over their own shoulders. For the briefest of moments, Itkovian stared at a three-tiered wall of savage humanity, then it collapsed inward, burying the Grey Swords.

The square buckled beneath the weight. Weapons were snagged. Shields were pulled down, helms ripped from heads, and everywhere the Shield Anvil looked, there was blood.

Figures scrambled over the heaving surface. Cleavers and hatchets and knives swung down in passing, but Itkovian was their final target, as he knew he would be. The Shield Anvil readied his broadsword and shield. A slight shift in the pressure of his legs began turning his mount into a ceaseless spin. The beast's head tossed, then ducked low to defend its throat. The armour covering its brow, neck and chest was already smeared and dented. Hooves stamped, eager to find living flesh.

The first peasant came within range. Itkovian swung his sword, watched a head spin away from its body, watched as the body shivered and twitched before crumpling. His horse lashed out its hind hooves, connecting with crunching thumps, then the animal righted itself and reared, iron-shod front hooves kicking and clawing, dragging a screaming woman down. Another Tenescowri leapt to grab one of the horse's front legs. Itkovian leaned forward and drove his sword against the man's lower back, cutting deep enough to sever his spine.

His horse spun, the leg flinging the corpse away. Head snapped forward, teeth cracking down on a peasant's hair-matted pate, punching through bone to pull back with a mouthful of hair and skull.

Hands clawed against Itkovian's thigh on his shield side. He twisted, swung down across his mount's withers. The blade chopped through muscle and clavicle. Blood and meat reeled away.

His horse kicked again. Bit and stamped and whirled, but hands and pressure and weight were on all sides now. Itkovian's sword flashed, whipped blindly yet never failed to find a target. Someone climbed up onto the horse's rump behind him. He arched his back, gauntleted hand swinging up over his own head, point driving downward behind him. He felt the edge slice its way through skin and flesh, skitter along ribs, then punch down into lower belly.

A flood of bile and blood slicked the back of his saddle. The figure slid away.

He snapped a command and the horse ducked its head. Itkovian swung his weapon in a sweeping, horizontal slash. Cutting, glancing contact stuttered its entire path. His mount pivoted and the Shield Anvil reversed the slash. Spun again, and Itkovian whipped the sword again.

Man and beast turned in a full circle in this fashion, a circle delivering dreadful wounds. Through the
blistering heat beneath his visored helm, Itkovian gained a fragmented collection of the scene on all sides.

There would be no rising from his Grey Swords. Not this time. Indeed, he could not see a single familiar surcoat. The Tenescowri closed on the Shield Anvil from all sides, a man's height's worth of bodies under their feet. And somewhere beneath that heaving surface, were Itkovian's soldiers. Buried alive, buried dying, buried dead.

He and his horse were all that remained, the focus of hundreds upon hundreds of avid, desperate eyes. Captured pikes were being passed forward to those peasants nearest him. In moments, those long-handled weapons would begin jabbing in on all sides. Against this, neither Itkovian's nor his horse's armour would be sufficient.

_Twin Tusks, I am yours. To this, the last moment._

'Break!'

His warhorse was waiting for that command. The beast surged forward. Hooves, chest and shoulders battered through the press. Itkovian carved his blade down on both sides. Figures reeled, parted, disappeared beneath the churning hooves. Pikes slashed out at him, skittered along armour and shield. The ones to his right he batted aside with his sword.

Something punched into the small of his back, snapping the links of his chain, twisting and gouging through leather and felt padding. Agony lanced through Itkovian as the jagged point drove through skin and grated against his lowest rib close to the spine.

At the same moment his horse screamed as it stumbled onto the point of another pike, the iron head plunging deep into the right side of its chest. The animal lurched to the left, staggering, head dipping, jaws snapping at the shaft.

Someone leapt onto Itkovian's shield, swung over it a woodsman's hatchet. The wedged blade buried itself deep between his left shoulder and neck, where it jammed.

The Shield Anvil jabbed the point of his sword into the peasant's face. The blade carved into one cheek, exited out through the other. Itkovian twisted the blade, his own visored face inches from his victim's as his sword destroyed her youthful visage. Gurgling, she toppled back.

He could feel the weight of the pike, its head still buried in his back, heard it clatter along his horse's rump-armour as the beast slewed and pitched.

A fishmonger's knife found the unprotected underside of his left knee, searing up into the joint. Itkovian chopped weakly down with the lower edge of his shield, barely sufficient to push the attacker away. The thin blade snapped, the six inches remaining in his knee grinding and slicing through tendon and cartilage. Blood filled the space between his calf and the felt padding sheathing it.

The Shield Anvil felt no pain. Brutal clarity commanded his thoughts. His god was with him, now, at this final moment. With him, and with the brave, indomitable warhorse beneath him.

The beast's sideways lumber ceased as the animal – pike plucked free – righted itself despite the blood that now gushed down its chest. The animal leapt forward, crushing bodies under it, kicked and clawed and clambered its way towards what seemed – impossibly to Itkovian's eyes – a cleared avenue, a place where only motionless bodies awaited.

The Shield Anvil, comprehending at last what he was seeing, renewed his efforts. The enemy was melting away, on all sides. Screams and the clash of iron echoed wildly in Itkovian's helmet.

A moment later and the horse stumbled clear, hooves lashing out as it reared – not in rage this time, but in triumph.

Pain arrived as Itkovian sagged onto the animal's armoured neck. Pain like nothing he had known before.
The pike remained embedded in his back, the broken knife-blade in the heart of his left knee, the hatchet buried in the shattered remains of his collar bone. Jaws clenched, he managed to quell his mount's pitching about, succeeded in pivoting the animal round, to face, once more, the cemetery.

Disbelieving, he saw his Grey Swords carving their way free of the bodies that had buried them, rising as if from a barrow of corpses, silent as ghosts, their movements jerky as if they were clawing their way awake after a horrifying nightmare. Only a dozen were visible, yet that was twelve more than the Shield Anvil had thought possible.

Boots thumped up to Itkovian. Blinking gritty sweat from his eyes, he tried to focus on the figures closing in around him.

Grey Swords. Battered and stained surcoats, the young, pale faces of Capan recruits.

Then, on a horse to match Itkovian's own, the Mortal Sword. Brukhalian, black-armoured, his black hair a wild, blood-matted mane, Fener's holy sword in one huge, gauntleted hand.

He'd raised his visor. Dark eyes were fixed on the Shield Anvil.

'Apologies, sir,' Brukhalian rumbled as he drew rein beside him. 'For our tardiness.'

Behind the Mortal Sword, Itkovian now saw Karnadas, hurrying forward. His face, drawn and pale as a corpse's, was nevertheless beautiful to the Shield Anvil's eyes.

'Destriant!' he gasped, weaving on his saddle. 'My horse, sir ... my soldiers ...'

'Fener is with me, sir,' Karnadas replied in a trembling voice. 'And so shall I answer you.'

The world darkened then. Itkovian felt the sudden tug of hands beneath him, as if he had fallen into their embrace. Pondering that, his thoughts drifted – my horse . . . my soldiers – then closed into oblivion.

They battered down the flimsy shutters, pushed in through the rooms above the ground floor. They slithered through the tunnel of packed bodies that had once been stairwells. Gruntle's iron fangs were blunt, nicked and gouged. They had become ragged clubs in his hands. He commanded the main hallway and was slowly, methodically creating barricades of cooling flesh and broken bone.

No weariness weighed down his arms or dulled his acuity. His breathing remained steady, only slightly deeper than usual. His forearms showed a strange pattern of blood stains, barbed and striped, the blood blackening and seeming to seep into his skin. He was indifferent to it.

There were Seerdomin, scattered here and there within the human tide of Tenescowri. Probably pulled along without volition. Gruntle cut down peasants in order to close with them. It was his only desire. To close with them. To kill them. The rest was chaff, irritating, getting in the way. Impediments to what he wanted.

Had he seen his own face, he would barely recognize it. Blackened stripes spread away from his eyes and bearded cheeks. Tawny amber streaked the beard itself. His eyes were the colour of sun-withered prairie grass.

His militia was a hundred strong now, silent figures who were as extensions of his will. Un QUESTIONING, looking upon him with awe. Their faces shone when he settled his gaze on them. He did not wonder at that, either, did not realize that the illumination he saw was reflected, that they but mirrored the pale, yet strangely tropical emanation of his eyes.

Gruntle was satisfied. He was answering all that had been visited upon Stonny – she now fought alongside his second-in-command, that small, wiry Lestari soldier, holding the tenement block's rear stairwell. They'd met but once since withdrawing to this building hours earlier. And it had shaken him, jarred him in a deep place within himself, and it was as if he had been shocked awake – as if all this time his soul had been hunkered down within him, hidden, silent, whilst an unknown, implacable force now ruled his limbs, rode the blood that pumped through him. She was broken still, the bravado torn away to reveal a human visage, painfully vulnerable, profoundly wounded in its heart.
The recognition had triggered a resurgence of cold desire within Gruntle. She was the debt he had only begun to pay. And whatever had rattled her upon their meeting once more, well, no doubt she had somehow comprehended his desire's bared fangs and unsheathed claws. A reasonable reaction, only troubling insofar as it deserved to be.

The decrepit, ancient Daru tenement now housed a storm of death, whipping winds of rage, terror and agony twisting and churning through every hallway, in every room no matter how small. It flowed vicious and without surcease. It matched, in every detail, the world of Gruntle's mind, the world within the confines of his skull.

There existed no contradictions between the reality of the outer world and that of his inner landscape. This truth beggared comprehension. It could only be grasped instinctively, a visceral understanding glimpsed by less than a handful of Gruntle's followers, the Lestari lieutenant among them.

He knew he had entered a place devoid of sanity. Knew, somehow, that he and the rest of the militia now existed more within the mind of Gruntle than they did in the real world. They fought with skills they had never before possessed. They did not tire. They did not shout, scream, or even so much as bark commands or rallying cries. There was no need for rallying cries – no-one broke, no-one was routed. Those that died fell where they had stood, silent as automatons.

Hallways were chest deep in bodies on the ground floor. Some rooms could not even be entered. Blood ran through these presses like a crimson river running beneath the surface of the land, seeping amidst hidden gravel lenses, pockets of sand, buried boulders – seeped, here in this dread building, around bone and meat and armour and boots and sandals and weapons and helms. Reeking like a sewer, thick as the flow in a surgeon's trench.

The attackers finally staggered back, withdrew down almost-blocked stairwells, clawed out of the windows. Thousands more waited outside, but the retreat clogged the approaches. A moment of peace settled within the building.

Light-headed and weaving as he clambered his way up the main hallway, the Lestari lieutenant found Gruntle. His master's striped arms glistened, the blades of his cutlasses were yellowed white – fangs in truth, now – and he swung a savagely feline visage to the Lestari.

'We surrender this floor, now,' Gruntle said, shaking the blood from his blades.

The hacked remains of Seerdomin surrounded the caravan captain. Armoured warriors literally chopped to pieces.

The lieutenant nodded. 'We're out of room to manoeuvre.'

Gruntle shrugged his massive shoulders. 'We've two more floors above us. Then the roof.'

Their eyes locked for a long moment, and the lieutenant was both chilled and warmed by what he saw within the vertical slits of Gruntle's pupils. *A man to fear ... a man to follow ... a man to love.* 'You are Trake's Mortal Sword,' he said.

The huge Daru frowned. 'Stonny Menackis.'

'She bears but minor injuries, Captain, and has moved up to the next landing.'

'Good.'

Weighed down with sacks of food and drink, the militia was converging, the command to do so unspoken, as it had been unspoken every time the gathering occurred. More than twenty had fallen in this last engagement, the Lestari saw. *We lose this many with each floor. By the time we reach the roof there'll be but a score of us. Well, that should be more than enough, to hold a single trapdoor. Hold it until the Abyss of Final Night.*

The silent followers were collecting serviceable weapons, scraps of armour – mostly from the Seerdomin. The Lestari watched with dull eyes a Capan woman pick up a gauntleted hand, severed raggedly at the wrist by one of Gruntle's cutlasses, and calmly pull the hand from the scaled glove, which she then donned.
Gruntle stepped over bodies on his way to the stairwell.

It was time to retreat to the next level, time to take command of the outer-lying rooms with their feebly shuttered windows, and the back stairs and the central stairs. *Time to jam yet more souls down Hood's clogged, choking throat.*

At the stairs, Gruntle clashed his cutlasses.

Outside, a resurging tide of noise ...

Brukhalian sat astride his huge, lathered warhorse, watching as the Destriant's cutters dragged a barely breathing Itkovian into a nearby building that would serve, for the next bell or two, as a triage. Karnadas himself, drawing once more on his fevered Warren of Denul, had quelled the flow of blood from the chest of the Shield Anvil's horse.

The surviving Grey Swords at the cemetery were being helped clear by the Mortal Sword's own companies. There were wounds to be tended to there as well, but those that were fatal had already proved so. Corpses were being pulled away in a frantic search for more survivors.

The cutters carrying Itkovian now faced the task of removing buried iron from the Shield Anvil, weapons that had, by virtue of remaining embedded, in all likelihood saved the man's life. And Karnadas would be on hand for that surgery, to quench the blood that would gush from each wound as the iron was drawn free.

Brukhalian's flat, hard eyes followed the Destriant as the old man stumbled after his cutters. Karnadas had gone too far, pulled too much from his warren, too much and too often. His body had begun its irreversible surrender. Bruises marked the joints of his arms, the elbows, the wrists, the fingers. Within him, his veins and arteries were becoming as cheesecloth, and the seepage of blood into muscle and cavity would only grow more profound. Denul's flow was disintegrating all that it flowed through – the body of the priest himself.

He would be, Brukhalian knew, dead before dawn.

Yet, before then, Itkovian would be healed, brutally mended without regard to the mental trauma that accompanied all wounds. The Shield Anvil would assume command once again, but not as the man he had been.

The Mortal Sword was a hard man. The fate of his friends was a knowledge bereft of emotion. It was as it had to be.

He straightened on his saddle, scanned the area to gauge the situation. The attack upon the barracks had been repelled. The Tenescowri had broken on all sides, and none still standing remained within sight. This was not the case elsewhere, Brukhalian well knew. The Grey Swords had been virtually obliterated as an organized army. No doubt pockets of resistance remained, but they would be few and far between. To all intents and purposes, Capustan had fallen.

A mounted messenger approached from the northwest, horse leaping the mounds of bodies littering the avenue, slowing as it neared the Mortal Sword's companies.

Brukhalian gestured with his blade and the young Capan woman reined in before him.

'Sir!' she gasped. 'I bring word from Rath'Fener! A message, passed on to me by an acolyte!'

'Let us hear it, then, sir.'

'The Thrall is assailed! Rath'Fener invokes the Reve's Eighth Command. You are to ride with all in your company to his aid. Rath'Fener kneels before the hooves – you are to be the Twin Tusks of his and Fener's shadow!'

Brukhalian's eyes narrowed. 'Sir, this acolyte managed to leave the Thrall in order to convey his priest's holy invocation. Given the protective sorcery around the building, how was this managed?'
The young woman shook her head. 'I do not know, sir.'

'And your path across the city, to arrive here, was it contested?'

'None living stood before me, sir.'

'Can you explain that?'

'No, sir, I cannot. Fener's fortune, perhaps ...'

Brukhalian studied her a moment longer. 'Recruit, will you join us in our deliverance?'

She blinked, then slowly nodded. 'I would be honoured, Mortal Sword.'

His reply was a gruff, sorrowful whisper that only deepened her evident bewilderment, 'As would I, sir.' Brukhalian lowered the visor, swung to his followers. 'Eleventh Mane to remain with the Destriant and his cutters!' he commanded. 'Remaining companies, we march to the Thrall! Rath'Fener has invoked the Reve, and to this we must answer!' He then dismounted and handed the reins of his warhorse to the messenger. 'My mind has changed,' he rumbled. 'You are to remain here, sir, to guard my destrier. Also, to inform the Shield Anvil of my disposition once he awakens.'

'Your disposition, sir?'

'You will know it soon, recruit.' The Mortal Sword faced his troops once more. They stood in ranks, waiting, silent. Four hundred Grey Swords, perhaps the last left alive. 'Sirs,' Brukhalian asked them, 'are you in full readiness?'

A veteran officer grated, -Ready to try, Mortal Sword.'

'Your meaning?' the commander asked.

'We are to cross half the city, sir. We shall not make it.'

'You assume our path to the Thrall will be contested, Nilbanas. Yes?'

The old soldier frowned, said nothing.

Brukhalian reached for his shield, which had waited at his side in the hands of an aide. 'I shall lead us,' he said. 'Do you follow?'

Every soldier nodded, and the Mortal Sword saw in those half-visored faces the emergence of an awareness, a knowledge to which he had already arrived. There would be no return from the journey to come. Some currents, he knew, could not be fought.

Readying the large bronze-plated shield on his left arm, adjusting his grip on his holy sword, Brukhalian strode forward. His Grey Swords fell in behind him. He chose the most direct route, not slowing even as he set across open, corpse-strewn squares.

The murmuring rumble of humanity was on all sides. Isolated sounds of battle, the collapse of burning buildings and the roar of unchecked fires, streets knee-deep in bodies – scenes of Hood's infernal pit rolled past them as they marched, as of two unfurling tapestries woven by a mad, soul-tortured artisan.

Yet their journey was uncontested.

As they neared the aura-sheathed Thrall, the veteran increased his pace to come alongside Brukhalian. 'I heard the messenger's words, sir—'

'Of that I am aware, Nilbanas.'

'It cannot be really from Rath'Fener—'

'But it is, sir.'
'Then the priest betrays us!'

'Yes, old friend, he betrays us.'

'He has desecrated Fener's most secret Reve! By the Tusks, sir—'

'The words of the Reve are greater than he is, Nilbanas. They are Fener's own.'

'Yet he has twisted them malign, sir! We should not abide!'

'Rath'Fener's crime shall be answered, but not by us.'

'At the cost of our lives?'

'Without our deaths, sir, there would be no crime. Thus, no punishment to match.'

'Mortal Sword—'

'We are done, my friend. Now, in this manner, we choose the meaning of our deaths.'

'But... but what does he gain? Betraying his own god—'

'No doubt,' Brukhalian said with a private, grim smile, 'his own life. For a time. Should the Thrall's protective sorcery be sundered, should the Council of Masks be taken, he will be spared the horrors that await his fellow priests. He judges this a worthwhile exchange.'

The veteran was shaking his head. 'And so Fener allows his own words to assume the weight of betrayal. How noble his Bestial Mien when he finally corners Rath'Fener?'

'Our god shall not be the one to deliver the punishment, Nilbanas. You are right, he could not do so in fullest conscience, for this is a betrayal that wounds him deeply, leaves him weakened and vulnerable to fatal consequence, sir.'

'Then,' the man almost sobbed, 'then who shall be our vengeful hand, Brukhalian?'

If anything, the Mortal Sword's smile grew grimmer. 'Even now, the Shield Anvil no doubt regains consciousness. And is moments from hearing the messenger's report. Moments from true comprehension. Nilbanas, our vengeful hand shall be Itkovian's. What is your countenance now, old friend?'

The soldier was silent for another half-dozen paces. Before them was the open concourse before the gate to the Thrall. 'I am calmed, sir,' he said, his voice deep and satisfied. 'I am calmed.'

Brukhalian cracked his sword against his shield. Black fire lit the blade, sizzled and crackled. 'They surround the concourse before us. Shall we enter?'

'Aye, sir, with great joy.'

The Mortal Sword and his four hundred followers strode into the clearing, not hesitating as the streets and alley mouths on all sides swiftly filled with Septarch Kulpath's crack troops, his Urdomen, Seerdomin and Betaklites, including the avenue they had just quitted. Archers appeared on the rooftops, and the hundreds of Seerdomin lying before the Thrall's gate, feigning death, now rose, readying weapons.

At Brukhalian's side, Nilbanas snorted. 'Pathetic.'

The Mortal Sword grunted a laugh that was heard by all. 'The Septarch deems himself clever, sir.'

'And us stupid with honour.'

'Aye, we are that indeed, are we not, old friend?'

Nilbanas raised his sword and roared triumphantly. Blade whirling over his head, he spun in place his dance of delighted defiance. The Grey Swords locked shields, ends curling to enclose the Mortal Sword as they
readied their last stand in the centre of the concourse.

The veteran remained outside it, still spinning, still roaring, sword high in the air.

Five thousand Pannions and the Septarch himself looked on, in wonder, disbelieving, profoundly alarmed by the man's wild, bestial stamping on the cobbles. Then, with a silent snarl, Kulpath shook himself and raised one gauntleted hand.

He jerked it down.

The air of the concourse blackened as fifteen hundred bows whispered as one.

Eyes snapping open, Itkovian heard that whisper. He saw, with a vision filling his awareness, to the exclusion of all else, as the barbed heads plunged into the shielded turtle that was the Grey Swords. Shafts slipped through here and there. Soldiers reeled, fell, folded in on themselves.

Nilbanas, pierced through by a hundred arrows or more, whipped round one last time in a haze of blood droplets, then collapsed.

In roaring masses, the Pannion foot soldiers surged into the concourse. Crashed against the locked shields of the surviving Grey Swords even as they struggled to close the gaps in their ranks. The square was shattered, ripped apart. Battle turned to slaughter.

Still standing, the Mortal Sword's whirling blade raged with black fire. Studded with arrow shafts, he stood like a giant amidst feral children.

And fought on.

Pikes drove into him from all sides, lifted him off his feet. Sword arm swinging down, he chopped through the shafts, landed amidst writhing bodies.

Itkovian saw as a double-bladed axe separated Brukhalian's left arm from his body, at the shoulder, where blood poured unchecked as the severed, shield-laden arm fell away, frenziedly contracting at the elbow as would an insect's dismembered limb.

The huge man folded to his right.

More pikes jabbed, ripping into his torso.

The grip on the sword did not falter. The burning blade continued to spread its devouring flame outward, incinerating as it went. Screams filled the air.

Urdomen closed in with their short, heavy blades. Began chopping.

The Mortal Sword's intestines, snagged on a sword tip, unravelled like a snake from his gut. Another axe crashed down on Brukhalian's head, splitting the heavy black-iron helm, then the skull, then the man's face.

The burning sword exploded in a dark flash, the shards cutting down yet more Pannions.

The corpse that was Fener's Mortal Sword tottered upright a moment longer, riven through, almost headless, then slowly settled to its knees, back hunching, a scarecrow impaled by a dozen pikes, countless arrows.

Kneeling, now motionless, in the deepening shadow of the Thrall, as the Pannions slowly withdrew on all sides – their battle-rage gone and something silent and dreadful in its stead – staring at the hacked thing that had been Brukhalian ... and at the tall, barely substantial apparition that took form directly before the Mortal Sword. A figure shrouded in black, hooded, hands hidden within the tattered folds of broad sleeves.

_Hood. King of High House Death . . . come to greet this man's soul. In person._

_Why?_
A moment later and the Lord of Death was gone. Yet no-one moved.

It began to rain. Hard.

Kneeling, watery blood staining the black armour, making the chain's iron links gleam crimson.

Another set of eyes was sharing Itkovian's inner vision, eyes that he knew well. And in the Shield Anvil's mind there came a cold satisfaction, and in his mind he addressed the other witness and knew, without doubt, that his words were heard.

*I have you, Rath'Fener.*

*You are mine, betrayer.*

*Mine.*

The sparrowhawk twisted through the wind-whipped rain clouds, felt the drops like nails as they battered its wings, its splayed tail. Lurid flames glimmered in the city below amidst the grey, blackening buildings.

The day was drawing to a close, but the horror did not relent. Buke's mind was numb with all that he had witnessed, and the distance afforded him by his Soletaken form was no release. These eyes were too sharp, too sharp by far.

He banked hard directly over the estate that was home to Bauchelain and Korbal Broach. The gate was a mass of bodies. The mostly ornamental corner towers and the walkways along the compound's walls were occupied by silent sentinels, dark and motionless in the rain.

Korbal Broach's army of animated corpses had grown. Hundreds of Tenescowri had breached the gate and poured into the compound earlier. Bauchelain had greeted them with waves of deadly sorcery – magic that blackened their flesh, cracked it, then made it curl away in strips from their bones. Long after they were dead, the spell continued its relentless work, until the cobbles were ankle-deep in charred dust.

Two more attempts had been made, each more desperate than the last. Assailed by sorcery and the implacable savagery of the undead warriors, the Tenescowri had finally reeled back, fleeing in terror. A company of Beklites fared no better later in the afternoon. Now, as dusk swept in behind the rain, the streets surrounding the estate held only the dead.

On wearying wings, Buke climbed higher once more, following the Daru District's main avenue westward.

Gutted tenement buildings, smoke billowing from rubble, the fitful lick of flames. Seething mobs of Tenescowri, huge bonfires where spitted human flesh roasted. Roving squads and companies of Scalandi, Beklites and Betaklites, Urdomen and Seerdomin.

*Bewildered, enraged, wondering where Capustan's citizens have gone. Oh, you have the city, now, yet you feel cheated none the less.*

His acute vision was failing with the fading light. To the southeast, hazy with rain and smoke, rose the prince's palace towers. Dark, seemingly inviolate. Perhaps its inhabitants held out still. Or perhaps it was, once more, a lifeless edifice home only to ghosts. Returned to the comfort of silence, such as it had known for centuries before the coming of the Capan and Daru.

Turning his head back, Buke caught glimpse of a single tenement building just off to his left. Fires surrounded it, but it seemed the squat structure defied the flames. In the glow of the banked bonfires, he saw red-limned, naked corpses. Filling the surrounding streets and alleys.

*No, that must be a mistake. My eyes deceive. Those dead are lying on rubble. They must be. Gods, the tenement's ground level isn't even visible. Buried. Rubble. There cannot be naught but bodies, not piled that high... oh... depthless Abyss!*
The building was where Gruntle had taken a room.

And, assailed by flames, it would not burn.

And there, lit on all sides from below, the walls wept.

Not water, but blood.

Buke wheeled closer, and the closer he flew, the more horrified he became. He could see windows, shutterless, on the first visible floor. Packed with bodies. The same on the next floor, and on the one above that, directly beneath the roof.

The entire building was, he realized, virtually solid. A mass of flesh and bone, seeping from the windows tears of blood and bile. A giant mausoleum, a monument to this day.

He saw figures on the roof. A dozen, huddled here and there beneath makeshift awnings and lean-to shelters. And one, standing apart, head bowed as if studying the horror in the street below. Tall, hulking. Broad, sloping shoulders. Strangely barbed in shadows. A cutlass hung heavy in each gauntleted hand, stripped and gleaming like bone.

A dozen paces behind him a standard had been raised, held upright by bundles that might be food packs, such as the Grey Swords issued. Sodden, yellow stained with dark bars of blood, a child's tunic.

Buke drew still closer, then swung away. He was not ready. Not for Gruntle. Not for the man as he was now, as he had become. A terrible transformation ... one more victim of this siege.

As are we all.

Blinking, Itkovian struggled to make sense of his surroundings. A low, damp-blighted ceiling, the smell of raw meat. Yellow lantern light, the weight of a rough woollen blanket on his chest. He was lying on a narrow cot, and someone was holding his hand.

He slowly turned his head, wincing at the lash of pain the motion elicited from his neck. Healed, yet not healed. The mending... incomplete...

Karnadas was at his side, collapsed onto his haunches, folded and motionless, the pale, wrinkled pate of his bowed head level with Itkovian's eyes.

The hand gripping his was all bone and deathly dry skin, icy cold.

The Shield Anvil squeezed it slightly.

The Destriant's face, as he lifted it into view, was skeletal, the skin mottled with deep bruises originating from the joints of his jaw; his red-webbed eyes sunken within charcoal-black pits.

'Ah,' the old man rasped, 'I have failed you, sir...'

'You have not.'

'Your wounds—'

'The flesh is sealed – I can feel as much. My neck, my back, my knee. There is naught but a tenderness, sir. Easily managed.' He slowly sat up, keeping his expression calm despite the agony that ripped through him. Flexing his knee left him bathed in sweat, suddenly chilled and lightheaded. He did not alter his firm grip on the Destriant's hand. 'Your gift ever humbles me, sir.'

Karnadas settled his head on Itkovian's thigh. 'I am done, my friend,' he whispered.

'I know,' the Shield Anvil replied. 'But I am not.'
The Destriant's head moved in a nod but he did not look up.

Itkovian glanced around. Four other cots, each bearing a soldier. Rough blankets had been drawn up over their faces. Two of the priest's cutters sat on the blood-gummed floor, their backs to a wall, their eyes closed in the sleep of the exhausted. Near the small room's door stood a Grey Sword messenger, Capan by her features beneath the rim of her helmet. He had seen a younger version of her, among the recruits ... perhaps a sister.

'How long have I been unconscious? Do I hear rain?'

Karnadas made no answer. Neither surgeon stirred awake. After a moment, the messenger cleared her throat. 'Sir, it is less than a bell before midnight. The rain came with the dusk.'

_With the dusk, and with a man's death._ The hand holding his slackened in increments. 'How many soldiers here, sir? How many do I still command?'

She flinched. 'There are one hundred and thirty-seven in all, sir. Of these, ninety-six recruits. Of the Manes who stood with you at the cemetery, eleven soldiers survive.'

'Our barracks?'

'Fallen, sir. The structure burns.'

'Jelarkan's Palace?'

She shook her head. 'No word, sir.'

Itkovian slowly disengaged his hand from Karnadas's limp grip and looked down upon the motionless figure. He stroked the wisps of the man's hair. Moments passed, then the Shield Anvil broke the silence. 'Find us an orderly, sir. The Destriant is dead.'

Her eyes widened on him.

'He joins our Mortal Sword, Brukhalian. It is done.'

Following these words, Itkovian settled his boots onto the floor, almost blacking out at the pain in his ruined knee. He drew a deep, shaky breath, slowly straightened. 'Do any armourers remain?'

'An apprentice, sir,' she replied after a moment, her tone brittle as burned leather.

'I shall need a brace for my knee, sir. Anything he or she can fashion.'

'Yes, sir,' she whispered. 'Shield Anvil—'

He paused in his search for his surcoat, glanced over. The woman had gone deathly white.

'I — I voice the Reve's Thirteenth Law. I request ... rightful punishment.' She was trembling.

'Punishment, sir? What was your crime?'

'I delivered the message. From RathFener's acolyte.' She reeled at her own words, armour clunking as her back came up against the door. 'Fener forgive me! I sent the Mortal Sword to his death!'

Itkovian's eyes thinned as he studied her. 'You are the recruit who accompanied me and my wings on the last excursion onto the plain. My apologies, sir, for not recognizing you earlier. I should have anticipated the intervening ... experience, writ so clearly upon your face. I deny your voicing the Reve, soldier. Now, find us that orderly, and the apprentice.'

'But sir—'

'Brukhalian was not deceived. Do you understand? Moreover, your presence here evinces your innocence in the matter. Had you been party to the betrayal, you would have ridden with him at his command. And would have been dealt with accordingly. Now go. We cannot wait here much longer.'
Ignoring the tears now streaking her mud-spattered face, the Shield Anvil slowly made his way to a heap of discarded armour. A moment later she swung about, opened the door and fled out into the hallway.

Itkovian paused in his hobbling. He glanced over at the sleeping cutters. 'I am the bearer of Fener's grief,' he intoned in a whisper. 'I am my vow incarnate. This, and in all that follows. We are not yet done here. I am not yet done. Behold, I yield to nothing.' He straightened, expressionless once more. His pain retreated. Soon, it would be irrelevant.

One hundred and thirty-seven armoured faces looked upon the Shield Anvil. Through the streaming rain, he in turn surveyed them as they stood in their ranks on the dark street. Two warhorses remained; his own – chest wound a red welt but fire undimmed in the eyes – and Brukhalian's black destrier. The messenger held both sets of reins.

Strips from a banded cuirass had been lashed to either side of Itkovian's damaged knee, providing sufficient flex for him to ride and walk while offering vital support when he stood. The rents in his chain surcoat had been mended with copper wire; the weight of the sleeve was noticeable only on his left arm – there was little strength in it, and the skin between his neck and shoulder felt stretched and hot over the incompletely knitted tissue beneath. Straps had been rigged that would hold his arm at an angle when it bore his shield.

'Grey Swords.' The Shield Anvil addressed them. 'We have work before us. Our captain and her sergeants have formed you into squads. We march to the palace of the prince. The journey is not far. It appears that the enemy is chiefly massed around the Thrall. Should we happen to encounter roving bands, however, they will probably be small, and most likely Tenescowri and thus ill armed and untrained. March, therefore, in readiness.' Itkovian faced his lone captain, who had only days earlier been the master-sergeant responsible for the training of the Capan recruits. 'Sir, array the squads.'

The woman nodded.

Itkovian strode to his horse. A makeshift mounting block had been prepared, easing the transition into the saddle. Accepting the reins from the messenger, the Shield Anvil looked down upon her. 'The captain will walk with her soldiers, sir,' he said. 'The Mortal Sword's horse should be ridden. She is yours, recruit. She will know your capacity by your seat, and respond in accordance to ensure your safety. It will not avail you to defy her in this.'

Blinking, the young woman slowly nodded.

'Mount up, then, sir, and ride at my side.'

The ramp leading to Jelarkan's Palace's narrow, arched gateway was unoccupied, swept clean. The gates themselves had been shattered. Faint torchlight glimmered from the antechamber immediately beyond. Not a single soldier stood on the walls or revetments. Apart from the drumming rain, there was naught but silence to greet Itkovian and his Grey Swords.

Point squads had scouted to the gate's threshold, confirming that the enemy was nowhere to be seen. Nor, it seemed, were there any surviving defenders. Or bodies.

Smoke and hissing mist filled the spaces between stone, sheets of rain the night sky overhead. All sounds of fighting in other sections were gone.

Brukhalian had asked for six weeks. Itkovian had given him less than three days. The truth of that gnawed within him, as if a broken blade or arrowhead still remained in his body – missed by the cutters – buried in his gut, wrapping its pain around his heart.

But I am not yet done.

He held to those words. Back straight, teeth gritted. A gesture with one gauntleted hand sent the first scouts through the gateway. They were gone for some time, then a single runner returned, padding down the ramp to
where Itkovian waited.

‘Sir,’ the woman reported, ‘there are Tenescowri within. In the main hall, we believe. Sounds of feasting and revelry.’

‘And are the approaches guarded?’ the Shield Anvil asked.

‘Three that we have found are not, sir.’

There were four entrances to Jelarkan's main hall. The double doors facing the gate on the other side of the antechamber, two flanking portals in the chamber itself that led to guest and guard rooms, and a narrow, curtain-shielded passage directly behind the prince's throne. ‘Very well. Captain, position one squad to each of the two side entrances. Quietly. Six squads here at the gate. The remaining five are with me.’

The Shield Anvil carefully dismounted, landing mostly on his undamaged leg. He reeled none the less at the jolt that shot up his spine. The messenger had followed suit and now stepped to his side. Slowing his breathing, he glanced at her. ‘Get me my shield,’ he grated.

Another soldier assisted her in strapping the bronze shield to Itkovian's arm, drawing the supporting sling over his shoulder.

The Shield Anvil lowered the visor on his helm, then slid his sword from its scabbard while the captain issued commands to the five squads arrayed around them.

‘Those with crossbows to the second line, stay low and keep your weapons cocked but lower still. Front line overlapping shields, swords on guard. All visors down. Sir,’ the captain addressed Itkovian, ‘we are ready.’

He nodded, said to the recruit, ‘You are to be on my left. Now, forward at my pace.’

He strode slowly up the rain-slick ramp.

Fifty-three silent soldiers followed.

Into the antechamber, the squarish, high-ceilinged room lit by a single wavering torch set in a bracket on the right-hand wall. The two squads assigned to the chamber split to either side as the Shield Anvil led his troop towards the broad hallway where waited the main hall's double doors. The patter of shed rain accompanied them.

Ahead, muted through the thick, oak doors, was the sound of voices. Laughter tinged with hysteria. The crackle of burning wood.

Itkovian did not pause upon reaching the entrance, using shield and mailed fist to thrust open the twin doors. As he stepped through, the squads behind him spread out to take command of his end of the long, vaulted chamber.

Faces snapped round. Gaunt figures in rags lurched up from the chairs on either side of the long table. Utensils clattered and bones thumped to the floor. A wild-haired woman shrieked, scrabbled madly towards the young man seated in Jelarkan's throne.

‘Gentle Mother,’ the man rasped, reaching out a shiny, grease-stained hand to her, yet holding his yellow-tinged eyes on Itkovian all the while, ‘be calmed.’

She grasped that hand in both of hers, fell to her knees whimpering.

‘These are naught but guests, Mother. Come too late, alas, to partake of the ... royal feast.’

Someone screamed a laugh.

On the centre of the table was a huge silver plate, on which had been made a fire from snapped chair legs and picture frames – mostly charcoal now. Spitted above it was the remains of a skinned human torso, no longer being turned, underside blackening. Severed at the knees, the two thighs bound as one by copper wire. Arms
pulled off at the shoulders, though they too had once been tied. Head left on, split and charred.

Knives had sliced off the flesh in places all over the body. Thighs, buttocks, chest, back, face. But this, Itkovian knew, had not been a feast born of hunger. These Tenescowri in this room looked better fed than any other he had yet seen. No, here, this night, had been a celebration.

To the left of the throne, half in shadow, was an X-shaped cross made from two pikes. On it was stretched Prince Jelarkan's skin.

'The dear prince was dead before we began cooking,' the young man on the throne said. 'We are not consciously cruel, after all. You are not Brukhalian, for Brukhalian is dead. You must be Itkovian, the so-called Shield Anvil of Fener.'

Seerdomin appeared from behind the throne, pale-armoured and helmed, fur-backed, their faces hidden by grilled face-baskets, heavy battleaxes in their gauntleted hands. Four, eight, a dozen. Twenty. And still more filed out.

The man on the throne smiled. 'Your soldiers look ... tired. Unequal to this particular task. Do you know me, Itkovian? I am Anaster, First Child of the Dead Seed. Tell me, where are the people of this city? What have you done with them? Oh, let me guess. They cower in tunnels beneath the streets. Guarded by a handful of surviving Gidrath, a company or two of your Grey Swords, some of the prince's Capan Guard. I imagine Prince Arard hides below as well. A shame, that. We have wanted him a long time. Well, the search for the hidden entrances continues. They shall be found. Capustan shall be cleansed, Shield Anvil, though, alas, you will not live to see that glorious day.'

Itkovian studied the young man, and saw what he had not expected to see. 'First Child,' he said. 'There is despair within you. I will take it from you, sir, and with it your burdens.'

Anaster jolted as if he had been physically struck. He drew his knees up, climbed onto the seat of the throne, face twitching. A hand closed on the strange obsidian dagger in his belt, then flinched away as if the stone was hot.

His mother screamed, clawed up her son's outstretched arm. Snarling, he pulled himself free. She sank down to the floor, curled up.

'I am not your father,' Itkovian continued, 'but I shall be as him. Unleash your flood, First Child.'

The captain stepped forward. 'We forgive your ignorance, sir,' she said. 'He is the Shield Anvil. Fener knows grief, so much grief that it is beyond his capacity to withstand it. And so he chooses a human heart. Armoured. A mortal soul, to assume the sorrow of the world. The Shield Anvil.

'These days and nights have witnessed vast sorrow, profound shame – all of which, we see now, is writ as plain knowledge in your eyes. You cannot deceive yourself, sir, can you?'

'You never could,' Itkovian said. 'Give me your despair, First Child. I am ready to receive it.'

Anaster's wail rang through the main hall. He clambered still further up the throne's high back, arms wrapping around himself.

All eyes held on him.

No-one moved.

Chest heaving, the First Child stared at Itkovian. Then he shook his head. 'No,' he whispered, 'you shall not have my – my despair.'

The captain hissed. 'This is a gift! First Child—'

'Not!'
Itkovian seemed to sag. Sword-point wavering, lowering. The recruit moved close to support the Shield Anvil.

“You cannot have it! You cannot have it!”

The captain’s eyes were wide as she turned to Itkovian. ‘Sir, I am unable to countenance this—’

The Shield Anvil shook his head, slowly straightened once more. ‘No, I understand. The First Child – within him there is naught but despair. Without it…’

*He is as nothing.*

‘I want them all killed!’ Anaster shrieked brokenly. ‘Seerdomin! Kill them all!’

Forty Seerdomin surged forward to either side of the table.

The captain snapped a command. The front line behind her dropped in unison to one knee. The second line raised into view their crossbows. Twenty-four quarrels crossed the room. Not one missed.

From the flanking guest-room entrances, more quarrels flashed.

The front line behind Itkovian rose and readied their weapons.

Only six Seerdomin remained standing. Figures both writhing and motionless covered the floor.

The Tenescowri at the table were fleeing towards the portal behind the throne.

Anaster himself was the first to reach it, his mother a step behind him.

The Seerdomin charged Itkovian.

*I am not yet done.*

His blade flashed. A helmed head leapt from its shoulders. A backhand slash snapped chain links and opened wide another Seerdomin’s belly.

Crossbows sounded once more.

And the Grey Swords stood unopposed.

The Shield Anvil lowered his weapon. ‘Captain,’ he said after a moment. ‘Retrieve the prince’s body. Have the skin taken down. We shall return Prince Jelarkan to his throne, to his rightful place. And this room, we shall now hold. For a time. In the name of the prince.’

‘The First Child—’

Itkovian faced her. ‘We will meet him again. I am his only salvation, sir, and I shall not fail him.’

‘You are the Shield Anvil,’ she intoned.

‘I am the Shield Anvil.’ *I am Fener’s grief. I am the world’s grief. And I will hold. I will hold it all, for we are not yet done.*
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

What the soul can house, flesh cannot fathom.

The Reve of Fener
Imarak, First Destriant

Hot, fevered, the pebbled skin moved like a damp rock-filled sack. The Matron's body exuded an acrid oil. It had permeated Toc the Younger's ragged clothes. He slid between folds of flesh as the huge, bloated K'Chain Che'Malle shifted about on the gritty floor, massive arms wrapped around him in a fierce embrace.

Darkness commanded the cave. The glimmers of light he saw were born within his mind. Illusions that might have been memories. Torn, fragmented scenes, of yellow-grassed low hills beneath warm sunlight. Figures, caught at the very edge of his vision. Some wore masks. One was naught but dead skin stretched over robust bone. Another was ... beauty. Perfection. He believed in none of them. Their faces were the faces of his madness, looming ever closer, hovering at his shoulder.

When sleep took him he dreamed of wolves. Hunting, not to feed, but to deliver ... something else; he knew not what. The quarry wandered alone, the quarry fled when it saw him. Brothers and sisters at his side, he pursued. Relentless, leagues passing effortlessly beneath his paws. The small, frightened creature could not elude them. He and his kin drew nearer, exhausting it against the slopes of hills, until finally it faltered, then collapsed. They surrounded it.

As they closed in, to deliver... what was to be delivered ... the quarry vanished.

Shock, then despair.

He and his kin would circle the spot where she'd lain. Heads lifted skyward, mournful howls issuing from their throats. Howling without surcease. Until Toc the Younger blinked awake, in the embrace of the Matron, the turgid air of the cave seeming to dance with the fading echoes of his howls. The creature would tighten her hold, then. Whimpering, prodding the back of his neck with a fanged snout, her breath like sugared milk.

The cycles of his life. Sleep, then wakefulness punctuated by hallucinations. Smearred scenes of figures in golden sunlight, delusions of being a babe in his mother's arms, suckling at her breast – the Matron possessed no breasts, so he knew these to be delusions, yet was sustained by them none the less – and times when he began voiding his bladder and bowels, and she held him out when he did this, so he fouled only himself. She would then lick him clean, a gesture that stripped him of his last shreds of dignity.

Her embrace broke bones. The more he screamed with the pain, the tighter she held him. He had learned to suffer in silence. His bones knitted with preternatural swiftness. Sometimes unevenly. He knew himself to be malformed – his chest, his hips, the blades of his shoulders.

Then there came the visitations. A ghostly face, sheathed in the wrinkled visage of an old man, the hint of gleaming tusks, took form within his mind. Yellowed eyes that shone with glee fixed on his own.

Familiar, those overlapping faces, but Toc was unable to take his recognition any further.

The visitor would speak to him.

They are trapped, my friend. All but the T'lan Imass, who fears solitude. Why else would he not leave his companions? Swallowed in ice. Helpless. Frozen. The Seguleh – no need to fear them. Never was. I but played. And the woman! My rimed beauteous statue! Wolf and dog have vanished. Fled. Aye, the kin, brother of your eyes . . . fled. Tail between legs, hee hee!

And again.
Your Malazan army is too late! Too late to save Capustan! The city is mine. Your fellow soldiers are still a week away, my friend. We shall await them. We shall greet them as we greet all enemies.

I will bring you the head of the Malazan general. I will bring you his cooked flesh, and we shall dine together, you and I, once more.

How much blood can one world shed? Have you ever wondered, Toc the Younger? Shall we see? Let us see, then. You and I, and dear Mother here – oh, is that horror I see in her eyes? Some sanity still resides in her rotted brain, it seems. How unfortunate . . . for her.

And now, after a long absence, he returned once more. The false skin of the old man was taut against the unhuman visage. The tusks were visible as if through a transparent sheath. The eyes burned, but not, this time, with glee.

Deceit! They are not mortal beasts! How dare they assail my defences! Here, at the very gates! And now the T'lan Imass has vanished – I can find him nowhere! Does he come as well?

So be it. They shall not find you. We journey, the three of us. North, far beyond their reach. I have prepared another . . . nest for you two.

The inconvenience . . .

But Toc no longer heard him. His mind had been snatched away. He saw brittle white sunlight, a painful glare shimmering from ice-clad mountains and valleys buried in rivers of snow. In the sky, wheeling condors. And then, far more immediate, there was smoke, wooden structures shattered, stone walls tumbled. Figures running, screaming. Crimson spattering the snow, filling the milky puddles of a gravel road.

The point of view – eyes that saw through a red haze – shifted, swung to one side. A mottled black and grey hound kept pace, shoulders at eye level to the armoured figures it was tearing into with blurred savagery. The creature was driving towards a second set of gates, an arched portal at the base of a towering fortress. None could stand before it, none could slow its momentum.

Grey dust swirled from the hound's shoulders. Swirled. Swirled. Bones gripping the creature's flanks, a bone-helmed head, torn fur a ragged wing behind it. Raised high, a rippled sword the colour of old blood.

His bones are well, his flesh is not. My flesh is well, my bones are not. Are we brothers?

Hound and rider – nightmare vision – struck the huge, iron-banded gates.

Wood exploded. In the archway's gloom, terror plunged among a reeling knot of Seerdomin.

Loping towards the breached portal, Toc rode his wolf's vision, saw into the shadows, where huge, reptilian shapes stepped into view to either side of the hound and its undead rider.

The K'ell Hunters raised their broad blades.

Snarling, the wolf sprinted. His focus was the gate, every detail there sharp as broken glass whilst all that lay to either side blurred. A shift of weight brought him to the Ke'll Hunter closing from the hound and rider's left.

The creature pivoted, sword slashing to intercept his charge.

The wolf ducked beneath it, then surged upward, jaws wide. Leathery throat filled his mouth. His canines sank deep into lifeless flesh. Jaw muscles bunched. Bone cracked, then crumbled as the wolf inexorably closed its vice-grip, even as the momentum of his charge drove the K'ell Hunter back onto its tail, crashing against a wall that shuddered with the impact. Upper and lower canines met. Jagged molars ground together, slicing through wood-like tendon and dry muscle.

The wolf was severing the head from the body.

The K'Chain Che'Malle shook beneath him, spasmed. A flailing blade sliced into the wolf's right haunch.
Toc and beast flinched at the pain, yet did not relent.

The ornately helmed head fell back, away, thumped as it struck the slush-covered cobbles.

Snarling, lifeless shreds snagged on his teeth, the wolf spun round.

The hound crouched, spine hunched, in a corner of the archway. Blood poured from it. Alone, to battle its wounds.

The undead swordsman—my brother—was on his leather-wrapped feet now, his flint sword trading blows with the other K'ell Hunter's twin blades. At speeds unimaginable. Chunks of the K'Chain Che'Malle flew. A sword-bound forearm spun end over end to land near the flinching hound.

The K'ell Hunter lurched back in the face of the onslaught. Shin-bones snapped with a brittle report. The huge creature fell over, spraying slush out to all sides.

The undead warrior clambered onto it, systematically swinging his sword to dismember the K'Chain Che'Malle. It was a task swiftly completed.

The wolf approached the wounded hound. The animal snapped a warning to stay away—

Toc was suddenly blind, ripped away from the wolf's vision.

Bitter winds tore at him, but the Matron held him tight. On the move. Swiftly. They travelled a warren, a path of riven ice. They were, he realized, fleeing Outlook, fleeing the fortress that had just been breached.

By Baaljagg. And Garath and Tool. Garath—those wounds—

'Silence!' a voice shrieked.

The Seer was with them, leading the way through Omtose Phellack.

The gift of clarity remained in Toc's mind. His laugh was a ragged gurgle.

'Shut up!'

The entire warren shook to distant thunder, the sound of vast ice ... cracking, exploding in a conflagration of sorcery.

Lady Envy. With us once more—

The Seer screamed.


The night sky to the south was lit red. Though over a league distant, from the slope of the sparsely wooded hill, Capustan's death was plain to see, drawing the witnesses to silence apart from the rustle of armour and weapons, and the squelch of boots and moccasins in mud.

Leaves dripped a steady susurration. The soaked humus filled the warm air with its fecundity. Somewhere nearby a man coughed.

Captain Paran drew a dagger and began scraping the mud from his boots. He had known what to expect at this moment—his first sight of the city. Humbrall Taur's scouts had brought word back earlier in the day. The siege was over. The Grey Swords might well have demanded an emperor's ransom for their services, but fire-charred, tooth-gnawed bones could not collect it. Even so, knowing what to expect did little to diminish the pathos of a dying city.

Had those Grey Swords been Crimson Guard, the scene before Paran might well be different. With the lone
exception of Prince K’azz D’Avore's Company of the Avowed, mercenaries were less than worthless as far as the captain was concerned. Tough talk and little else.

*Let's hope those children of Humbrall Taur have fared better.* It did not seem likely. Pockets of resistance perhaps remained. Small knots of cornered soldiers, knowing mercy was out of the question, would fight to the last. In alleys, in houses, in rooms. Capustan's death-throes would be protracted. *Then again, if these damned Barghast can actually manage a doubletime – instead of this squabbling saunter – we might be able to adjust that particular fate’s conclusion.*

Paran turned at the arrival of his new commander, Trotts.

The huge Barghast's eyes glittered as he studied the burning city. 'The rains have done little to dim the flames,' he rumbled, scowling.

'Perhaps it's not as bad as it looks,' Paran said. 'I can make out maybe five major fires. It could be worse – I've heard tales of firestorms ...'

'Aye. We saw one from afar, in Seven Cities, once.'

'What's Humbrall Taur had to say, Warchief? Do we pick up our pace or do we just stand here?'

Trotts bared his filed teeth. 'He will send the Barahn and the Ahkrata clans southeast. They are tasked with taking the landings and the floating bridges and barges. His own Senan and the Gilk will strike towards Capustan. The remaining clans will seize the Septarch's main supply camp, which lies between the landings and the city.'

'That's all very well, but if we keep dawdling—'

'Hetan and Cafal, Taur's children, are alive and not at risk. So the shouldermen insist. The bones are being protected, by strange sorceries. Strange, yet profoundly powerful. There is—'

'Damn you, Trotts! People are dying down there! People are being *devoured*!'

The Barghast's grin broadened. 'Thus, I have been given leave ... to lead my clan at a pace of my own choosing. Captain, are you eager to be first among the White Faces into Capustan?'

Paran growled under his breath. He felt a need to draw his sword, felt a need to deliver vengeance, to finally – after all this time – strike a blow against the Pannion Domin. Quick Ben, in those moments when he was lucid and not raving with fever, had made it clear that the Domin held dire secrets, and a malevolence stained its heart. The fact of the Tenescowri was proof enough of that to the captain's mind.

But there was more to his need. He lived with pain. His stomach raged with spotfires. He had thrown up acidic bile and blood – revealing that truth to no-one. The pain bound him within himself, and those bindings were getting tighter.

*And another truth, one I keep pushing away. She's haunting me. Seeking my thoughts. But I'm not ready for her. Not yet, not with my stomach aflame . . .*

It was no doubt madness – a delusion – but Paran believed that the pain would relent – all would be well once more – as soon as he delivered to the world the violence trapped within him. Folly or not, he clung to that belief. *Only then will these pressures relent. Only then.*

He was not ready to fail.

'Call up the Bridgeburners, then,' Paran muttered. 'We can be at the north gate inside of a bell.'

Trotts grunted. 'All thirty-odd of us.'

'Well, damn if we can't shame these Barghast into some haste—'

'This is your hope?'
Paran glanced over at the man. 'Hood take us all, Trotts, you were the one who asked Taur to grant you leave. Do you expect the thirty-seven of us to retake Capustan all on our own? With an unconscious mage in tow?'

The Barghast, eyes thinned to slits as he studied the city ahead, rolled his shoulders and said, 'We leave Quick Ben behind. As for retaking the city, I mean to try.'

After a long moment, the captain grinned. 'Glad to hear it.'

The march of the White Face Barghast had been slow, torturous. Early on, during the southward journey across the high plains, sudden duels brought the clans to a halt a half-dozen times a day. These were, finally, diminishing, and Humbrall Taur's decision to assign entire clans to specific tasks in the upcoming battle would effectively remove the opportunity in the days to come. For all that every warchief had bowed to the single cause – the liberation of their gods – longstanding enmities persisted.

Trotts's new role as warchief of the Bridgeburners had proved something of a relief for Paran. He'd hated the responsibility of command. The pressure that was the well-being of every soldier under him had been a growing burden. As second-in-command, that pressure had diminished, if only slightly – but it was, for now, enough. Less pleasant was the fact that Paran had lost his role as representative of the Bridgeburners. Trotts had taken on the task of attending the war councils, leaving the captain out of the picture.

In the strictest sense, Paran remained in command of the Bridgeburners. But the company had become a tribe, insofar as Humbrall Taur and the Barghast were concerned, and tribes elected warchiefs, and that role belonged to Trotts.

The tree-studded hills behind them, the company of Bridgeburners moved down to the muddy verges of a seasonal stream that wound its way towards the city. Smoke from Capustan's fires obscured the stars overhead, and the rain of the past few days had softened the ground underfoot, lending it a spongy silence. Armour and weapons had been strapped tight; the Bridgeburners padded forward through the darkness without a sound.

Paran was three paces behind Trotts, who still held to his old role in Whiskeyjack's squad – that of taking point. Not the ideal position for the commander, but one that complemented the Barghast role of warchief. The captain was not happy with it. Worse, it showed Trotts's stubborn side all too clearly. A lack of adaptability that was disturbing in a leader.

An invisible presence seemed to settle on his shoulder, the touch of a distant, familiar mind. Paran grimaced. His link with Silverfox was growing stronger. This was the third time she had reached out to him this week. A faint brush of awareness, like the touching of fingers, tip to tip. He wondered if that made her able to see what he saw, wondered if she was reading his thoughts. Given all that he held within himself, Paran was beginning to instinctively recoil from her contact. His secrets were his own. She had no right to plunder them, if that was what she was doing. Even tactical necessity could not justify that to his mind. His frown deepened as her presence lingered. If it is her. What if—

Ahead, Trotts stopped, settling into a crouch, one hand raised. He gestured twice.

Paran and the soldier immediately behind him moved to join the Barghast warrior.

They had reached the Pannions' north pickets. The encampment was a shambles, bereft of organization, sloppily prepared and seriously undermanned. Litter cluttered the trodden paths between trenches, pits, and the ragged sprawl of makeshift tents. The air was redolent with poorly placed latrines.

The three men studied the scene for a moment longer, then withdrew to rejoin the others. The squad sergeants slipped forward. A huddle was formed.

Spindle, who had been the soldier accompanying Paran, was the first to speak. 'Medium infantry on station,' he whispered. 'Two small companies by the pair of standards—'

'Two hundred,' Trotts agreed. 'More in the tents. Sick and wounded.'
'Mostly sick, I'd say,' Spindle replied. 'Dysentery, I'd guess, by the smell. These Pannion officers ain't worth dung. Them sick ones won't be in the fighting no matter what we do. Guess everyone else is in the city.'

'The gates beyond,' Trotts growled.

Paran nodded. 'Lots of bodies before it. A thousand corpses, maybe more. No barricades at the gates themselves, nor could I see any guard. The overconfidence of victors.'

'We gotta punch through them medium infantry,' Sergeant Antsy muttered. 'Spindle, how are you and the rest of the sappers for Moranth munitions?'

The small man grinned. 'Found your nerve again, eh, Antsy?'

The sergeant scowled. 'This is fightin', ain't it? Now answer my question, soldier.'

'We got plenty. Wish we had a few of them lobbers Fiddler makes, though.'

Paran blinked, then recalled the oversized crossbows Fiddler and Hedge used to extend the range of cussers. 'Doesn't Hedge have one?' he asked.

'He broke it, the idiot. No, we'll prime some cussers but that'll be just for sowing. Sharpers, tonight. Burners would make too much light – let the enemy see how few of us there really are. Sharpers. I'll gather the lads and lasses.'

'I thought you were a mage,' Paran muttered as the man turned towards the waiting squads.

Spindle glanced back. 'I am, Captain. And I'm a sapper, too. Deadly combination, eh?'

'Deadly for us,' Antsy retorted. 'That and your damned hairshirt—'

'Hey, the burnt patches are growing back – see?'

'Get to it,' Trotts growled.

Spindle started tagging off squad sappers.

'So we just punch right through,' Paran said. 'With the sharpers that should be no problem, but then the ones on the outside flanks will sweep in behind us—'

Spindle rejoined them in time to grunt and say, 'That's why we'll sow cussers, Captain. Two drops on the wax. Ten heartbeats. The word's "run", and when we shout it that's what you'd better do, and fast. If you're less than thirty paces away when they go up, you're diced liver.'

'You ready?' Trotts asked Spindle.

'Aye. Nine of us, so expect just under thirty paces wide, the path we carve.'

'Weapons out,' the Barghast said. Then he reached out and gripped Spindle's hairshirt and dragged him close. Trotts grinned. 'No mistakes.'

'No mistakes,' the man agreed, eyes widening as Trotts clacked his sharpened teeth inches from his face.

A moment later, Spindle and his eight fellow sappers were moving towards the enemy lines, hooded and shapeless in their rain-capes.

The presence brushed Paran's awareness once again. He did all he could in his mind to push it away. The acid in his stomach swirled, murmuring a promise of pain. He drew a deep breath to steady himself. \textit{If swords clash ... it will be my first. After all this time, my first battle ...}

The enemy medium infantry were huddled in groups, twenty or more to each of a row of hearths on the encampment's only high ground – what used to be a cart track running parallel to the city wall. Paran judged that a path thirty paces wide would take out most of three groups.
Leaving well over a hundred Pannions capable of responding. If there were any capable officers among them, this could get ugly. *Then again, if there were any capable officers there the squads wouldn’t be clumped up the way they are.*

The sappers had gone to ground. The captain could no longer see them. Shifting his grip on his sword, he checked back over a shoulder to scan the rest of the Bridgeburners. Picker was at the forefront, a painful expression on her face. He was about to ask her what was wrong when detonations cracked through the night. The captain spun round.

Bodies writhed in the firelight of the now scattered hearths.

Trotts loosed a quavering warcry.

The Bridgeburners sprinted forward.

More sharpers exploded, out to the sides now, dropping the mobbed, confused soldiers around adjacent hearths.

Paran saw the dark forms of the sappers, converging directly ahead, squatting down amidst dead and dying Pannions.

Crossbows thunked in the hands of the dozen or so Bridgeburners who carried them.

Screams rang.

Trotts leading the way, the Bridgeburners reached the charnel path, passed around the crouching sappers who were one and all readying the larger cussers. Two drops of acid to the wax plug sealing the hole in the clay grenade.

A chorus of muted hisses.

*‘Run!’*

Paran cursed. Ten heartbeats suddenly seemed no time at all. Cussers were the largest of the Moranth munitions. A single one could make the intersection of four streets virtually impassable. The captain ran.

His heart almost seized in his chest as he fixed his eyes on the gate directly ahead. The thousand corpses were stirring. *Oh damn. Not dead at all. Sleeping. The bastards were sleeping!*

*‘Down down down!’*

The word was Malazan, the voice was Hedge’s.

Paran hesitated only long enough to see Spindle, Hedge and the other sappers arrive among them ... to throw cussers. Forward. Into the massing ranks of Tenescowri between them and the gates. Then they dived flat.

*‘Oh, Hood!’* The captain threw himself down, slid across gritty mud, releasing his grip on his sword and clamping both hands to his ears.

The ground punched the breath from his lungs, threw his legs into the air. He thumped back down in the mud. On his back. He had time to begin his roll before the cussers directly ahead exploded. The impact sent him tumbling. Bloody shreds rained down on him.

A large object thumped beside Paran’s head. He blinked his eyes open. To see a man’s hips – just the hips, the concavity where intestines belonged yawning black and wet. Thighs were gone, taken at the joints. The captain stared.

His ears were ringing. He felt blood trickling from his nose. His chest ached. Distant screaming wailed through the night.

A hand closed on his rain-cape, tugged him upright.
Mallet. The healer leaned close to press the captain's sword into his hands, then shouted words Paran barely heard. 'Come on! They're all getting the Hood out of here!' A shove sent the captain stumbling forward.

His eyes saw, but his mind failed in registering the devastation to either side of the path they now ran down towards the north gate. He felt himself shutting down inside, even as he slipped and staggered through the human ruin... shutting down as he had once before, years ago, on a road in Itko Kan.

The hand of vengeance stayed cold only so long. Any soul possessing a shred of humanity could not help but see the reality behind cruel deliverance, no matter how justified it might have at first seemed. Faces blank in death. Bodies twisted in postures no-one unbroken could achieve. Destroyed lives. Vengeance yielded a mirror to every atrocity, where notions of right and wrong blurred and lost all relevance.

He saw, to the right and left, fleeing figures. A few sharers cracked, hastening the rout.

The Bridgeburners had announced themselves to the enemy.

_We are their match_, the captain realized as he ran, _in calculated brutality. But this is a war of nerves where no-one wins._

The unchallenged darkness of the gate swallowed Paran and his fellow Bridgeburners. Boots skidded as the soldiers halted their mad sprint. Dropping into crouches. Reloading crossbows. Not a word spoken.

Trotts reached a hand out and dragged Hedge close. The Barghast shook the man hard for a moment, then made to throw him down. A squeal from Spindle stopped him. Hedge, after all, carried a leather sack half full of munitions.

His face still a mass of bruises from Detoran's fond touch, Hedge cursed. 'Ain't no choice, you big ape!' Paran could hear the words. An improvement. He wasn't sure who he sided with on this one, but the truth of it was, it no longer mattered. Trotts! he snapped. 'What now? If we wait here—'

The Barghast grunted. 'Into the city, low and quiet.'

'Which direction?' Antsy asked.

'We head to the Thrall—'

'Fine, and what's that?'

'The glowing keep, you thick-skulled idiot.' They edged forward, out from beneath the archway's gloom, onto the concourse immediately beyond. Their steps slowed as flickering firelight revealed the nightmare before them.

There had been vast slaughter, and then there had been a feast. The cobbles were ankle-deep in bones, some charred, others red and raw with bits of tendon and flesh still clinging to them. And fully two-thirds of the dead, the captain judged from what he could see of uniforms and clothing, belonged to the invaders.

'Gods,' Paran muttered, 'the Pannions paid dearly.' _I think I should revise my estimation of the Grey Swords._ Spindle nodded. 'Even so, numbers will tell.'

'A day or two earlier...' Mallet said.

No-one bothered finishing the thought. There was no need.

'What's your problem, Picker?' Antsy demanded.

'Nothing!' the woman snapped. 'It's nothing.'

'Is that the Thrall, then?' Hedge asked. 'That glowing dome? There, through the smoke—'
'Let's go,' Trotts said.

The Bridgeburners ranging out cautiously in the Barghast's wake, they set forth, across the grisly concourse, to a main avenue that seemed to lead directly towards the strangely illumined structure. The style of the houses and tenement blocks to either side – those that were still standing – was distinctly Daru to Paran's eyes. The rest of the city, he saw from fragmented glimpses down side alleys and avenues where fires still burned – was completely different. Vaguely alien. And, everywhere, bodies.

Further down the street, piles of still-fleshed corpses rose like the slope of a hill.

The Bridgeburners said nothing as they neared that slope. The truth before them was difficult to comprehend. On this street alone, there were at least ten thousand bodies. Maybe more. Sodden, already swollen, the flesh pale around gaping, blood-drained wounds. Concentrated mounds around building entrances, alley mouths, an estate's gate, the stepped approaches to gutted temples. Faces and sightless eyes reflected flames, making expressions seem to writhe in mocking illusion of animation, of life.

To continue on the street, the Bridgeburners would have to climb that slope.

Trotts did not hesitate.

Word arrived from the small company's rearguard. Tenescowri had entered through the gate, were keeping pace like silent ghosts behind them. A few hundred, no more than that. Poorly armed. No trouble. Trotts simply shrugged at the news.

They scrambled their way up the soft, flesh-laden ramp.

*Do not look down. Do not think of what is underfoot. Think only of the defenders, who must have fought on. Think of courage almost inhuman, defying mortal limits. Of these Grey Swords – those motionless, uniformed corpses in those doorways, crowding the alley mouths. Fighting on, and on. Yielding nothing. Cut to pieces where they stood.*

*These soldiers humble us all. A lesson ... for the Bridgeburners around me. This brittle, heart-broken company. We've come to a war devoid of mercy.*

The ramp had been fashioned. There was an intention to its construction. It was an approach. To what?

It ended in a tumbled heap, at a level less than a man's height below the roof of a tenement block. Opposite the building there had been another just like it, but fire had reduced it to smouldering rubble.

Trotts stopped at the ramp's very edge. The rest followed suit, crouching down, looking around, trying to comprehend the meaning of all that they saw. The ragged end revealed the truth: there was no underlying structure to this ghastly construct. It was indeed solid bodies.

'A siege ramp,' Spindle finally said in a quiet, almost diffident tone. 'They wanted to get to somebody—'

'Us,' a low voice rumbled from above them.

Crossbows snapped up.

Paran looked to the tenement building's roof. A dozen figures lined its edge. Distant firelight lit them.

'They brought ladders,' the voice continued, now speaking Daru. 'We beat them anyway.'

These warriors were not Grey Swords. They were armoured, but it was a ragtag collection of accoutrements. One and all, their faces and exposed skin were daubed in streaks and barbs. Like human tigers.

'I like the paint,' Hedge called up, also in Daru. 'Scared the crap out of me, that's for sure.'

The spokesman, tall and hulking, bone-white black-barbed cutlasses in his mailed hands, cocked his head. 'It's not paint, Malazan.'
Silence.

Then the man gestured with a blade. 'Come up, if you like.'

Ladders appeared from the rooftop, slid down its edge.

Trotts hesitated. Paran stepped close. 'I think we should. There's something about that man and his followers —'

The Barghast snorted. 'Really?' He waved the Bridgeburners to the ladders.

Paran watched the ascent, deciding he would be the last to go. He saw Picker hanging back. 'Problem, Corporal?'

She flinched, massaging her right arm.

'You're in pain,' the captain said, moving to her side, studying her pinched face. 'Did you take a wound? Let's go to Mallet.'

'He can't help me, Captain. Never mind about it.'

I know precisely how you feel. 'Climb, then.'

As if approaching gallows, the corporal made her way to the nearest ladder.

Paran glanced back down the ramp. Spectral figures moved in the gloom at its far base. Well out of any kind of missile range. Unwilling, perhaps, to ascend the slope. The captain wasn't surprised at that.

Fighting twinges, he began climbing.

The tenement's flat roof had the look of a small shanty-town. Tarps and tents, hearths smouldering on overturned shields. Food packs, caskets of water and wine. A row of blanket-wrapped figures — the fallen, seven in all. Paran could see others in some of the tents, most likely wounded.

A standard had been raised near the roof's trapdoor, the yellow flag nothing more than a dark-streaked child's tunic.

The warriors stood silent, watchful as Trotts sent squads out to each corner of the roof, where they checked on whatever lay both below and opposite the building.

Their spokesman turned suddenly, a fluid, frighteningly graceful motion, and faced Corporal Picker. 'You have something for me,' he rumbled.

Her eyes widened. 'What?'

He sheathed one of his cutlasses and stepped up to her.

Paran and the others nearby watched as the man reached out to Picker's right arm. He gripped her chain-sleeved bicep. A muted clatter sounded.

Picker gasped.

After a moment she dropped her sword to clunk on the tarr'd rooftop, and began stripping off her chain surcoat with quick, jerky motions. In a flood of relief, she spoke. 'Bern's blessing! I don't know who in Hood's name you are, sir, but they've been killing me. Getting tighter and tighter. Gods, the pain! He said they'd never come off. He said they'd be on me for good. Even Quick Ben said that — can't make a deal with Treach. The Tiger of Summer's mad, insane—'

'Dead,' the Daru cut in.

Half out of her surcoat, Picker froze. 'What?' she whispered. 'Dead? Treach is dead?'
'The Tiger of Summer has ascended, woman. Treach – Trake – now strides with the gods. I will have them 
now, and I thank you for delivering them to my hand.'

She pulled her right arm clear of the chain sleeve. Three ivory arm-torcs clattered down to her hand. 'Here! 
Yes, please! Glad to oblige—'

'Hood take your tongue, Picker,' Antsy snapped. 'You're embarrassing us! Just give him the damned things!'

The corporal stared about. 'Blend! Where in the Abyss you hiding, woman?'

'Here,' a voice murmured beside Paran.

Startled, he stepped back. Damn her!

'Hah!' Picker crowed. 'You hear me, Blend? Hah!'

The squads were converging once more.

The Daru rolled up a tattered sleeve. The striped pattern covered the large, well-defined muscles of his arm. He slid the three torcs up past the elbow. The ivory clicked. Something flashed amber in the darkness beneath the rim of his helmet.

Paran studied the man. A beast resides within him, an ancient spirit, reawakened. Power swirled around the Daru, but the captain sensed that it was born as much from a natural air of command as from the beast hiding within him – for that beast preferred solitude. Its massive strength had, somehow, been almost subsumed by that quality of leadership. Together, a formidable union. There's no mistaking, this one's important. Something's about to happen here, and my presence is no accident. 'I am Captain Paran, of Onearm's Host.'

'Took your time, didn't you, Malazan?'

Paran blinked. 'We did the best we could, sir. In any case, your relief this night and tomorrow will come from the White Face clans.'

'Hetan and Cafal's father, Humbrall Taur. Good. Time's come to turn the tide.'

'Turn the tide?' Antsy sputtered. 'Looks like you didn't need no help to turn the tide, man!'

Trotts,' Hedge called out. 'I ain't happy about what's underfoot. There's cracks. This whole roof is nothing but cracks.'

'Same for the walls,' another sapper noted. 'All sides.'

'This building is filled with bodies,' said a small warrior in Lestari armour beside the Daru. 'They're swelling, I guess.'

His eyes still on the big Daru, Paran asked, 'Do you have a name?'

'Gruntle.'

'Are you some kind of sect, or something? Temple warriors?'

Gruntle slowly faced him, his expression mostly hidden beneath the helm's visor. 'No. We are nothing. No-one. This is for a woman. And now she's dying—'

'Which tent?' Mallet interrupted in his high, thin voice.

'The Warren of Denul is poisoned—'

'You feel that, do you, Gruntle? Curious.' The healer waited, then asked again, 'Which tent?'

Gruntle's Lestari companion pointed. 'There. She was stuck through bad. Blood in the lungs. She might already be ...' He fell silent.
Paran followed Mallet to the tattered shelter.

The woman lying within was pale, her young face drawn and taut. Frothy blood painted her lips.

And here, there's more.

The captain watched the healer settle to his knees beside her, reach out his hands.

'Hold it,' Paran growled. 'The last time damn near killed you—'

'Not my gift, Captain. Got Barghast spirits crowding me with this one, sir. Again. Don't know why. Someone's taken a personal interest, maybe. It may be too late anyway. We'll see ... all right?'

After a moment, Paran nodded.

Mallet laid his hands on the unconscious woman, closed his eyes. A dozen heartbeats passed. 'Aai,' he finally whispered. 'Layers here. Wounded flesh... wounded spirit. I shall need to mend both. So ... will you help me?'

The captain realized the question was not being asked of him, and so made no reply.

Mallet, eyes still closed, sighed. 'You will sacrifice so many for this woman?' He paused, eyes still closed, then frowned. 'I can't see these threads you speak of. Not her, nor Gruntle, nor the man at my side—'

At your side? Me? Threads? Gods, why don't you just leave me alone?

— but I'll take your word for it. Shall we begin?

Moments passed, the healer motionless above the woman. Then she stirred on her pallet, softly moaned.

The tent was torn from around them, guidewires snapping. Paran's head jerked up in surprise. To see Gruntle, chest heaving, standing above them.

'What?' the Daru gasped. 'What—' He staggered back a step, was brought up by Trotts's firm hands on his shoulders.

'No such thing,' the Barghast growled, 'as too late.'

Approaching, Antsy grinned. 'Hello, Capustan. The Bridgeburners have arrived.'

The sounds of fighting from the north and the east accompanied the dawn. The White Face clans had finally engaged the enemy. Picker and the others would later learn of the sudden and bloody pitched battle that occurred at the landings on the coast and on the shore of Catlin River. The Barahn and Ahkrata clans had collided with newly arrived regiments of Betaklites and Betrullid cavalry. The commander there had elected to counterattack rather than hold poorly prepared defensive positions, and before long the Barghast were the ones digging in, harried on all sides.

The Barahn were the first to break. Witnessing the ensuing slaughter of their kin had solidified the resolve of the Ahkrata, and they held until midday, when Taur detached the Gilk from the drive into the city and sent the turtle-shell-armoured warriors to their aid. A plains clan whetted on interminable wars against mounted enemies, the Gilk locked horns with the Betrullid and became the fulcrum for a renewed offensive by the Ahkrata, shattering the Betaklites and seizing the pontoon bridges and barges. The last of the Pannion medium infantry were driven into the river's shallows, where the water turned red. Surviving elements of the Betrullid disengaged from the Gilk and retreated north along the coast to the marshlands – a fatal error, as their horses foundered in the salty mud. The Gilk pursued to resume a mauling that would not end until nightfall. Septarch Kulpath's reinforcements had been annihilated.

Humbrall Taur's push into the city triggered a panicked rout. Units of Seerdomin, Urdomen, Beklite, Scalandi and Betaklite were caught up and driven apart by the tens of thousands of Tenescowri fleeing before the Barghast hook-swords and lances. The main avenues became heaving masses of humanity, a swirling flood pushing westward, pouring through the breaches on that side, out onto the plain.
Taur did not relent in his clans' vigorous pursuit, driving the Pannions ever westward.

Crouched on the rooftop, Picker looked down on the screaming, panic-stricken mob below. The tide had torn into the ramp, cutting swathes through it, each one a narrow gully winding between walls of cold flesh. Every path was choked with figures, whilst others scrambled overtop, at times less than a long pike's reach from the Malazan's position.

Despite the horror she was witnessing below, she felt as if a vast burden had been lifted from her. The damned torcs no longer gripped her arm. The closer they had come to the city, the tighter and hotter they had grown – burns still ringed her upper arm and a deep ache still lingered in the bones. There were questions surrounding all that, but she was not yet prepared to mull on them.

From a few streets to the east came the now familiar sound of slaughter, the discordant battle-chants of the Barghast a rumbling undercurrent. A Pannion rearguard of sorts had formed, ragged elements of Beklite, Urdomen and Seerdomin joining ranks in an effort to blunt the White Face advance. The rearguard was fast disintegrating, overwhelmed by numbers.

There would be no leaving the rooftop until the routed enemy had passed, despite Hedge's moans about foundation cracks and the like. Picker was well pleased with that. The Bridgeburners were in the city; it'd been hairy outside the wall and north gate, but apart from that things had gone easy – easier than she'd expected. Moranth munitions had a way of evening out the odds, if not swinging them all the way round.

Not a single clash of blades yet. Good. We ain't as tough as we used to be, never mind Antsy's bravado.

She wondered how far away Dujek and Brood were. Captain Paran had sent Twist to make contact with them as soon as it was clear that Humbrall Taur had unified his tribes and was ready to announce the command to march south to Capustan. With Quick Ben out of the action, and Spindle too scared to test his warrens, there was no way of knowing whether the Black Moranth had made it.

Who knows what's happened to them. Tales among the Barghast of undead demonic reptiles on the plains . . . and those fouled warrens – who's to say that poison isn't some nasty's road? Spindle says the warrens are sick. What if they've just been taken over? Could be they're being used right now. Someone could have come through and hit them hard. There might be thirty thousand corpses rotting on the plain right now. We might be all that's left of Onearm's Host.

The Barghast did not seem interested in committing to the war beyond the liberation of Capustan. They wanted the bones of their gods. They were about to get them, and once that happened they'd probably head back home.

And if we're then on our own . . . what will Paran decide? That damned noble looks deathly. The man's sick. His thoughts ride nails of pain, and that ain't good. Ain't good at all.

Boots crunched beside her as someone stepped to the roof's edge. She looked up, to see the red-haired woman Mallet had brought back from almost-dead. A rapier snapped a third of the way down the blade was in her right hand. Her leather armour was in tatters, old blood staining countless rents. There was a brittleness to her expression, as well as something of . . . wonder.

Picker straightened. The screams from below were deafening. She moved closer and said, 'Won't be much longer, now. You can see the front ranks of the Barghast from here.' She pointed.

The woman nodded, then said, 'My name is Stonny Menackis.'

'Corporal Picker.'

'I've been talking with Blend.'

'That's a surprise. She ain't the talkative type.'

'She was telling me about the torcs.'
'Was she now? Huh.'

Stonny shrugged, hesitated, then asked, 'Are you ... are you sworn to Trake or something? Lots of soldiers are, I gather. The Tiger of Summer, Lord of Battle—'

'No,' Picker growled. 'I'm not. I just figured they were charms – those torcs.'

'So you didn't know that you had been chosen to deliver them. To ... to Gruntle ...'

The corporal glanced over at the woman. 'That's what's got you kind of confused, is it? Your friend Gruntle. You never would've figured him for what ... for whatever he's now become.'

Stonny grimaced. 'Anyone but him, to be honest. The man's a cynical bastard, prone to drunkenness. Oh, he's smart, as far as men go. But now, when I look at him ...'

'You ain't recognizing what you see.'

'It's not just those strange markings. It's his eyes. They're a cat's eyes, now, a damned tiger's. Just as cold, just as inhuman.'

'He says he fought for you, lass.'

'I was his excuse, you mean.'

'Can't say as I'd argue there was a difference.'

'But there is, Corporal.'

'If you say so. Anyway, the truth's right there in front of you. In this damned cryptorium of a building. Hood take us, it's there in Gruntle's followers – he ain't the only one all dappled, is he? The man stood between the Pannions and you, and that was a solid enough thing to pull in all the others. Did Treach shape all this? I guess maybe he did, and I guess I played a part in that, too, with me showing up with those torcs on my arm. But now I'm quit of the whole thing and that suits me fine. 'And I ain't going to think on it no more."

Stonny was shaking her head. 'I won't kneel to Trake. By the Abyss, I've gone and found myself before the altar of another god – I've already made my choice, and Trake isn't it.'

'Huh. Maybe, then, your god found the whole thing with Gruntle and all that somehow useful. Humans ain't the only ones who spin and play with webs, right? We ain't the only ones who sometimes walk in step, or even work together to achieve something of mutual benefit – without explaining a damned thing to the rest of us. I ain't envying you, Stonny Menackis. It's deadly attention, when it's a god's. But it happens ...' Picker fell silent.

'Walk in step. Her eyes narrowed. And keeping the rest of us in the dark.'

She swung about, searched the group around the tents until she spied Paran. The corporal raised her voice, 'Hey, Captain!' He looked up.

'And how about you, Captain? Keeping secrets, maybe? Here's a hunch for you. 'Any word from Silverfox?'' she asked.

The Bridgeburners nearby all fixed their attention on the noble-born officer.

Paran recoiled as if he had been struck. One hand went to his stomach as a spasm of pain took him. Jaws bunching, he managed to lift his head and meet Picker's eyes. 'She's alive,' he grated.

'Thought so. You'd been too easy with this by far, Captain. Meaning, you have been keeping things from us. A bad decision. The last time us Bridgeburners was kept in the dark, that dark swallowed damn near every one of us. 'How close? How far away, Captain?"
She could see the effect of her words, yet a part of her was angry, enough to harden herself. Officers always held out. It was the one thing the Bridgeburners had learned to despise the most when it came to their commanders. Ignorance was fatal.

Paran slowly forced himself straight. He drew a deep breath, then another as he visibly clamped down on the pain. 'Humbrall Taur is driving the Pannions into their laps, Corporal. Dujek and Brood are maybe three leagues away—'

Sputtering, Antsy asked, 'And do they know what's coming down on them?'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

'How?'

*Good question. Just how tight is this contact between you and Tattersail-reborn? And why ain't you told us? We're your soldiers. Expected to fight for you. So it's a damned good question.*

Paran scowled at Antsy, but made no reply.

The sergeant wasn't about to let go, now that he'd taken the matter from Picker's hands and was speaking for all the Bridgeburners. 'So here we damn near got our heads lopped off by the White Faces, damn near got roasted by Tenescowri, and all the while thinking we might be alone. Completely alone. Not knowing if the alliance has held or if Dujek and Brood have ripped each other apart and there's nothing but rotting bones to the west. And yet, you knew. So, if you was dead ... right now, sir...'

*We'd know nothing, not a damned thing.*

'If I was dead, we wouldn't be having this conversation,' Paran replied. 'So why don't we just pretend, Sergeant?'

'Maybe we don't pretend at all,' Antsy growled, one hand reaching for his sword.

From nearby, where he had been crouching near the roof's edge, Gruntle slowly turned, then straightened.

*Now wait a minute. 'Sergeant!' Picker snapped. 'You think Tattersail will turn a smile on you the next time she sees you? If you go ahead and do what you're thinking of doing?*

'Quiet, Corporal,' Paran ordered, eyes on Antsy. 'Let's get it over with. Here, I'll make it even easier.' The captain turned his back to the sergeant, waited.

*So sick he wants it ended. Shit. And worse . . . all this, in front of an audience.*

'Don't even think it, Antsy,' Mallet warned. 'None of this is as it seems—'

Picker turned on the healer. 'Well, now we're getting somewhere! You was jawing enough with Whiskeyjack before we left, Mallet. You and Quick Ben. Out with it! We got a captain hurting so bad he wants us to kill him and ain't nobody's telling us a damned thing – what in Hood's name is going on?'

The healer grimaced. 'Aye, Silverfox is reaching out to the captain – but he's been pushing her away – so there hasn't been some kind of endless exchange of information going on. He knows she's alive, as he says, and I guess he can make out something of just how far away she is, but it goes no further than that. Damn you, Picker. You think you and the rest of us Bridgeburners have been singled out for yet another betrayal, just because Paran's not talking to you? *He's not talking to anyone!* And if you had as many holes burned through your guts as he does, you'd be pretty damned tight-lipped yourself! Now, all of you, just cut it! Look to yourselves and if that's shame you see it's damned well been earned!'

Picker fixed her gaze on the captain's back. The man had not moved. Would not face his company. Could not – not now. Mallet had a way of turning things right over. Paran was a sick man, and *sick people don't think right. Gods, I had torcs biting my arm and I was losing it fast. Oh, ain't I just stepped in a pile of dung. Swearing someone else's to blame all the while, too. I guess Pale's burns are a far way from healing. Damn.*
Hood's heel on my rotted soul, please. Down and twist hard.

Paran barely heard the shouted exchanges behind him. He felt assailed by the pressure of Silverfox's presence, leading to a dark desire to be crushed lifeless beneath it – if such a thing was possible – rather than yield.

A sword between his shoulder-blades – no god to intervene this time. Or a final, torrential gush of blood into his stomach as its walls finally gave way – a painful option, but none the less as final as any other. Or a leap down into the mob below, to get torn apart, trampled underfoot. Futility whispering of freedom.

She was close indeed, as if she strode a bridge of bones stretching from her to where he now stood. No, not her. Her power, that was so much more than just Tattersail. Making its relentless desire to break through his defences much deadlier of purpose than a lover's simple affection; much more, even, than would be born of strategic necessity. Unless Dujek and Brood and their armies are under assault. . . and they're not. Gods, I don't know how I know, but I do. With certainty. This – this isn't Tattersail at all. It's Nightchill. Bellurdan. One or both. What do they want?

He was suddenly rocked by an image, triggering an almost audible snap within his mind. Away. Towards. Dry flagstones within a dark cavern, the deeply carved lines of a card of the Deck, stone-etched, the image seeming to writhe as if alive.

Obelisk. One of the Unaligned, a leaning monolith ... now of green stone. Jade. Towering above wind-whipped waves – no, dunes of sand. Figures, in the monolith's shadow. Three, three in all. Ragged, broken, dying.

Then, beyond the strange scene, the sky tore.

And the furred hoof of a god stepped onto mortal ground.

Terror.

Savagely pulled into the world – oh, you didn't choose that, did you? Someone pulled you down, and now . . .

Fener was as good as dead. A god trapped in the mortal realm was like a babe on an altar. All that was required was a knife and a wilful hand.

As good as dead.

Bleak knowledge flowered like deadly nightshade in his mind. But he wanted none of it. Choices were being demanded of him, by forces ancient beyond imagining. The Deck of Dragons ... Elder Gods were playing it ... and now sought to play him.

And this is to be the role of the Master of the Deck, if that is what I've become? A possessor of fatal knowledge and, now, a Hood-damned mitigator? I see what you're telling me to do. One god falls, push another into its place? Mortals sworn to one, swear them now to another? Abyss below, are we to be shoved – flicked – around like pebbles on a board?

Rage and indignation fanned white hot in Paran's mind. Obliterating his pain. He felt himself mentally wheel round, to face that incessant, alien presence that had so hounded him. Felt himself open like an explosion.

All right, you wanted my attention. You've got it. Listen, and listen well, Nightchill – whoever – whatever you really are. Maybe there have been Masters of the Deck before, long ago, whom you could pluck and pull to do your bidding. Hood knows, maybe you're the one – you and your Elder friends – who selected me this time round. But if so, oh, you've made a mistake. A bad one.

I've been a god's puppet once before. But I cut those strings, and if you want details, then go ask Oponn. I walked into a cursed sword to do it, and I swear, I'll do it again – with far less mercy in my heart – if I get so much as a whiff of manipulation from you.

He sensed cold amusement in reply, and the bestial blood within Paran responded. Raised hackles. Teeth
bared. A deep, deadly growl.

Sudden alarm.

Aye, the truth of it. I won't be collared, Nightchill. And I tell you this, now, and you'd do well to take heed of these words. I'm taking a step forward. Between you and every mortal like me. I don't know what that man Gruntle had to lose, to arrive where you wanted him, but I sense the wounds in him – Abyss take you, is pain your only means of making us achieve what you want? It seems so. Know this, then: until you can find another means, until you can show me another way – something other than pain and grief – I'll fight you.

We have our lives. All of us, and they're not for you to play with. Not Picker's life, not Gruntle's or Stonny's.

You've opened this path, Nightchill. Connecting us. Fine. Good. Give me cause, and I'll come down it. Riding the blood of a Hound of Shadow – do you know, I think, if I wanted to, I could call the others with it. All of them.

Because I understand something, now. Come to a realization, and one I know to be truth. In the sword Dragnipur . . . two Hounds of Shadow returned to the Warren of Darkness. Returned, Nightchill. Do you grasp my meaning? They were going home.

And I can call them back, without doubt. Two souls of untamed Dark. Grateful souls, beloved spawn of destruction—

A reply came, then, a woman's voice unknown to Paran. 'You have no idea what you threaten, mortal. My brother's sword hides far more secrets than you can contemplate.'

He smiled. Worse than that, Nightchill. The hand now wielding Dragnipur belongs to Darkness. Anomander Rake, the son of the mother. The pathway has never been so straight, so direct or so short, has it? Should I tell him what has happened within his own weapon—

'Should Rake learn that you found a way into Dragnipur and that you freed the two Hounds he had slain . . . he would lull you, mortal.'

He might. He's already had a few chances to do so, and just reasons besides. Yet he stayed his hand. I don't think you understand the Lord of Moon's Spawn as well as you think you do. There is nothing predictable in Anomander Rake – perhaps that is what frightens you so.

'Pursue not this course.'

I will do whatever I have to, Nightchill, to cut your strings. In your eyes, we mortals are weak. And you use our weakness to justify manipulating us.

'The struggle we face is far vaster – far deadlier – than you realize.'

Explain it. All of it. Show me this vast threat of yours.

'To save your sanity, we must not, Ganoes Paran.'

Patronizing bitch.

He sensed her anger flare at that. 'You say our only means of using you is through the deliverance of pain. To that we have but one answer: appearances deceive.'

Keeping us ignorant is your notion of mercy?

'Bluntly worded, but in essence, you are correct, Ganoes Paran.'

A Master of the Deck cannot be left ignorant, Nightchill. If I am to accept this role and its responsibilities – whatever they might be and Hood knows, I don't yet know them – but if I am, then I need to know. Everything.

'In time—'
He sneered.

‘In time, I said. Grant us this small mercy, mortal. The struggle before us is no different from a military campaign – incremental engagements, localized contests. But the field of battle is no less than existence itself. Small victories are each in themselves vital contributions to the pandemic war we have chosen to undertake—’

Who is ‘we’?

‘The surviving Elder Gods . . . and others somewhat less cognizant of their role.’

K’rul? The one responsible for Tattersail’s rebirth?

‘Yes. My brother.’

Your brother. But not the brother who forged Dragnipur.

‘Not him. At the moment, Draconus can do naught but act indirectly, for he is chained within the very sword he created. Slain by his own blade, at the hand of Anomander Rake.’

Paran felt the cold steel of suspicion slide into him. Indirectly, you said.

‘A moment of opportunity, Ganoes Paran. Unexpected. The arrival of a soul within Dragnipur that was not chained. The exchange of a few words that signified far more than you ever realized. As did the breach into the Warren of Darkness, the barrier of souls broken, so very briefly. But enough—’

Wait. Paran needed silence to think, fast and hard. When he’d been within Dragnipur, walking alongside the chained souls dragging their unimaginable burden, he had indeed spoken with one such prisoner. Abyss below, that had been Draconus. Yet he could recall nothing of the words exchanged between them.

The chains led into the Warren of Darkness, the knot beneath the groaning wagon. Thus, Darkness held those souls, one and all, held them fast.

I need to go back. Into the sword. I need to ask—

‘Jen’isand Rul. Aye, Draconus, the one you spoke with within Dragnipur – my other brother – made use of you, Ganoes Paran. Does that truth seem brutal to you? Is it beyond understanding? Like the others within the sword, my brother faces . . . eternity. He sought to outwit a curse, yet he never imagined that doing so would take so long. He is changed, mortal. His legendary cruelty has been . . . blunted. Wisdom earned a thousand times over. More, we need him.’

You want me to free Draconus from Rake’s sword.

‘Yes.’

To then have him go after Rake himself in an effort to reclaim the weapon he forged. Nightchill, I would rather Rake than Draconus—

‘There will be no such battle, Ganoes Paran.’

Why not?

‘To free Draconus, the sword must be shattered.’

The cold steel between his ribs now twisted. And that would free . . . everyone else. Everything else. Sorry, woman, I won’t do it—

‘If there is a way to prevent that woeful release of mad, malign spirits – whose numbers are indeed beyond legion and too horrifying to contemplate – then only one man will know it.’

Draconus himself.

‘Yes. Think on this, Ganoes Paran. Do not rush – there is still time.’
Glad to hear it.

'We are not as cruel as you think.'

Vengeance hasn't blackened your heart, Nightchill? Excuse my scepticism.

'Oh, I seek vengeance, mortal, but not against the minor players who acted out my betrayal, for that betrayal was foretold. An ancient curse. The one who voiced that curse is the sole focus of my desire for vengeance.'

I'm surprised he or she's still around.

There was a cold smile in her words. 'Such was our curse against him.'

I'm beginning to mink you all deserve each other.

There was a pause, then she said, 'Perhaps we do, Ganoes Paran.'

What have you done with Tattersall?

'Nothing. Her attentions are presently elsewhere.'

So I was flattering myself, thinking otherwise. Dammit, Paran, you're still a fool.

'We shall not harm her, mortal. Even were we able, which we are not. There is honour within her. And integrity. Rare qualities, for one so powerful. Thus, we have faith—'

A gloved hand on his shoulder startled Paran awake. He blinked, looked around. The roof. I'm back.

'Captain?'

He met Mallet's concerned gaze. 'What?'

'Sorry, sir, it seemed we'd lost you there ... for a moment.'

He grimaced, wanting to deny it to the man's face, but unable to do so. 'How long?'

'A dozen heartbeats, sir.'

'Is that all? Good. We have to get moving. To the Thrall.'

'Sir?'

'I'm between them and us, now, Mallet. But there's more of 'us' than you realize. Damn, I wish I could explain this. Without sounding like a pompous bastard. Not replying to the healer's question, he swung round and found Trotts. 'Warchief. The Thrall beckons.'

'Aye, Captain.'

The Bridgeburners were one and all avoiding his gaze. Paran wondered why. Wondered what he'd missed. Mentally shrugging, he strode over to Gruntle. 'You're coming with us,' he said.

'I know.'

'Yes, you would at that. Fine, let's get this done.'

The palace tower rose like a spear, wreathed in banners of ghostly smoke. The dark, colourless stone dulled the bright sunlight bathing it. Three hundred and thirty-nine winding steps led up the tower's interior, to emerge onto an open platform with a peaked roof of copper tiles that showed no sign of verdigris. The wind howled between the columns holding the roof and the smooth stone platform, yet the tower did not sway.

Itkovian stood looking east, the wind whipping against his face. His body felt bloodless, strangely hot
beneath the tattered armour. He knew that exhaustion was finally taking its toll. Flesh and bone had its limits. The defence of the dead prince in his Great Hall had been brutal and artless. Hallways and entrances had become abattoirs. The stench of slaughter remained like a new layer beneath his skin – even the wind could not strip it away.

The battles at the coast and the landings were drawing to a grim close, a lone surviving scout had reported. The Betrullid had been broken, fleeing north along the coast, where the Shield Anvil well knew their horses would become mired in the salt marsh. The pursuing Barghast would make short work of them.

The besiegers' camps had been shattered, as if a tornado had ripped through them. A few hundred Barghast – old women and men and children – wandered through the carnage, gathering the spoils amidst squalling seagulls.

The East Watch redoubt, now a pile of rubble, barely rose above the carpet of bodies. Smoke drifted from it as if from a dying pyre.

Itkovian had watched the Barghast clans push into the city, had seen the Pannion retreat become a rout in the streets below. The fighting had swiftly swept past the palace. A Seerdomin officer had managed to rally a rearguard in Jelarkan's Concourse, and that battle still raged on. But for the Pannions it was a withdrawing engagement. They were buying time for the exodus through what was left of the south and west gates.

A few White Face scouts had ventured into the palace grounds, close enough to discern that defenders remained, but no official contact had been established.

The recruit, Velbara, stood at Itkovian's side, a recruit no longer. Her training in weapons had been one of desperation. She'd not missed the foremost lesson – that of staying alive – that was the guiding force behind every skill she thereafter acquired in the heat of battle. As with all the other Capan newcomers to the company – who now made up most of the survivors under the Shield Anvil's command – she had earned her place as a soldier of the Grey Swords.

Itkovian broke a long silence. 'We yield the Great Hall, now.'

'Yes, sir.'

'The honour of the prince has been reasserted. We must needs depart – there is unfinished business at the Thrall.'

'Can we even yet reach it, sir? We shall need to find a Barghast warchief.'

'We shall not be mistaken for the enemy, sir. Enough of our brothers and sisters lie dead in the city to make our colours well known. Also, given the pursuit has, apart from the concourse, driven the Pannions west onto the plain, we shall likely find our path unopposed.'

'Yes, sir.'

Itkovian fixed his attention one last time on the destroyed redoubt in the killing field to the east. Two Gidrath soldiers in the Great Hall below were from that foolhardy but noble defence, and one of them bore recent wounds that would most likely prove fatal. The other, a bull of a man who had knelt before Rath'Hood, seemed no longer able to sleep. In the four days and nights since retaking the Great Hall, he had but paced during his rest periods, oblivious of his surroundings. Pacing, muttering under his breath, his eyes darkly feverish in their intensity. He and his dying companion were, Itkovian suspected, the last Gidrath still alive outside the Thrall itself.

A Gidrath sworn to Hood, yet he follows my command without hesitation. Simple expedience, one might reasonably conclude. Notions of rivalry dispensed with in the face of the present extremity. Yet . . . I find myself mistrusting my own explanations.

Despite his exhaustion, the Shield Anvil had sensed a growing perturbation. Something had happened. Somewhere. And as if in response he'd felt his blood seem to drain from him, emptying his veins, hollowing his heart, vanishing through a wound he'd yet to find. Leaving him to feel . . . incomplete.
As if I had surrendered my faith. But I have not. 'The void of lost faith is filled with your swollen self.' Words from a long-dead Destriant. One does not yield, one replaces. Faith with doubt, scepticism, denial. I have yielded nothing. I have no horde of words crowding my inner defences. Indeed, I am diminished into silence. Emptied ... as if awaiting renewal. . .

He shook himself. 'This wind screams too loud in my ears,' he said, eyes still on the East Watch redoubt. 'Come, sir, we go below.'

One hundred and twelve soldiers remained in fighting condition, though not one was free of wounds. Seventeen Grey Swords lay dead or slowly dying along one wall. The air reeked of sweat, urine and rotting meat. The Great Hall's entanceways were framed in blackening blood, scraped clean on the tiles for firm footing. The long-gone architect who had given shape to the chamber would have been appalled at what it had become. Its noble beauty now housed a nightmare scene.

On the throne, his skin roughly sewn back onto his half-devoured form, sat Prince Jelarkan, eyeless, teeth exposed in a grin that grew wider as the lips lost their moisture and shrank away on all sides. Death's broadening smile, a precise, poetic horror. Worthy to hold court in what the Great Hall had become. A young prince who had loved his people, now joined to their fate.

It was time to leave. Itkovian stood near the main entrance, studying what was left of his Grey Swords. They in turn faced him, motionless, stone-eyed. To the left, two Capan recruits held the reins of the two remaining warhorses. The lone Gidrath – his companion had died moments earlier – paced with head sunk low, shoulders hunched, back and forth along the wall behind the ranked mercenaries. A battered longsword was held in each hand, the one on the left bent by a wild swing that had struck a marble column two nights past.

The Shield Anvil thought to address his soldiers, if only to honour decorum, but now, as he stood scanning their faces, he realized that he had no words left within him: none to dress what mutually bound them together; none capable of matching the strangely cold pride he felt at that moment. Finally, he drew his sword, tested the straps holding his shield-arm in place, then turned to the main entanceway.

The hallway beyond had been cleared of corpses, creating an avenue between the stacked bodies to the outer doors.

Itkovian strode down the ghastly aisle, stepped between the leaning, battered doors, and out into sunlight.

Following their many assaults, the Pannions had pulled their fallen comrades away from the broad, shallow steps of the approach, had used the courtyard to haphazardly pile the bodies – including those still living, who then either expired from wounds or from suffocation.

Itkovian paused at the top of the steps. The sounds of fighting persisted from the direction of Jelarkan's Concourse, but that was all he heard. Silence shrouded the scene before him, a silence so discordant in what had been a lively palace forecourt, in what had been a thriving city, that Itkovian was deeply shaken for the first time since the siege began.

Dear Fener, find for me the victory in this.

He descended the steps, the stone soft and gummy under his boots. His company followed, not a word spoken.

They strode through the shattered gate, began picking their way through the corpses on the ramp, then in the street beyond. Uncontested by the living, this would nevertheless prove a long journey. Nor would it be a journey without battle. Assailing them now were what their eyes saw, what their noses smelled, and what they could feel underfoot.

A battle that made shields and armour useless, that made flailing swords futile. A soul hardened beyond humanity was the only defence, and for Itkovian that price was too high. I am the Shield Anvil. I surrender to what lies before me. Thicker than smoke, the grief unleashed and now lost, churning this lifeless air. A city has been killed. Even the survivors huddling in the tunnels below – Fener take me, better they never emerge ...
Their route took them between the cemeteries. Itkovian studied the place where he and his soldiers had made a stand. It looked no different from anywhere else his eye scanned. The dead lay in heaps. As Brukhalian had promised, not one pavestone had gone uncontested. This small city had done all it could. Pannion victory might well have been inevitable, but thresholds nevertheless existed, transforming inexorable momentum into a curse.

And now the White Face clans of the Barghast had announced their own inevitability. What the Pannions had delivered had been in turn delivered upon them. We are all pushed into a world of madness, yet it must now fall to each of us to pull back from this Abyss, to drag ourselves free of the descending spiral. From horror, grief must be fashioned, and from grief, compassion.

As the company entered a choked avenue at the edge of the Daru district, a score of Barghast emerged from an alley mouth directly ahead. Bloodied hook-swords in hands, white-painted faces spattered red. The foremost among them grinned at the Shield Anvil.

'Defenders!' he barked in harshly-accented Capan. 'How sits this gift of liberation?'

'Itkovian ignored the question, 'You have kin at the Thrall, sir. Even now I see the protective glow fading.'

'We shall see the bones of our gods, aye,' the warrior said, nodding. His small, dark eyes scanned the Grey Swords. 'You lead a tribe of women.'

'Capan women,' Itkovian said. 'This city's most resilient resource, though it fell to us to discover that. They are Grey Swords, now, sir, and for that we are strengthened.'

'We've seen your brothers and sisters everywhere,' the Barghast warrior growled. 'Had they been our enemies, we would be glad they are dead.'

'And as allies?' the Shield Anvil asked.

The Barghast fighters one and all made a gesture, back of sword-hand to brow, the briefest brush of leather to skin, then the spokesman said, 'The loss fills the shadows we cast. Know this, soldier, the enemy you left to us was brittle.'

'Itkovian shrugged. 'The Pannions' faith knows not worship, only necessity. Their strength is a shallow thing, sir. Will you accompany us to the Thrall?'

'At your sides, soldiers. In your shadow lies honour.'

Most of the structures in the Daru district had burned, collapsing in places to fill the streets with blackened rubble. As the Grey Swords and Barghast wound their way through the least cluttered paths, Itkovian's eyes were drawn to one building still standing, off to their right. A tenement, its walls were strangely bowed. Banked fires had been built against the side facing him, scorching the stones, but the assault of flame had failed for some reason. Every arched window Itkovian could see looked to have been barricaded.

At his side, the Barghast spokesman growled, 'Your kind crowd your barrows.'

The Shield Anvil glanced at the man. 'Sir?'

The warrior nodded towards the smoke-hazed tenement and went on with his commentary, 'Easier, aye, than digging and lining a pit outside the city, then the lines passing buckets of earth. You like a clear view from the walls, it seems. But we do not live among our dead in the manner of your people

'Itkovian turned back to study the tenement, now slightly to the rear on the right. His eyes narrowed. The barricades blocking the windows. Once more, flesh and bone. Twin Tusks, who would build such a necropolis? Surely, it cannot be the consequence of defence?'

'We wandered close,' the warrior at his side said. 'The walls give off their own heat. Jellied liquid bleeds between the cracks.' He made another gesture, this one shuddering, hilt of his hook-sword clattering against the
coin-wrought armour covering his torso. 'By the bones, soldier, we fled.'

'Is that tenement the only one so ... filled?'

'We've seen no other, though we did pass one estate that still held – enlivened corpses stood guard at the gate and on the walls. The air stank of sorcery, an emanation foul with necromancy. I tell you this, soldier, we shall be glad to quit this city.'

Itkovian was silent. He felt rent inside. The Reve of Fener voiced the truth of war. It spoke true of the cruelty that humanity was capable of unleashing upon its own kind. War was played like a game by those who led others; played in an illusory arena of calm reason, but such lies could not survive reality, and reality seemed to have no limits. The Reve held a plea for restraint, and insisted the glory to be found was not to be a blind one, rather a glory born of solemn, clear-eyed regard. Within limitless reality resided the promise of redemption.

That regard was failing Itkovian now. He was recoiling like a caged animal cruelly prodded on all sides. Escape was denied to him, yet that denial was self-imposed, a thing born of his conscious will, given shape by the words of his vow. He must assume this burden, no matter the cost. The fires of vengeance had undergone a transformation within him. He would be, at the last, the redemption – for the souls of the fallen in this city.

Redemption. For everyone else, but not for himself. For that, he could only look to his god. But, dear Fener, what has happened? Where are you? I kneel in place, awaiting your touch, yet you are nowhere to be found. Your realm . . . it feels . . . empty.

Where, now, can I go?

Aye, I am not yet done. I accept this. And when I am? Who awaits me? Who shall embrace me? A shiver ran through him.

Who shall embrace me?

The Shield Anvil pushed the question away, struggled to renew his resolve. He had, after all, no choice. He would be Fener's grief. And his Lord's hand of justice. Not welcome responsibilities, and he sensed the toll they were about to exact.

They neared the plaza before the Thrall. Other Barghast were visible, joining in the convergence. The distant sounds of battle in Jelarkan Concourse, which had accompanied them through most of the afternoon, now fell silent. The enemy had been driven from the city.

Itkovian did not think the Barghast would pursue. They had achieved what they had come here to do. The Pannion threat to the bones of their gods had been removed.

Probably, if Septarch Kulpath still lived, he would reform his tattered forces, reassert discipline and prepare for his next move. Either a counterattack, or a westward withdrawal. There were risks to both. He might have insufficient force to retake the city. And his army, having lost possession of their camps and supply routes, would soon suffer from lack of supplies. It was not an enviable position. Capustan, a small, inconsequential city on the east coast of Central Genabackis, had become a many-sided curse. And the lives lost here signified but the beginning of the war to come.

They emerged onto the plaza.

The place where Brukhalian had fallen lay directly ahead, but all the bodies had been removed – taken, no doubt, by the retreating Pannions. Flesh for yet another royal feast. It doesn't matter. Hood came for him. In person. Was that a sign of honour, or petty gloating on the god's part?

The Shield Anvil's gaze held on that stained stretch of flagstones for a moment longer, then swung to the Thrall's main gate.

The glow was gone. In the shadows beneath the gate's arch, figures had appeared.

Every approach to the plaza had filled with Barghast, but they ventured no further.
Itkovian turned back to his company. His eyes found his captain — who had been the master-sergeant in charge of training the recruits — then Velbara. He studied their tattered, stained armour, their lined, drawn faces. 'The three of us, sirs, to the centre of the plaza.'

The two women nodded.

The three strode onto the concourse. Thousands of eyes fixed on them, followed by a rumbling murmur, then a rhythmic, muted clashing of blade on blade.

Another party emerged, from the right. Soldiers, wearing uniforms Itkovian did not recognize, and, in their company, figures displaying barbed, feline tattooing. Leading the latter group, a man Itkovian had seen before. The Shield Anvil's steps slowed.

*Gruntle.* The name was a hammerblow to his chest. Brutal certainty forced his next thoughts. *The Mortal Sword of Trake, Tiger of Summer. The First Hero is ascended.*

We . . . we are replaced.

Steeling himself, Itkovian resumed his pace, then halted in the centre of the expanse.

A single soldier in the foreign uniform had moved up alongside Gruntle. He closed a hand around the big Daru's striped arm and barked something back to the others, who all stopped, while the man and Gruntle continued on, directly towards Itkovian.

A commotion from the Thrall's gate caught their attention. Priests and priestesses of the Mask Council were emerging, holding a struggling comrade among them as they hastened forward. In the lead, Rath'Trake. A step behind, the Daru merchant, Keruli.

The soldier and Gruntle reached Itkovian first.

Beneath the Daru's helm, Gruntle's tiger eyes studied the Shield Anvil. 'Itkovian of the Grey Swords,' he rumbled, 'it is done.'

Itkovian had no need to ask for elaboration. The truth was a knife in his heart.

'No, it isn't,' the foreign soldier snapped. 'I greet you, Shield Anvil. I am Captain Paran, of the Bridgeburners. Onearm's Host.'

'He is more than that,' Gruntle muttered. 'What he claims now——'

'Is nothing I do willingly,' Paran finished. 'Shield Anvil. Fener has been torn from his realm. He strides a distant land. You – your company – you have lost your god.'

*And so it is known to all.* 'We are aware of this, sir.'

'Gruntle says that your place, your role, is done. The Grey Swords must step aside, for a new god of war has gained pre-eminence. But that doesn't have to be. A path for you has been prepared...' Paran's gaze went past Itkovian. He raised his voice. 'Welcome, Humbrall Taur. Your children no doubt await within the Thrall.'

The Shield Anvil glanced back over his shoulder to see, standing ten paces behind him, a huge Barghast warchief in coin-threaded armour.

'They can wait a while longer,' Humbrall Taur growled. 'I would witness this.'

Paran grimaced. 'Nosy bastard——'

'Aye.'

The Malazan returned his attention to Itkovian and made to speak, but the Shield Anvil interrupted him: 'A moment, sir.' He stepped past the two men.
Rath’Fener jerked and twisted in the grip of his fellow priests. His mask was awry, wisps of grey hair pulled free of the leather strapping. ‘Shield Anvil!’ he cried upon seeing Itkovian's approach. ‘In the name of Fener—’

‘In his name, aye, sir,’ Itkovian cut in. ‘To my side, Captain Norul. The Reve’s law is invoked.’

‘Sir,’ the grizzled woman replied, stepping forward.

‘You can’t!’ Rath’Fener screamed. ‘For this, only the Mortal Sword can invoke the Reve!’

Itkovian stood motionless.

The priest managed to pull one arm forward to jab a finger at the Shield Anvil. ‘My rank is as Destriant! Unless you've one to make claim to that title?’

‘Destriant Karnadas is dead.’

‘That man was no Destriant, Shield Anvil! An Aspirant, perhaps, but my rank was and remains pre-eminent. Thus, only a Mortal Sword can invoke the Reve against me, and this you know.’

Gruntle snorted. ‘Itkovian, Paran here told me there was a betrayal. Your priest sold Brukhalian's life to the Pannions. Not only disgusting, but ill-advised. So.’ He paused. ‘Will any Mortal Sword do? If so, I invoke the Reve.’ He bared his teeth at Rath’Fener. ‘Punish the bastard.’

_We are replaced. The Lord of Battle is transformed indeed._

‘He cannot!’ Rath’Fener shrieked.

‘A bold claim,’ Itkovian said to the masked priest. ‘In order to deny this man’s right to the title, sir, you must call upon our god. In your defence. Do so, sir, and you shall walk from here a free man.’

The eyes within the mask went wide. ‘You know that is impossible, Itkovian!’

‘Then your defence is over, sir. The Reve is invoked. I am become Fener’s hand of justice.’

Rath’Trake, who had been standing nearby in watchful silence, now spoke, ‘There is no need for any of this, Shield Anvil. Your god's absence changes ... everything. Surely, you understand the implications of the traditional form of punishment. A simple execution – not the Reve’s law—’

‘Is denied this man,’ Itkovian said. ‘Captain Norul.’

She strode to Rath’Fener, reached out and plucked him from the hold of the priests and priestesses. He seemed like a rag doll in her large, scarred hands as she swung him round and threw him belly down on the flagstones. She then straddled him, stretching his arms out forward yet side by side. The man shrieked with sudden comprehension.

Itkovian drew his sword. Smoke drifted from the blade. ‘The Reve,’ he said, standing over Rath’Fener's outstretched arms. ‘Betrayal, to trade Brukhalian’s life for your own. Betrayal, the foulest crime to the Reve's law, to Fener himself. Punishment is invoked, in accordance with the Boar of Summer's judgement.’ He was silent for a moment, then he said, ‘Pray, sir, that Fener finds what we send to him.’

‘But he won’t!’ Rath’Trake cried. ‘Don’t you understand? His realm – your god no longer waits within it!’

‘He knows,’ Paran said. ‘This is what happens when it gets personal, and believe me, I'd rather have had no part in this.’

Rath’Trake swung to the captain. ‘And who are you, soldier?’

‘Today. Right now. I am the Master of the Deck, priest. And it seems I am here to negotiate ... on you and your god's behalf. Alas,’ he added wryly, ‘the Shield Anvil is proving admirably ... recalcitrant...’

Itkovian barely heard the exchange. Eyes holding on the priest pinned to the ground before him, he said, ‘Our
Lord is ... gone. Indeed. So ... best pray, Rath’Fener, that a creature of mercy now looks kindly upon you.'

Rath’Trake whirled back to the Shield Anvil at those words, 'By the Abyss, Itkovian – there is no crime so foul to match what you’re about to do! His soul will be torn apart! Where they will go, there are no creatures of mercy! Itkovian—'

'Silence, sir. This judgement is mine, and the Reve’s.'

The victim shrieked.

And Itkovian swung down the sword. Blade’s edge cracked onto the flagstones. Twin gouts of blood shot out from the stumps of Rath’Fener’s wrists. The hands ... were nowhere to be seen.

Itkovian jammed the flat of his blade against the stumps. Flesh sizzled. Rath’Fener’s screams ceased abruptly as unconsciousness took him. Captain Norul moved away from the man, left him lying on the flagstones.

Paran began speaking. ‘Shield Anvil, hear me. Please. Fener is gone – he strides the mortal realm. Thus, he cannot bless you. With what you take upon yourself ... there is nowhere for it to go, no way to ease the burden.’

'I am equally aware of what you say, sir.' Itkovian still stared down at Rath’Fener, who was stirring to consciousness once more. 'Such knowledge is worthless.'

'There's another way, Shield Anvil.'

He turned at that, eyes narrowing.

Paran went on, 'A choice has been ... fashioned. In this I am but a messenger—'

Rath’Trake stepped up to Itkovian. 'We shall welcome you, sir. You and your followers. The Tiger of Summer has need for you, a Shield Anvil, and so offers his embrace—'

'No.'

The eyes within the mask narrowed.

’Itkovian,’ Paran said, ‘this was foreseen ... the path prepared for ... by Elder powers, once more awake and active in this world. I am here to tell you what they would have you do—’

'No. I am sworn to Fener. If need be, I shall share his fate.’

'This is an offer of salvation – not a betrayal!’ Rath’Trake cried.

'Isn’t it? No more words, sirs.’ On the ground below, Rath’Fener had regained awareness. Itkovian studied the man. ’I am not yet done,’ he whispered.

Rath’Fener’s body jerked, a throat-tearing scream erupting from him, his arms snapping as if yanked by invisible, unhuman hands. Dark tattoos appeared on the man’s skin, but not those belonging to Fener – for the god had not been the one to claim Rath’Fener’s severed hands. Wringing, alien script swarmed his flesh as the unknown claimant made its mark, claimed possession of the man’s mortal soul. Words that darkened like burns.

Blisters rose, then broke, spurting thick, yellow liquid.

Screams of unbearable, unimaginable pain filled the plaza, the body on the flagstones spasming as muscle and fat dissolved beneath the skin, then boiled, breaking through.

Yet the man did not die.

Itkovian sheathed his sword.

The Malazan was the first to comprehend. His hand snapped forward, closed on the Shield Anvil’s arm. 'By the Abyss, do not—'
'Captain Norul.'

Face white beneath the rim of her helm, the woman settled a hand on the grip of her sword. 'Captain Paran,' she said in a taut, brittle voice, 'withdraw your touch.'

He swung on her. 'Aye, even you recoil at what he plans—'

'Nevertheless, sir. Release him or I will kill you.'

The Malazan's eyes glittered strangely at that threat, but Itkovian could spare no thought for the young captain. He had a responsibility. Rath'Fener had been punished enough. His pain must end.

*And who shall save me?*

Paran relinquished his grip.

Itkovian bent down to the writhing, barely recognizable shape on the flagstones. 'Rath'Fener, hear me. Yes, I come. Will you accept my embrace?'

For all the envy and malice within the tortured priest, all that led to the betrayal, not just of Brukhalian – the Mortal Sword – but of Fener himself, some small measure of mercy remained in the man's soul. Mercy, and comprehension. His body jerked away, limbs skidding as he sought to crawl from Itkovian's shadow.

The Shield Anvil nodded, then gathered the suppurating figure into his arms and rose.

*I see you recoil, and know it for your final gesture. One that is atonement. To this, I cannot but answer in kind, Rath'Fener. Thus. I assume your pain, sir. No, do not fight this gift. I free your soul to Hood, to death's solace—*

Paran and the others saw naught but the Shield Anvil standing motionless, Rath'Fener in his arms. The rendered, blood-streaked priest continued to struggle for a moment longer, then he seemed to collapse inward, his screams falling into silence.

The man's life unfolded in Itkovian's mind. Before him, the priest's path to betrayal. He saw a young acolyte, pure of heart, cruelly schooled not in piety and faith, but in the cynical lessons of secular power struggles. Rule and administration was a viper's nest, a ceaseless contest among small and petty minds with illusory rewards. A life within the cold halls of the Thrall that had hollowed out the priest's soul. The self filled the new cavern of lost faith, beset by fears and jealousies, to which malevolent acts were the only answer. The need for preservation made every virtue a commodity, to be traded away.

Itkovian understood him, could see each step taken that led, inevitably, to the betrayal, the trading of lives as agreed between the priest and the agents of the Pannion Domin. And within that, Rath'Fener's knowledge that he had in so doing wrapped a viper about himself whose kiss was deadly. He was dead either way, but he had gone too far from his faith, too far to ever imagine he might one day return to it.

*I comprehend you, now, Rath'Fener, but comprehension is not synonymous with absolution. The justice that is your punishment does not waver. Thus, you were made to know pain.*

*Aye, Fener should have been awaiting you; our god should have accepted your severed hands, so that he might look upon you following your death, that he might voice the words prepared for you and you alone – the words on your skin. The final atonement to your crimes. This is as it should have been, sir.*

*But Fener is gone.*

*And what holds you now has . . . other desires.*

*I now deny it the possession of you—*

Rath'Fener's soul shrieked, seeking to pull away once more. Carving words through the tumult: *Itkovian! You must not! Leave me with this, I beg you. Not for your soul – I never meant – please, Itkovian—*
The Shield Anvil tightened his spiritual embrace, breaking the last barriers. No-one is to be denied their grief, sir, not even you.

But barriers, once lowered, could not choose what would pass through.

The storm that hit Itkovian overwhelmed him. Pain so intense as to become an abstract force, a living entity that was itself a thing filled with panic and terror. He opened himself to it, let its screams fill him.

On a field of battle, after the last heart has stilled, pain remains. Locked in soil, in stone, bridging the air from each place to every other, a web of memory, trembling to a silent song. But for Itkovian, his vow denied the gift of silence. He could hear that song. It filled him entire. And he was its counterpoint. Its answer.

I have you now, Rath’Fener. You are found, and so I . . . answer.

Suddenly, beyond the pain, a mutual awareness – an alien presence. Immense power. Not malign, yet profoundly ... different. From that presence: storm-tossed confusion, anguish. Seeking to make of the unexpected gift of a mortal's two hands... something of beauty. Yet that man's flesh could not contain that gift.

Horror within the storm. Horror ... and grief.

Ah, even gods weep. Commend yourself, then, to my spirit. I will have your pain as well, sir.

The alien presence recoiled, but it was too late. Itkovian's embrace offered its immeasurable gift—
—and was engulfed. He felt his soul dissolving, tearing apart – too vast!

There was, beneath the cold faces of gods, warmth. Yet it was sorrow in darkness, for it was not the gods themselves who were unfathomable. It was mortals. As for the gods – they simply paid.

We – we are the rack upon which they are stretched.

Then the sensation was gone, fleeing him as the alien god succeeded in extracting itself, leaving Itkovian with but fading echoes of a distant world's grief – a world with its own atrocities, layer upon layer through a long, tortured history. Fading ... then gone.

Leaving him with heart-rending knowledge.

A small mercy. He was buckling beneath Rath'Fener's pain and the growing onslaught of Capustan's appalling death as his embrace was forced ever wider. The clamouring souls on all sides, not one life's history unworthy of notice, of acknowledgement. Not one he would turn away. Souls in the tens of thousands, lifetimes of pain, loss, love and sorrow, each leading to – each riding memories of its own agonized death. Iron and fire and smoke and falling stone. Dust and airlessness. Memories of piteous, pointless ends to thousands and thousands of lives.

I must atone. I must give answer. To every death. Every death.

He was lost within the storm, his embrace incapable of closing around the sheer immensity of anguish assailing him. Yet he struggled on. The gift of peace. The stripping away of pain's trauma, to free the souls to find their way ... to the feet of countless gods, or Hood's own realm, or, indeed, to the Abyss itself. Necessary journeys, to free souls trapped in their own tortured deaths.

I am the . . .the Shield Anvil. This is for me . . .to hold . . . hold on. Reach – gods! Redeem them, sir! It is your task. The heart of your vows – you are the walker among the dead in the field of battle, you are the bringer of peace, the redeemer of the fallen. You are the mender of broken lives. Without you, death is senseless, and the denial of meaning is the world's greatest crime to its own children. Hold, Itkovian . . . hold fast—

But he had no god against which to set his back, no solid, intractable presence awaiting him to answer his own need. And he was but one mortal soul...

Yet, I must not surrender. Gods, hear me! I may not be yours. But your fallen children, they are mine. Witness, then, what lies behind my cold face. Witness!
In the plaza, amidst a dreadful silence, Paran and the others watched as Itkovian slowly settled to his knees. A rotted, lifeless corpse was slumped in his arms. The lone, kneeling figure seemed – to the captain’s eyes – to encompass the exhaustion of the world, an image that burned into his mind, and one that he knew would never leave him.

Of the struggles – the wars – still being waged within the Shield Anvil, little showed. After a long moment, Itkovian reached up with one hand and unstrapped his helm, lifting it clear to reveal the sweat-stained leather under-helm. The long, dripping hair plastered against his brow and neck shrouded his face as he knelt with head bowed, the corpse in his arms crumbling to pale ash. The Shield Anvil was motionless.

The uneven rise and fall of his frame slowed.

Stuttered.

Then ceased.

Captain Paran, his heart hammering loud in his chest, darted close, grasped Itkovian’s shoulders and shook the man. ‘No, damn you! This isn’t what I’ve come here to see! Wake up, you bastard!’

—peace – I have you now? My gift – ah, this burden—

The Shield Anvil’s head jerked back. Drew a sobbing breath.


Crouching, the Malazan moved round to face Itkovian. ‘Mallet!’ he shouted over a shoulder.

As the healer ran forward, Itkovian, his eyes finding Paran, slowly raised a hand. Swallowing his dismay, he managed to find words. ‘I know not how,’ he rasped, ‘but you have returned me ...’

Paran’s grin was forced. ‘You are the Shield Anvil.’

‘Aye,’ Itkovian whispered. And Fener forgive me, what you have done is no mercy ... ‘I am the Shield Anvil.’

‘I can feel it in the air,’ Paran said, eyes searching Itkovian’s. ‘It’s . . . it’s been cleansed.’

Aye.

And I am not yet done.

Gruntle stood watching as the Malazan and his healer spoke with the Grey Sword commander. The fog of his thoughts – which had been closed around him for what he now realized was days – had begun to thin. Details now assailed him, and the evidence of the changes within himself left him alarmed.

His eyes saw ... differently. Unhuman acuity. Motion – no matter how slight or peripheral – caught his attention, filled his awareness. Judged inconsequential or defined as threat, prey or unknown: instinctive decisions yet no longer buried deep, now lurking just beneath the surface of his mind.

He could feel his every muscle, every tendon and bone, could concentrate on each one to the exclusion of all the others, achieving a spatial sensitivity that made control absolute. He could walk a forest floor in absolute silence, if he so wished. He could freeze, shielding even the breath he drew, and become perfectly motionless.

But the changes he felt were far more profound than these physical manifestations. The violence residing within him was that of a killer. Cold and implacable, devoid of compassion or ambiguity.

And this realization terrified him.

The Tiger of Summer’s Mortal Sword. Yes, Trake, I feel you. I know what you have made of me. Dammit, you could’ve at least asked.
He looked upon his followers, knowing them to be precisely that. Followers, his very own Sworn. An appalling truth. Among them, Stonny Menackis – no, she isn't Trake's. She's chosen Keruli's Elder God. Good. If she was ever to kneel before me we wouldn't be thinking religious thoughts . . . and how likely is that? Ah, lass . . .

Sensing his gaze, she looked at him.

Gruntle winked.

Her brows rose, and he understood her alarm, making him even more amused – his only answer to his terror at the brutal murderer hiding within him.

She hesitated, then approached. 'Gruntle?'

'Aye. I feel like I've just woken up.'

'Yeah, well, the hangover shows, believe me.'

'What's been going on?'

'You don't know?'

'I think I do, but I'm not entirely sure ... of myself, of my own memories. We defended our tenement, and it was uglier than what's between Hood's toes. You were wounded. Dying. That Malazan soldier there healed you. And there's Itkovian – the priest in his arms has just turned to dust – gods, he must've needed a bath—'

'Beru fend us all, it really is you, Gruntle. I'd thought you were lost to m— to us for good.'

'I think a part of me is, lass. Lost to us all.'

'Since when were you the worshipping type?'

'That's the joke on Trake. I'm not. He's made a terrible choice. Show me an altar and I'm more likely to piss on it than kiss it.'

'You might have to kiss it, so I'd suggest you reverse the gestures.'

'Ha ha.' He shook himself, rolling his shoulders, and sighed.

Stonny recoiled slightly at the motion. 'Uh, that was too cat-like for me – your muscles rippled under that barbed skin.'

'And it felt damned good. Rippled? You should be considering new ... possibilities, lass.'

'Keep dreaming, oaf.'

The banter was brittle, and they both sensed it.

Stonny was silent for a moment, then the breath hissed between her teeth. 'Buke. I guess he's gone—'

'No, he's alive. Circling overhead right now, in fact. That sparrowhawk – Keruli's gift to help the man keep an eye on Korbal Broach. He's Soletaken, now.'

Stonny was glaring skyward, hands on her hips. 'Well, that's just great!' She swung a venomous look upon Keruli – who was standing well off to one side, hands within sleeves, unnoticed, watching all in silence. 'Everybody gets blessed but me! Where's the justice in that?'

'Well, you're already blessed with incomparable beauty, Stonny—'

'Another word and I'll cut your tail off, I swear it.'

'I haven't got a tail.'
'Precisely.' She faced him. 'Now listen, we've got some' thing to work out. Something tells me that for both of us, heading back to Darujhistan isn't likely – at least not for the next while, anyway. So, now what? Are we about to part ways, you miserable old man?'

'No rush on all that, lass. Let's see how things settle—'

'Excuse me.'

Both turned at the voice, to find that Rath'Trake had joined them.

Gruntle scowled at the masked priest. 'What?'

'I believe we have matters to discuss, you and I, Mortal Sword.'

'You believe what you like,' the Daru replied. 'I've already made it plain to the Whiskered One that I'm a bad choice—'

Rath'Trake seemed to choke. 'The Whiskered One?' he sputtered in indignation.

Stonny laughed, and clouted the priest on the shoulder. 'He's a reverent bastard, ain't he just?'

'I don't kneel to anyone,' Gruntle growled. 'And that includes gods. And if scrubbing would do it, I'd get these stripes off my hide right now.'

The priest rubbed his bruised shoulder, the eyes within the feline mask glaring at Stonny. At Gruntle's words he faced the Daru again. 'These are not matters open to debate, Mortal Sword. You are what you are—'

'I'm a caravan guard captain, and damned good at it. When I'm sober, that is.'

'You are the master of war in the name of the Lord of Summer—'

'We'll call that a hobby.'

'A – a what!?'

They heard laughter. Captain Paran, still crouching beside Itkovian, was looking their way, and had clearly heard the conversation. The Malazan grinned at Rath'Trake. 'It never goes how you think it should, does it, priest? That's the glory of us humans, and your new god had best make peace with that, and soon. Gruntle, keep playing by your own rules.'

'I hadn't planned otherwise, Captain,' Gruntle replied. 'How fares the Shield Anvil?'

Itkovian glanced over. 'I am well, sir.'

'Now that's a lie,' Stonny said.

'None the less,' the Shield Anvil said, accepting Mallet's shoulder as he slowly straightened.

Gruntle looked down at the two white cutlasses in his hands. 'Hood take me,' he muttered, 'but these have turned damned ugly.' He forced the blades into their scarred, tattered sheaths.

'They are not to leave your hands until this war is done,' Rath'Trake snapped.

'Another word from you, priest,' Gruntle said, 'and you'll be done.'

No-one else had ventured onto the plaza. Corporal Picker stood with the other Bridgeburners at the alley mouth, trying to determine what was going on. Conversations surrounded her, as the soldiers conjectured in time-honoured fashion, guessing at the meaning of the gestures and muted exchanges they witnessed among the dignitaries.

Picker glared about. 'Blend, where are you?'
'Here,' she replied at the corporal's shoulder.

'Why don't you sidle out there and find out what's happening?'

She shrugged. 'I'd get noticed.'

'Really?'

'Besides, I don't need to. It's plain to me what's happened.'

'Really?'

Blend made a wry face. 'You lose your brain when you gave up those torcs, Corporal? Never seen you so consistently wide-eyed before.'

'Really,' Picker repeated, this time in a dangerous drawl. 'Keep it up and you'll regret it, soldier.'

'An explanation? All right. Here's what I think I've been seeing. The Grey Swords had some personal business to clear up, which they've done, only it damn near ripped that commander to pieces. But Mallet, drawing on Hood-knows whose powers, has lent some strength – though I think it was the captain's hand that brought the man back from the dead – and no, I never knew Paran had it in him, and if we've been thinking lately that he was more than just a willow-spined noble-born officer, we've just seen proof of our suspicions. But I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing for us – he won't stick a sword in our backs, Corporal. He might step in front of one heading our way, in fact. As for Gruntle, well, I think he's just shaken himself awake – and that masked priest of Trake's ain't happy about it – but no-one else gives a damn, because sometimes a smile is precisely what we all need.'

Picker's reply was a grunt.

'And finally, after watching all that,' Blend continued, 'it's time for Humbrall Taur and his Barghast...'

Humbrall Taur had raised his axe high, and had begun walking towards the Thrall's gate. Warchiefs and shoulder-men and women emerged from the gathered tribes, crossing the plaza in the giant warrior's wake.

Trots pushed his way through the knot of Bridgeburners and joined them.

Staring at his back, Picker snorted.

'He goes to meet his gods,' Blend murmured. 'Give him that, Corporal. '

'Let's hope he stays with them,' she replied. 'Hood knows, he don't know how to command—'

'But Captain Paran does,' Blend said.

She glanced at her companion, then shrugged. 'I suppose he does at that.'

'Might be worth cornering Antsy,' Blend continued in a low tone, 'and anyone else who's been talking through their cracks of late...'

'Cornering, aye. Then beating them senseless. Sound plan, Blend. Find us Detoran. Seems we got personal business, too, to clear up.'

'Well. Guess your brain's working after all.'

Picker's only reply was another grunt.

Blend slipped back into the crowd.

*Personal business. I like the sound of that. We'll straighten 'em up for ya, Captain. Hood knows, it's the least I can do...*
Circling high overhead, the sparrowhawk's sharp eyes missed nothing. The day was drawing to a close, shadows lengthening. Banks of dust on the plain to the west revealed the retreating Pannions – still being driven ever westward by elements of Humbrall Taur's Barahn clan.

In the city itself, still more thousands of Barghast moved through the streets. Clearing away dead, whilst tribes worked to excavate vast pits beyond the north wall, which had begun filling as commandeered wagons began filing out from Capustan. The long, soul-numbing task of cleansing the city had begun.

Directly below, the plaza's expanse was now threaded with figures, Barghast moving in procession from streets and alley mouths, following Humbrall Taur as the warchief approached the Thrall's gate. The sparrowhawk that had once been Buke heard no sound but the wind, lending the scene below a solemn, ethereal quality.

None the less, the raptor drew no closer. Distance was all that kept it sane, was all that had been keeping it sane since the dawn.

From here, far above Capustan, vast dramas of death and desperation were diminished, almost into abstraction. Tides of motion, the blurring of colours, the sheer muddiness of humanity – all diminished, the futility reduced to something strangely manageable.

Burned-out buildings. The tragic end of innocents. Wives, mothers, children. Desperation, horror and grief, the storms of destroyed lives—

No closer.

No closer.

Ever again.

The sparrowhawk caught an updraught, swept skyward, eyes now on the livening stars as night swallowed the world below.

There was pain in the gifts of the Elder Gods.

But sometimes, there was mercy.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The birth of Barghast gods rang like a hammer on the anvil of the pantheon. Primordial in their aspect, these ascended spirits emerged from the Hold of the Beast, that most ancient of realms from the long-lost Elder Deck. Possessors of secrets and mysteries born in the bestial shadow of humanity, theirs was a power wreathed in antiquity.

Indeed, the other gods must have felt the tremor of their rising, rearing their heads in alarm and consternation. One of their own, after all, had just been abandoned in the mortal realm, whilst a First Hero assumed the warrior mantle in his place. More, the Fallen One had returned to the game in dire malice, corrupting the warrens to announce his deadly desire for vengeance and, it must be said in clear-eyed retrospect, domination.

Burn’s sleep was fevered. Human civilization floundered in countless lands, drowning in the mire of spilled blood. These were dark times, and it was a darkness that seemed made for the dawn of the Barghast gods . . .

In the Wake of Dreams
Imrygyn Tallobant the Younger

The wizard’s eyes opened.

To see, squatting atop a backpack directly in front of him, a small figure of wrapped sticks and knotted twine, its head an acorn, that now cocked slightly to one side.

‘Awake. Yes. A mind once more sound.’

Quick Ben grimaced. ‘Talamandas. For a moment there, I thought I was reliving a particularly unpleasant nightmare.’

‘By your ravings these past few days and nights, Ben Adaephon Delat, you’ve lived through more than a few unpleasant nightmares, yes?’

Light rain was pattering on the tent’s sloped walls. The wizard pushed the furs from his body and slowly sat up. He found he was wearing little more than his thin wool undergarments: leather armour and quilted tunic had been removed. He was sweat-chilled, the grubby, coarse wool damp. ‘Ravings?’

The sticksnare’s laugh was soft. ‘Oh yes. And I listened, I listened indeed. So, you know the cause of the illness besetting the Sleeping Goddess. You would set yourself in the Crippled God’s path, match his wits if not his power, and defeat all he seeks. Mortal, yours is a surpassing conceit ... which I cannot but applaud.’

Quick Ben sighed, scanning the tumbled contents of the tent. ‘Mockingly, no doubt. Where are the rest of my clothes?’

‘I do not mock you, Wizard. Indeed, I am humbled by the depth of your ... integrity. To find such, in a common soldier, one serving a malevolent, spiteful Empress who sits on a blood-stained throne, ruling an empire of murderers—’

‘Now hold on, you misbegotten puppet—’

Talamandas laughed. ‘Oh, but it has always been so, has it not? Within the rotting corpse hide diamonds! Pure of heart and stalwart with honour, yet besieged within their own house by the foulest of masters. And when the historians are done, the ink drying, may the house shine and sparkle even as it burns!’

‘You’ve lost me, runt,’ Quick Ben muttered. ‘How long have I been ... out?’

‘Long enough. With the city retaken, the Thrall yielding the bones of our Founders, and the Pannions driven
into the maw of Brood and your Malazan kin, well, you have missed most of the fun. For the moment, in any case. The tale's far from done, after all.'

The wizard found his quilted tunic. 'All of that,' he muttered as he pulled the heavy garment on, 'would have been nice to witness, but given my present lack of efficacy—'

'Ah, as to that. . .'

Quick Ben glanced at the sticksnare. 'Go on.'

'You would best the Crippled God, yet you find yourself unable to use the powers you possess. How, then, will you manage?

He reached for his leggings. 'I'll think of something, eventually. Of course, you think you have an answer for me, don't you?'

'I do.'

'Well, let's hear it, then.'

'My gods are awakened, Wizard. Nose in the air, gleaning the scent of things, given to troubled thought and dour contemplation. You, Ben Adaephon Delat, pursue a worthy course. Sufficiently bold to snare their regard. Leading to certain conclusions. Sacrifices must be made. To your cause. Into the warrens, a necessary step. Thus, the need to supply you with ... suitable armour. So that you may be fended from the Crippled God's poisons.'

Quick Ben massaged his brow. 'Talamandas, if you and your gods have sewn together some kind of impervious cloak or baldric or something, just say so. Please.'

'Nothing so ... bland, Wizard. No, your flesh itself must be immune to infection. Your mind must be implacable to fevers and other similar plagues. You must be imbued with protective powers that by nature defy all that the Crippled God attempts when he seeks to thwart you.'

'Talamandas, what you describe is impossible.'

'Precisely.' The sticksnare untangled itself and rose. 'Thus. Before you, stands the worthy sacrifice. Twigs and twine do not sicken. A soul that has known death cannot be made fevered. The protective powers binding me are ancient and vast, the highest of sorceries to trap me within myself—'

'Yet you were taken. Once before. Torn from your barrow—'

'By necromancers, rot their foul hearts. There shall be no repetition. My gods have seen to that, with the power of their own blood. I shall accompany you, Ben Adaephon Delat. Into the warrens. I am your shield. Use me. Take me where you will.'

Quick Ben's dark eyes narrowed as he studied the stick-snare. 'I don't walk straight paths, Talamandas. And no matter how little sense my actions may make to you, I won't waste time with explanations.'

'My gods have given their trust in you, mortal.'

'Why?'

'Because they like you.'

'Hood's breath! What have I been raving about?'

'I cannot in truth tell you why they trust you, Wizard, only that they do. Such matters are not for me to question. In your fevered state, you revealed the way your mind works — you wove a net, a web, yet even I could not discern all the links, the connecting threads. Your grasp of causality surpasses my intellect, Ben Adaephon Delat. Perhaps my gods caught a glimmer of your design. Perhaps no more than a hint, triggering an instinctive suspicion that in you, mortal, the Crippled God will meet his match.'
Quick Ben climbed to his feet and strode to where his leather armour and Bridgeburner colours waited in a heap near the tent flap. 'That's the plan, anyway. All right, Talamandas, we've a deal. I admit, I was at a loss as to how to proceed without my warrens.' He paused, turned to the sticksnare once more. 'Maybe you can answer me a few questions. Someone else is in this game. Seems to be shaping its own opposition to the Fallen One. Do you know who or what that might be?'

Talamandas shrugged. 'Elder Gods, Wizard. My Barghast gods conclude their actions have been reactionary by and large—'

'Reactionary?'

'Aye, a kind of fighting withdrawal. They seem incapable of changing the future, only preparing for it.'

'That's damned fatalistic of them.'

'Their perennial flaw, Wizard.'

Quick Ben shrugged himself into his armour. 'Mind you,' he muttered, 'it's not really their battle. Except for maybe K'rul...'

Talamandas leapt to the floor and scrambled to stand directly in front of the wizard. 'What did you say? K'rul? What do you know of him?'

Quick Ben raised an eyebrow. 'Well, he made the warrens, after all. We swim his immortal blood – we mages, and everyone else who employs the pathways of sorcery, including the gods. Yours, too, I imagine.'

The sticksnare hopped about, twig fingers clutching at the yellowed grass bound to its acorn head. 'No-one knows all that! No-one! You – you – how can you – aagh! The web! The web of your infernal brain!'

'K'rul is in worse shape even than Burn, given the nature of the Crippled God's assault,' Quick Ben said. 'So, if I felt helpless, imagine how he must feel. Makes that fatalism a little more understandable, don't you think? And if that's not enough, all the last surviving Elder Gods have lived under a host of nasty curses for a long, long time. Haven't they? Given those circumstances, who wouldn't be feeling a little fatalistic?'

'Bastard mortal! Warp and weft! Deadly snare! Out with it, damn you!'

Quick Ben shrugged. 'Your Barghast gods aren't ready to go it alone. Not by throwing all their weight behind me, in any case. Not a chance, Talamandas – they're still babes in the woods. Now, the Elder Gods have been on the defensive – tried to go it alone, I imagine. Legendary hubris, with that lot. But that wasn't working, so they've gone looking for allies.

'Thus... who was at work refashioning you into something capable of shielding me in the warrens? Hood, for one, I'd imagine. Layers of death protecting your soul. And your own Barghast gods, of course. Cutting those binding spells that constrained your own power. And Fener's thrown you a bone, or Treach, or whoever's on that particular roost right now – you can hit back if something comes at you. And I'd guess the Queen of Dreams has stepped in, a bridge between you and the Sleeping Goddess, to turn you into a lone and likely formidable crusader against the poison in her flesh, and in K'rul's veins. So, you're all ready to go, but where? How? And that's where I come in. How am I doing so far, Talamandas?'

'We are relying upon you, Ben Adaephon Delat,' the sticksnare growled.

'To do what?'

'Whatever it is you're planning to do!' Talamandas shrieked. 'And it had better work!'

After a long moment, Quick Ben grinned down at the creature.

But said nothing.

The sticksnare scrambled after Quick Ben when he left the tent. The mage paused to look around. What he had thought to be rain had been, in fact, water dripping from the leaves of a broad, verdant oak, its branches
hanging over the tent. It was late afternoon, the sky clear overhead.

A Barghast encampment was sprawled out on all sides. Wicker and hide dwellings rose from the forest floor along the base of a lightly treed slope directly behind the wizard, whilst before him – to the south – were the dun-coloured humps of rounded tipis. The different styles reflected at least two distinct tribes. The mud-churned pathways crisscrossing the encampment were crowded with warriors, many wounded or bearing fallen kin.

'Where,' Quick Ben asked Talamandas, 'are my fellow Bridgeburners?'

'First into Capustan, Wizard, and still there. At the Thrall, likely.'

'Did they get into any fighting?'

'Only at the north gate – breaking through the siege line. Swiftly done. There are none wounded, Ben Adaephon Delat. Making your tribe unique, yes?'

'So I see,' Quick Ben murmured, watching the warriors filing into the camp. 'Not much duelling of late, I take it.'

The sticksnare grunted. 'True enough. Our gods have spoken to our shamans, who have in turn conveyed to the clan warriors a ... chastisement. It would appear that the White Faces are not yet done with these Pannions – or with your war, Wizard.'

Quick Ben glanced down. 'You'll be marching south with us, Talamandas?'

'We shall. It is not enough blunting the sword – we must sever the hand wielding it.'

'I need to contact my allies ... in the army to the west. Should I attempt a warren?'

'I am ready.'

'Good. Let's find somewhere private.'

Two leagues to the west of Capustan, in the shadows edging down a broad slope, the massed ranks of Malazan heavy infantry locked shields and advanced. Marines armed with crossbows ranged ahead, firing quarrels into the milling line of Betaklites less than thirty paces distant.

Whiskeyjack watched through the slits of his helm's visor from where he had reined in at the hill's crest, his horse tossing its head at the smell of blood. Aides and messengers gathered around him.

Dujek's flank attack on the Septarch's regiment of archers had virtually eliminated the whizzing flight of arrows from the valley side opposite. Whiskeyjack's heavy infantry had drawn their fire, which had provided Onearm's heavy cavalry the time needed to mount a charge along the north slope. Had the Pannion archers the discipline – and competent commanders – they would have had time to wheel in formation and loose at least three flights at the charging cavalry, perhaps sufficient to beat off the attack. Instead, they had milled in confusion upon seeing the horsewarriors closing on their right flank, then had disintegrated into a rout. Pursuit and wholesale slaughter followed.

The marines slipped back through aisles in the advancing heavy infantry. They would reappear on each wing, resuming their crossbow-fire against the enemy line's edges. Before then, however, four thousand silent, scale-armoured and shield-bearing veterans closed with the Betaklites. Javelins preceded their charge when but a dozen paces remained, the long-headed, barbed spears cutting into the Pannion line – a tactic peculiar to Onearm's Host – then thrusting swords snapped from scabbards. And the Malazans surged forward.

The Betaklite line crumpled.

Whiskeyjack's heavy infantry reformed into individual four-squad wedges, each one independently driving deeper into the Pannion ranks once the battle was fully joined.
The details before the commander were precise in following the Malazan doctrine of set battles, as devised by Dassem Ultor decades past. Shield-locked lines and squares worked best in defending engagements. When delivering chaos into massed enemy ranks in an assault, however, it was found that smaller, tighter units worked best. A successful advance that drove the enemy back often lost its momentum, and, indeed, its contact with the retreating foes, amidst a corpse-cluttered ground and the need to maintain closed ranks. Almost a thousand four-squad wedges, of thirty-five to forty soldiers each, on the other hand, actually delayed the moment of rout. Flight was more difficult, communication problematic, and lines of sight to fellow soldiers often broken – none knew what the others were doing, and in the face of that uncertainty, they often hesitated before fleeing – a fatal option. There was another choice, of course, and that was to fight, but it took a very special army to be capable of maintaining such discipline and adaptability in those circumstances, and in those instances the Malazan forces would hold their shield-locked formation.

These Betaklites possessed none of these qualities. Within fifty heartbeats, the division was shattered. Entire companies, finding themselves surrounded by the silent, deadly Malazans, flung their weapons down.

This part of the battle, Whiskeyjack concluded, was finished.

A Saltoan messenger rode up to Whiskeyjack's side. 'Sir! Word from the warlord!'

Whiskeyjack nodded.

'The Ilgres Barghast and their Rhivi skirmishers have broken the Seerdomin and Urdomen. There was a Mage Cadre active in the engagement, at least at the start, but the Tiste Andii nullified them. Brood owns the field on the south flank.'

'Very good,' Whiskeyjack grunted. 'Anything else?'

'Sir, a well-aimed slingstone from a Rhivi gave Septarch Kulpath a third eye – killed the bastard outright. We are in possession of his army’s standard, sir.'

'Inform the warlord that the Betaklites, Beklites, Scalandi and Desandi companies have been defeated. We command the centre and north. Enquire of the warlord as to our next move – my scouts inform me that upwards of two hundred thousand Tenescowri are encamped half a league to the east. Rather mauled by all accounts, yet potentially a nuisance. At the same time – and on this Dujek and I are agreed – an unmitigated slaughter of these peasants would not sit well with us.'

'I will convey your words, Commander.' The messenger saluted, swung his horse round, and rode southward.

A slash of darkness opened before Whiskeyjack, startling his horse and those of the riders nearest him. Snorting, stamping, the beast came close to rearing until a low growl from Whiskeyjack calmed it. His retinue managed the same.

Korlat emerged from her warren. Her black armour glittered with blood-spray, but he saw no obvious wounds. None the less ...

'Are you injured?'

She shook her head. 'A hapless Pannion warlock. Whiskeyjack, I need you to come with me. Are you done here?'

He grimaced, ever loath to leave a battle – even one drawing to a quick, satisfying conclusion. 'I'll assume it's important – enough to have you risk your warren – so the answer is yes. Do we go far?'

'To Dujek's command tent.'

'He's taken wounds?'

'No. All is well, you old worrier,' she said, cracking a smile. 'How long would you have me wait?'

'Well enough,' he growled. He turned to an officer sitting on a roan destrier nearby. 'Barack, you're in charge
The young man's eyes widened. 'Sir, I'm a captain—'

'So here's your chance. Besides, I'm a sergeant -- at least I would be if I was still drawing coin on the Empress's paylists. Besides again, you're the only officer present who doesn't have his or her own company to worry about.'

'But sir, I am Dujek's liaison to the Black Moranth—'

'And are they here?'

'Uh, no sir.'

'So, enough jawing and make sure things get wrapped up here, Barack.'

'Yes, sir.'

Whiskeyjack dismounted and handed the reins of his charger to an aide, then joined Korlat. He resisted an urge to draw her into his arms, and was disconcerted to see a glimmer of prescient knowledge in her eyes.

'Not in front of the troops, surely,' she murmured.

He growled. 'Lead me through, woman.'

Whiskeyjack had travelled a warren only a few times, but his memories of those fraught journeys did little to prepare him for Kurald Galain. Taking him by the hand, Korlat drew him into the ancient realm of Mother Dark, and though he could feel the sure grip of her fingers, he stepped into blindness.

No light. Gritty flagstones under his boots, the air perfectly motionless, scentless, with an ambient temperature that seemed no different from that of his skin.

He was pulled forward, his boots seeming to barely touch the floor.

A sudden streak of grey assaulted his eyes, and he heard Korlat hiss: 'We are assailed even here -- the Crippled God's poison seeps deep, Whiskeyjack. This does not bode well.'

He cleared his throat. 'No doubt Anomander Rake has recognized the threat, and if so, do you know what he plans to do about it?'

'One thing at a time, dear lover. He is the Knight of Darkness, the Son. Mother Dark's own champion. Not one to shy from a confrontation.'

'I'd never have guessed,' he replied wryly. 'What's he waiting for, then?'

'We're a patient people, us Tiste Andii. The true measure of power lies in the wisdom to wait for the propitious moment. When it comes, and he judges it to be so, then Anomander Rake will respond.'

'Presumably the same holds for unleashing Moon's Spawn on the Pannion Domin.'

'Aye.'

*And, somehow, Rake's managed to hide a floating fortress the size of a mountain... You've considerable faith in your Lord, haven't you?*

He felt her shrug through the hand clasped in his. 'There is sufficient precedent to disregard notions of faith, when it comes to my Lord. I am comforted by certainty.'

'Glad to hear it. And are you comfortable with me, Korlat?'

'Devious man. The answer to every facet of that question is yes. Would you now have me ask in kind?'
'You shouldn't have to.'

'Tiste Andii or human, when it comes to males, they're all the same. Perhaps I shall force the words from you none the less.'

'You won't have to work hard. My answer's the same as yours.'

'Which is?'

'Why, the very word you used, of course.'

He grunted at the jab in his ribs. 'Enough of that. We've arrived.'

The portal opened to painful light – the interior of Dujek's command tent, shrouded in the gloom of late afternoon. They stepped within, the warren closing silently behind them.

'If all this was just to get me alone—'

'Gods, the ego!' She gestured with her free hand and a ghostly figure took form in front of Whiskeyjack. A familiar face – that smiled.

'What a charming sight,' the apparition said, eyeing them. 'Hood knows, I can't recall the last time I had a woman.'

'Watch your tongue, Quick Ben,' Whiskeyjack growled, disengaging his hand from Korlat's. 'It's been a while, and you look terrible.'

'Why, thanks a whole lot, Commander. I'll have you know I feel even worse. But I can traverse my warrens, now, more or less shielded from the Fallen One's poison. I bring news from Capustan – do you want it or not?'

Whiskeyjack grinned. 'Go ahead.'

'The white faces hold the city.'

'We'd guessed that much, once Twist delivered the news of your success with the Barghast, and once the Pannion army stumbled into our laps.'

'Fine. Well, assuming you've taken care of that army, I'll add just one more thing. The Barghast are marching with us. South. If you and Dujek found things tense dealing with Brood and Kallor and company – your pardon, Korlat – now you've got Humbrall Taur to deal with as well.'

Whiskeyjack grunted at that. 'What's he like, then?'

'Too clever by half, but at least he's united the clans, and he's clear-eyed on the mess he's heading into.'

'I'm glad one of us is. How fare Paran and the Bridgeburners?'

'Reportedly fine, though I haven't seen them in a while. They are at the Thrall – with Humbrall Taur and the survivors of the city's defenders.'

Whiskeyjack's brows rose. 'There are survivors?'

'Aye, so it seems. Non-combatants still cowering in tunnels. And some Grey Swords. Hard to believe, isn't it? Mind you, I doubt there's much fight left in them. From what I've heard about Capustan's streets...' Quick Ben shook his head. 'You'll have to see it to believe it. So will I, in fact, which is what I'm about to do. With your leave, that is.'

'With caution, I trust.'

The wizard smiled. 'No-one will see me unless I want them to, sir. When do you anticipate reaching Capustan?'
Whiskeyjack shrugged. 'We've the Tenescowri to deal with. That could get complicated.'

Quick Ben's dark eyes narrowed. 'You're not intending to parley with them, are you?'

'Why not? Better than slaughter, Wizard.'

'Whiskeyjack, the Barghast are returning with stories . . . of what happened in Capustan, of what the Tenescowri did to the defenders. They have a leader, those Tenescowri, a man named Anaster, the First Child of the Dead Seed. The latest rumour is he personally skinned Prince Jelarkan, then served him up as the main course of a banquet – in the prince's own throne room.'

The breath hissed from Korlat.

Grimacing, Whiskeyjack said, 'If such crimes can be laid with certainty at the feet of this Anaster – or of any Tenescowri – then Malazan military law will prevail.'

'Simple execution grants them a mercy not accorded their victims.'

'Then they will be fortunate that Onearm's Host captured them, and none other.'

Quick Ben still looked troubled. 'And Capustan's surviving citizens, the defenders and the priests of the Thrall – will they have no say in the disposition of the prisoners? Sir, troubled times might await us.'

'Thank you for the warning, Wizard.'

After a moment, Quick Ben shrugged, then sighed. 'See you in Capustan, Whiskeyjack.'

'Aye.'

The apparition faded.

Korlat turned to the commander. 'Malazan military law.'

He raised his brows. 'My sense of Caladan Brood is that he's not the vengeful type. Do you anticipate a clash?'

'I know what Kallor will advise.' A hint of tension was present in her tone.

'So do I, but I don't think the warlord's inclined to listen. Hood knows, he hasn't thus far.'

'We have not yet seen Capustan.'

He released a long breath, drew off his gauntlets. 'Horrors to answer in kind.'

'An unwritten law,' she said in a low voice. 'An ancient law.'

'I don't hold to it,' Whiskeyjack growled. 'We become no better, then. Even simple execution...’ He faced her. 'Over two hundred thousand starving peasants. Will they stand about like sheep? Not likely. As prisoners? We couldn't feed them if we tried, nor have we sufficient soldiers to spare guarding them.'

Korlat's eyes were slowly widening. 'You are proposing we leave them, aren't you?'

_She's leading up to something here. I've caught glimmers before, the whisper of a hidden wedge, poised to drive itself between us._ 'Not all of them. We'll take their leaders. This Anaster, and his officers – assuming there are any. If the Tenescowri walked a path of atrocity, then the First Child led the way.' Whiskeyjack shook his head. 'But the real criminal awaits us within the Domin itself – the Seer – who would starve his followers into cannibalism, into madness. Who would destroy his own people. We'd be executing the victims – _his_ victims.'

The Tiste Andii frowned. 'By that token, we should absolve the Pannion armies as well, Whiskeyjack.'

The Malazan's grey eyes hardened. 'Our enemy is the Seer. Dujek and I agree on this – we're not here to annihilate a nation. The armies that impede our march to the Seer, we will deal with. Efficiently. Retribution
and revenge are distractions.'

'And what of liberation? The conquered cities—'

'Incidental, Korlat. I'm surprised at your confusion on this. Brood saw it the same as we did – at that first parlary when tactics were discussed. We strike for the heart—'

'I believe you misunderstood, Whiskeyjack. For over a decade, the warlord has been waging a war of liberation – from the rapacious hunger of your Malazan Empire. Caladan Brood has now shifted his focus – a new enemy – but the same war. Brood is here to free the Pannions—'

'Hood's breath! You can't free a people from themselves!'

'He seeks to free them from the Seer's rule.'

'And who exalted the Seer to his present status?'

'Yet you speak of absolving the commonalty, even the soldiers of the Pannion armies, Whiskeyjack. And that is what is confusing me.'

Not entirely. 'We speak at cross-purposes here, Korlat. Neither I nor Dujek will willingly assume the role of judge and executioner – should we prove victorious. Nor are we here to put the pieces back together for the Pannions. That's for them to do. That responsibility will turn us into administrators, and to effectively administrate, we must occupy.'

She barked a harsh laugh. 'And is that not the Malazan way, Whiskeyjack?'

'This is not a Malazan war!'

'Isn't it? Are you sure?'

He studied her through slitted eyes. 'What do you mean? We're outlawed, woman. Onearm's Host is... He fell silent, seeing a flatness come to Korlat's gaze, then realized – too late – that he had just failed a test. And with that failure had ended the trust that had grown between them. Damn, I walked right into it. Wide-eyed stupid.

She smiled then, and it was a smile of pain and regret. 'Dujek approaches. You might as well await him here.'

The Tiste Andii turned and strode from the tent.

Whiskeyjack stared after her, then, when she'd left, he flung his gauntlets on the map table and sat down on Dujek's cot. Should I have told you, Korlat? The truth? That we've got a knife at our throats. And the hand holding it – on Empress Laseen's behalf – is right here in this very camp, and has been ever since the beginning.

He heard a horse thump to a halt outside the tent. A few moments later Dujek Onearm entered, his armour sheathed in dust. 'Ah, wondered where you'd got to—'

'Brood knows,' Whiskeyjack cut in, his voice low and raw.

Dujek paused but a moment. 'He does, does he? What, precisely, has he worked out?'

'That we're not quite as outlawed as we've made out to be.'

'Any further?'

'Isn't that enough, Dujek?'

The High Fist strode over to the side table where waited a jug of ale. He unstoppered it and poured two tankards full. 'There are ... mitigating circumstances—'

'Relevant only to us. You and I—'
'And our army—'

'Who believe their lives are forfeit in the Empire, Dujek. Made into victims once again – no, it's you and I and no-one else this time.'

Dujek drained his tankard, refilled it in silence. Then he said, 'Are you suggesting we spread our hand on the table for Brood and Korlat? In the hopes that they'll do something about our ... predicament?'

'I don't know – not if we're hoping for absolution for having maintained this deceit all this time. That would be a motive that wouldn't sit well with me, even if patently untrue. Appearances—'

'Will make it seem precisely that, aye. "We've been lying to you from the very beginning to save our own necks. But now that you know, we'll tell you ..." Gods, that's insulting even to me and I'm the one saying it. All right, the alliance is in trouble—'

A thud against the tent flap preceded the arrival of Artanthos. 'Your pardon, sirs,' the man said, flat eyes studying the two soldiers in turn before he continued, 'Brood has called for a counsel.'

_Ah, standard-bearer, your timing is impeccable . . ._

Whiskeyjack collected the tankard awaiting him and drained it, then turned to Dujek and nodded.

_The High Fist sighed. 'Lead the way, Artanthos, we're right behind you.'_

The encampment seemed extraordinarily quiet. The Mhybe had not realized how comforting the army's presence had been on the march. Now, only elders and children and a few hundred rearguard Malazan soldiers remained. She had no idea how the battle fared; either way, deaths would make themselves felt. Mourning among the Rhivi and Barghast, bereft voices rising into the darkness.

_Victory is an illusion. In all things._

She fled in her dreams every night. Red and was, eventually, caught, only to awaken. Sudden, as if torn away, her withered body shivering, aches filling her joints. An escape of sorts, yet in truth she left one nightmare for another.

_An illusion. In all things._

This wagon bed had become her entire world, a kind of mock sanctuary that reappeared each and every time sleep ended. The rough woollen blankets and furs wrapped around her were a personal landscape, the bleak terrain of dun folds startlingly similar to what she had seen when in the dragon's grip, when the undead beast flew high over the tundra in her dream, yielding an echo of the freedom she had experienced then, an echo that was painfully sardonic.

To either side of her ran wooden slats. Their patterns of grain and knots had become intimate knowledge. Far to the north, she recalled, among the Nathii, the dead were buried in wood boxes. The custom had been born generations ago, arising from the more ancient practice of interring corpses in hollowed-out tree trunks. The boxes were then buried, for wood was born of earth and to earth it must return. A vessel of life now a vessel of death. The Mhybe imagined that, if a dead Nathii could see, moments before the lid was lowered and darkness swallowed all, that Nathii's vision would match hers.

_Lying in the box, unable to move, awaiting the lid. A body past usefulness, awaiting the darkness._

But there would be no end. Not for her. They were keeping it away. Playing out their own delusions of mercy and compassion. The Daru who fed her, the Rhivi woman who cleaned and bathed her and combed the wispy remnants of her hair. Gestures of malice. Playing out, over and over, scenes of torture.

_The Rhivi woman sat above her now, steadily pulling the horn comb through the Mhybe's hair, humming a child's song. A woman the Mhybe remembered from her other life. Old, she had seemed back then, a hapless woman who had been kicked in the head by a bhederin and so lived in a simple world._
I'd thought it simple. But that was just one more illusion. No, she lives amidst unknowns, amidst things she cannot comprehend. It is a world of terror. She sings to fend off the fear born of her own ignorance. Given tasks to keep her busy.

Before I had come along for her, this woman had helped prepare corpses. After all, the spirits worked through such childlike adults. Through her, the spirits could come close to the fallen, and so comfort them and guide them into the world of the ancestors.

It could be nothing other than malice, the Mhybe concluded, to have set this woman upon her. Possibly, she was not even aware that the subject of her attentions was still alive. The woman met no-one's eyes, ever. Recognition had fled with the kick of a bhederin's hoof.

The comb dragged back and forth, back and forth. The humming continued its ceaseless round.

Spirits below, I would rather even your terror of the unknown. Rather that, than the knowledge of my daughter's betrayal – the wolves she has set upon me, to pursue me in my dreams. The wolves, which are her hunger. The hunger, which has already devoured my youth and now seeks yet more. As if anything's left. Am I to be naught but food for my daughter's burgeoning life? A final meal, a mother reduced to nothing more than sustenance?

Ah, Silverfox, are you every daughter? Am I every mother? There have been no rituals severing our lives – we have forgotten the meaning behind the Rhivi ways, the true reasons for those rituals. I ever yield. And you suckle in ceaseless demand. And so we are trapped, pulled deeper and deeper, you and I.

To carry a child is to age in one's bones. To weary one's blood. To stretch skin and flesh. Birthing splits a woman in two, the division a thing of raw agony. Splitting young from old. And the child needs, and the mother gives.

I have never weaned you, Silverfox. Indeed, you have never left my womb. You, daughter, draw far more than just milk.

Spirits, please, grant me surcease. This cruel parody of motherhood is too much to bear. Sever me from my daughter. For her sake. My milk is become poison. I can feed naught but spite, for there is nothing else within me. And I remain a young woman in this aged body—

The comb caught on a snarl, tugging her head back. The Mhybe hissed in pain, shot a glare up at the woman above her. Her heart suddenly lurched.

Their gazes were locked.

The woman, who looked at no-one, was looking at her.

I, a young woman in an old woman's body. She, a child in a woman's body—

Two prisons, in perfect reflection.

Eyes locked.

'Dear lass, you look weary. Settle here with magnanimous Kruppe and he will pour you some of this steaming herbal brew.'

'I will, thank you.'

Kruppe smiled, watching Silverfox slowly lower herself onto the ground and lean back against the spare saddle, the small hearth between them. The well-rounded curves of the woman were visible through the worn deer-leather tunic. 'So where are your friends?' she asked.

'Gambling. With the crew of the Trygalle Trade Guild. Kruppe, for some odd reason, has been barred from such games. An outrage.' The Daru handed her a tin cup. 'Mostly sage, alas. If you've a cough—'
'I haven't, but it's welcome anyway.'

'Kruppe, of course, never coughs.'

'And why is that?'

'Why, because he drinks sage tea.'

Her brown eyes slipped past his and settled on the wagon a dozen paces away. 'How does she fare?'

Kruppe's brows lifted. 'You might ask her, lass.'

'I can't. I can be nothing other than an abomination for my mother – her stolen youth, in the flesh. She despises me, with good reason, especially now that Korlat's told her about my T'lan Ay.'

'Kruppe wonders, do you now doubt the journey undertaken?'

Silverfox shook her head, sipped at the tea. 'It's too late for that. The problem persists – as you well know. Besides, our journey is done. Only hers remains.'

'You dissemble,' Kruppe murmured. 'Your journey is anything but done, Silverfox. But let us leave that subject for the moment, yes? Have you gleaned news of the dreadful battle?'

'It's over. The Pannion forces are no more. Barring a couple of hundred thousand poorly armed peasants. The White Faces have liberated Capustan – what's left of it, that is. The Bridgeburners are already in the city. More pressing: Brood has called a council – you might be interested in attending that.'

'Indeed, if only to bless the gathering with Kruppe's awesome wisdom. What of you – are you not also attending?'

Silverfox smiled. 'As you said earlier, Daru, my journey's not quite over.'

'Ah, yes. Kruppe wishes you well in that, lass. And dearly hopes he will see you again soon.'

The woman's eyes glanced once more at the wagon. 'You will, friend,' she replied, then drained her tea and rose with a soft sigh.

Kruppe saw her hesitate. 'Lass? Is something wrong?'

'Uh, I'm not sure.' Her expression was troubled. 'A part of me desires to accompany you to that council. A sudden urge, in fact.'

The Daru's small eyes narrowed. 'A part of you, Silverfox?'

'Aye, inviting the question: which part? Whose soul within me now twitches with suspicion? Who senses that sparks are about to fly in this alliance of ours? Gods, even worse, it's as if I know precisely why ... but I don't.'

'Tattersail doesn't, yes? Leaving Nightchill and Bellurdan as potential candidates possessing prescient knowledge fraught with dire motivation. Uh, perhaps that can be said a simpler way—'

'Never mind, Kruppe.'

'You are torn, Silverfox, to put it bluntly. Consider this: will a minor delay in seeking your destiny unduly affect its outcome? Can you, in other words, spare the time to come with me to the warlord's command tent?'

She studied him. 'You've a hunch as well, don't you?'

'If a rift is imminent, lass, then your personage could prove essential, for you are the bridge indeed between these formidable camps.'

'I – I don't trust Nightchill, Kruppe.'
'Most mortals occasionally fail in trusting parts of themselves. Excepting Kruppe, of course, whose well-earned confidence is absolute. In any case, conflicting instincts are woven in our natures, excepting Kruppe, of —'

'Yes, yes. All right. Let's go.'

A slash of darkness opened in the canvas wall. The mild breath of Kurald Galain flowed into the command tent, dimming the lanterns. Anomander Rake strode through. The midnight rent closed silently behind him. The lanterns flared back into life.

Brood's wide, flat face twisted. 'You are late,' he growled. 'The Malazans are already on their way.'

Shrugging the black leather cape from his shoulders, the Lord of Moon's Spawn said, 'What of it? Or am I to adjudicate yet again?'

Her back to one side of the tent wall, Korlat cleared her throat. 'There have been ... revelations, Lord. The alliance itself is in question.'

A dry snort came from Kallor, the last person present. 'In question? We've been lied to from the very start. A swift strike against Onearm's Host – before it's had a chance to recover from today's battles – is imperative.'

Korlat watched her master study his allies in silence.

After a long moment, Rake smiled. 'Dear Caladan, if by lying you are referring to the hidden hand of the Empress – the daggers poised behind the backs of Dujek Onearm and Whiskeyjack – well, it would seem that, should action be required – which I add I do not believe to be the case – our position should be one of intervention. On behalf of Dujek and Whiskeyjack, that is. Unless, of course' – his eyes flattened on Brood – 'you are no longer confident of their capabilities as commanders.' He slowly withdrew his gauntlets. 'Yet Crone's report to me of today's engagement was characterized by naught but grudging praise. The Malazans were professional, perfunctory and relentless. Precisely as we would have them.'

'It's not their fighting ability that is the problem,' Kallor rasped. 'This was to be a war of liberation—'

'Don't be a fool,' Rake muttered. 'Is there wine or ale? Who will join me in a drink?'

Brood grunted. 'Aye, pour me one, Rake. But let it be known, whilst Kallor has uttered foolish statements in the past, he did not do so now. Liberation. The Pannion Domin—'

'Is just another empire,' the Lord of Moon's Spawn drawled. 'And as such, its power represents a threat. Which we are intending to obliterate. Liberation of the commonalty may well result, but it cannot be our goal. Free an adder and it will still bite you, given the chance.'

'So we are to crush the Pannion Seer, only to have some High Fist of the Malazan Empire take his place?'

Rake handed the warlord a cup of wine. The Tiste Andii's eyes were veiled, almost sleepy as he studied Brood. 'The Domin is an empire that sows horror and oppression among its own people,' Rake said. 'None of us here would deny that. Thus, for ethical reasons alone, there was just cause for marching upon it.'

'Which is what we've been saying all along—'

'I heard you the first time, Kallor. Your penchant for repetition is wearisome. I have described but one ... excuse. One reason. Yet it appears that you have all allowed that reason to overwhelm all others, whilst to my mind it is the least in importance.' He sipped his wine, then continued. 'However, let us stay with it for a moment. Horror and oppression, the face of the Pannion Domin. Consider, if you will, those cities and territories on Genabackis that are now under Malazan rule. Horror? No more so than mortals must daily face in their normal lives. Oppression? Every government requires laws, and from what I can tell Malazan laws are, if anything, among the least repressive of any empire I have known.

'Now. The Seer is removed, a High Fist and Malazan-style governance replaces it. The result? Peace,
reparation, law, order.' He scanned the others, then slowly raised a single eyebrow. 'Fifteen years ago, Genabarbs was a fetid sore on the northwest coast, and Nathilog even worse. And now, under Malazan rule? Rivals to Darujhistan herself. If you truly wish the best for the common citizens of Pannion, why do you not welcome the Empress?

'Instead, Dujek and Whiskeyjack are forced into an elaborate charade to win us as allies. They're soldiers, in case you've forgotten. Soldiers are given orders. If they don't like them, that's just too bad. If it means a false proclamation of outlawry – without letting every private in the army in on the secret and thereby eliminating the chance of it ever remaining a secret – then a good soldier grits his teeth and gets on with it.

'The truth is simple – to me at least. Brood, you and I, we have fought the Malazans as liberators in truth. Asking no coin, no land. Our motives aren't even clear to us – imagine how they must seem to the Empress? Inexplicable. We appear to be bound to lofty ideals, to nearly outrageous notions of self-sacrifice. We are her enemy, and I don't think she even knows why.'

'Sing me the Abyss,' Kallor sneered. 'In her Empire there would be no place for us – not one of us.'

'Does that surprise you?' Rake asked. 'We cannot be controlled. The truth laid bare is we fight for our own freedom. No borders for Moon's Spawn. No world-spanning peace that would make warlords and generals and mercenary companies obsolete. We fight against the imposition of order and the mailed fist that must hide behind it, because we're not the ones wielding that fist.'

'Nor would I ever wish to,' Brood growled.

'Precisely. So why begrudge the Empress possessing the desire and its attendant responsibilities?'

Korlat stared at her Lord. Stunned once again, thrown off-balance yet one more time. The Draconian blood within him. He does not think as we do. Is it that blood? Or something else? She had no answer, no true understanding of the man she followed. A sudden welling of pride filled her. He is the Son of Darkness. A master worth swearing fealty to – perhaps the only one. For me. For the Tiste Andii.

Caladan Brood let out a gusting sigh. 'Pour me another, damn you.'

'I shall set aside my disgust,' Kallor said, rising from his chair in a rustle of chain armour, 'and voice a subject only marginally related to what's been said thus far. Capustan has been cleansed. Before us, the river. South of that, three cities to march on. To do so in succession as a single army will slow us considerably. Setta, in particular, is not on our path to Coral. So, the army must divide in two, meeting again south of Lest and Setta, perhaps at Maurik, before striking for Coral. Now, the question: along what lines do we divide?'

'A reasonable subject,' Rake murmured, 'for discussion at this pending meeting.'

'And none other, aye,' Caladan Brood rumbled. 'Won't they be surprised?'

_They will indeed._ Regret seeped through Korlat's thoughts. _And more, I have done Whiskeyjack an injustice. I hope it is not too late to make reparations. It is not well for a Tiste Andii to judge in haste. My vision was clouded. Clouded? No, more like a storm. Of emotions, born of need and of love. Can you forgive me, Whiskeyjack?_

The tent flap was drawn back and the two Malazan commanders entered, trailed by the standard-bearer, Artanthos. Dujek's face was dark. 'Sorry we were delayed,' he growled. 'I have just been informed that the Tenescowri are on the move. Straight for us.'

Korlat sought to meet Whiskeyjack's eyes, but the man was studying the warlord as he added, 'Expect another battle, at dawn. A messy one.'

'Leave that to me,' Anomander Rake drawled.

The voice pulled Whiskeyjack round in surprise. 'Lord, forgive me. I didn't see you. I'm afraid I was somewhat... preoccupied.'
Dujek asked, 'You are offering to set your Tiste Andii against the Tenescowri, Lord?'

'Hardly,' Rake replied. 'I mean to scare them witless. In person.'

No-one spoke for a moment, then Caladan Brood began rummaging in a trunk for more cups. 'We have another issue to discuss, High Fist,' he said.

'So I gather.'

The old man looked positively sick, while Whiskeyjack's colour was high.

The warlord poured more wine, then gestured at the cups he had filled. 'Help yourselves. Kallor has noted a pending problem in the disposition of our forces.'

_Oh, the bastards are making fun of this. Enough._ Korlat spoke, 'High Fist, to the south await three cities. Lest and Setta should be taken simultaneously, if possible, with a rejoining of our forces at Maurik, before continuing on to Coral. We would like to discuss with you how to divide the armies.'

Whiskeyjack's eyes found hers. She offered him a half-smile. He frowned in reply.

'I see,' Dujek said after a moment. He collected his cup and sat down on a camp chair. 'Well enough.' And, for the moment, said no more.

Whiskeyjack cleared his throat and spoke, 'The division, at least initially, seems fairly obvious. Onearm's Host southwest to Setta – which will close our lines of communication with our Black Moranth, who remain in place in the Vision Mountains. The warlord and his forces straight south to Lest. Once we have taken Setta, we strike for the headwaters of the Maurik River, then follow the course south to Maurik itself. Possibly, you will have arrived there first, but that is not especially problematic.'

'Agreed,' Brood said.

'I said initially, alas,' Whiskeyjack continued.

The others turned to him.

The man shrugged. 'The White Face Barghast are joining the campaign. We also have to consider the surviving elements of Capustan's defenders – they might well desire to accompany us. Finally, there is the looming question of Silverfox, and her T'lan Imass.'

'If we allow the bitch and her T'lan Imass into this war,' Kallor snarled, 'we will have lost all hope of guiding it.'

Whiskeyjack studied the ancient warrior. 'Yours is a singular obsession, Kallor. It has twisted your mind—'

'And sentiment has twisted yours, soldier. Perhaps a day will come when you and I can test our respective resolve—'

'Enough,' Brood cut in. 'It seems, then, that this meeting must be adjourned. We can reconvene when all the relevant commanders are present.' The warlord turned to Rake. 'How fares Moon's Spawn?'

The Tiste Andii Lord shrugged. 'We will rendezvous at Coral as planned. It might be worth noting that the Seer has been under serious assault from the south, which he answers with Omtose Phellack sorcery. My Great Ravens have caught sight of his enemy, or at least some of them. A T'lan Imass, a she-wolf and a very large dog. Thus, the old battle: Omtose Phellack, ever retreating from Tellann. There might well be other players as well – lands to the south of Outlook have been completely shrouded in mists born of dying ice. The significance of all this is that the Seer has fled Outlook, and is heading by warren to Coral.'

There was silence as the implications of Rake's revelations slowly settled in the minds of those present.

Whiskeyjack was the first to speak. 'A lone T'lan Imass? A Bonecaster, then, to have sufficient power to single-handedly sunder a Jaghut's sorcery.'
'Having heard the summons made by Silverfox,' Dujek added. 'Yes, that's likely.'

'This T'lan Imass is a warrior,' Rake responded laconically. 'Wielding a two-handed flint sword. Bonecasters carry no weapons. Clearly, he has singular skill. The wolf is an ay, I believe, a creature thought long extinct. The hound rivals those of Shadow.'

'And they are driving the Seer into our laps,' Brood rumbled. 'It seems that Coral will not simply be the last city we can reach this campaigning season. We'll be facing the Seer himself.'

'Damn well ensuring that the battle will be fraught with sorcery,' Dujek muttered. 'Bloody terrific.'

'We've plenty of time to formulate our tactics,' Brood said after a moment. 'This meeting is adjourned.'

Thirty paces from the command tent, as darkness settled ever deeper on the camp, Silverfox slowed her steps.

Kruppe glanced at her. 'Ah, lass, you sense the storm's passing unbroken. As do I. Shall we pay a visit to formidable personages in any case?'

She hesitated, then shook her head. 'No, why precipitate a confrontation? I must now turn to my own ... destiny. If you please, Kruppe, inform no-one of my departure. At least not for a while.'

'The Gathering is come.'

'It is,' she agreed. 'I sense the imminent convergence of the T'lan Imass, and would rather it occur somewhere beyond the sight of anyone else.'

'A private matter, of course. None the less, Silverfox, would you resent company? Kruppe is wise – wise enough to keep silent when silence is called for, and yet wiser still to speak when wise words are required. Wisdom, after all, is Kruppe's blood brother.'

She smiled down at him. 'You would witness the Second Gathering?'

'There is no better witness to all things wondrous than Kruppe of Darujhistan, lass. Why, the tales that could flow effortlessly from these rather oily lips, should you ever but prod with curiosity—'

'Forgive me if I refrain from doing so,' she replied. 'At least in the near future.'

'Lest you become distracted, of course. It is clear, is it not, that even Kruppe's mere presence generates wisdom in bounty.'

'Very clear. Very well. We'll have to find you a horse, since I plan to ride.'

'A horse? Horrors! Foul beasts. Nay, I hold to my trusty mule.'

'Tightly.'

'To the limits of my physical abilities, aye.' He turned at a clopping sound behind them. 'Ah, speak of the demon! And look, a moonstruck horse follows like a pup on a leash, and is it any wonder, when one looks upon my handsome, proud beast?'

Silverfox studied the saddled horse trailing the mule with narrowed eyes. 'Tell me, Kruppe, who else will be witness to the Gathering through you?'

'Through Kruppe? Why, naught but Kruppe himself! He swears!'

'Not the mule, surely?'

'Lass, the mule's capacity for sleep – in no matter what the circumstances – is boundless, unaffected and indeed, admirable. I assure you, none shall witness through its eyes!'

'Sleep, is it? No doubt, to dream. Very well, let us be on with it, Kruppe. I trust you're comfortable with a
ride through the night?'

'Not in the least, but perseverance is Kruppe's closest cousin ...'

'Walk with me.'

Pausing as he emerged from the tent entrance, Whiskeyjack looked left, to see Anomander Rake standing in
the gloom. Ah, not Korlat, then. Oh well . . . 'Of course, Lord.'

The Son of Darkness led him through the tent rows, southward, out to the very edge of the encampment, then
beyond. They ascended a ridge and came within sight of Catlin River. Starlight played on its swirling surface
two hundred paces away.

Moths fluttered like flecks of snow fleeing the warm wind.

Neither man spoke for a long while.

Finally, Anomander Rake sighed, then asked, 'How fares the leg?'

'It aches,' Whiskeyjack answered truthfully. 'Especially after a full day in the saddle.'

'Brood is an accomplished healer. High Denul. He would not hesitate should you ask.'

'When there's time——'

'There has been plenty of that, as we both know. None the less, I share something of your stubbornness, so
I'll not raise the subject again. Have you been contacted by Quick Ben?'

Whiskeyjack nodded. 'He's in Capustan. Or should be by now.'

'I am relieved. The assault on the warrens has made being a mage somewhat perilous. Even Kurald Galain
has felt the poison's touch.'

'I know.'

Rake slowly turned to regard him. 'I had not expected to find in her such ... renewal. A heart I'd believed
closed for ever. To see it flowering so ...'

Whiskeyjack shifted uneasily. 'I may have wounded it this evening.'

'Momentarily, perhaps. Your false outlawry is known.'

'Thus the meeting, or so we thought.'

'I pulled the thorn before you and the High Fist arrived.'

The Malazan studied the Tiste Andii in the gloom. 'I wasn't sure. The suspicion could find no root, however.'

'Because, to you, my position makes no sense.'

'Aye.'

Rake shrugged. 'I rarely see necessity as a burden.'

Whiskeyjack thought about that, then nodded. 'You still need us.'

'More than ever, perhaps. And not just your army. We need Quick Ben. We need Humbrall Taur and his
White Face clans. We need your link to Silverfox and through her to the T'lan Imass. We need Captain Paran
——'

'Ganoes Paran? Why?'
'He is the Master of the Deck of Dragons.'

'It's no secret, then.'

'It never was.'

'Do you know,' Whiskeyjack asked, 'what that role signifies? A genuine question, because, frankly, I don't and wish I damn well did.'

'The Crippled God has fashioned a new House and now seeks to join it to the Deck of Dragons. A sanction is required. A blessing, if you will. Or, conversely, a denial.'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'What of the House of Shadow, then? Was there a Master of the Deck around who sanctioned its joining?'

'There was no need. The House of Shadow has always existed, more or less. Shadowthrone and Cotillion simply reawakened it.'

'And now, you want Paran – the Master of the Deck – to deny the Crippled God's House.'

'I believe he must. To grant the Fallen One legitimacy is to grant him power. We see what he is capable of in his present weakened state. The House of Chains is the foundation he will use to rebuild himself.'

'Yet, you and the gods took him down once before. The Chaining.'

'A costly endeavour, Whiskeyjack. One in which the god Fener was vital. Tell me, among your soldiers, the Tusked One is a popular god – have you priests as well?'

'No. Fener's popular enough, being the Lord of Battle. Malazans are somewhat ... relaxed when it comes to the pantheon. We tend to discourage organized cults within the military.'

'Fener is lost to us,' Rake said.

'Lost? What do you mean?'

'Torn from his realm, now striding the mortal earth.'

'How?'

There was a grim smile in Rake's tone as he explained. 'By a Malazan. A once-priest of Fener, a victim of the Reve.'

'Which means?'

'His hands were ritually severed. The power of the Reve then sends those hands to the hooves of Fener himself. The ritual must be the expression of purest justice, but this one wasn't. Rather, there was a perceived need to reduce the influence of Fener, and in particular that High Priest, by agents of the Empire – likely the Claw. You mentioned the discouraging of cults within the army. Perhaps that was a factor – my knowledge is not complete, alas. Certainly the High Priest's penchant for historical analysis was another – he had completed an investigation that concluded that the Empress Laseen in fact failed in her assassination of the Emperor and Dancer. Granted, she got the throne she so badly wanted, but neither Kellanved nor Dancer actually died. Instead, they ascended.'

'I can see why Surly's back would crawl at that revelation.'

'Surly?'

'The Empress Laseen. Surly was her old name.'

'In any case, those severed hands were as poison to Fener. He could not touch them, nor could he remove them from his realm. He burned the tattoos announcing his denial upon the high priest's skin, and so sealed the
virulent power of the hands, at least for the time being. And that should have been that. Eventually, the priest would die, and his spirit would come to Fener to retrieve what had been cruelly and wrongfully taken from him. That spirit would then become the weapon of Fener's wrath, his vengeance upon the priests of the fouled temple, and indeed upon the Claw and the Empress herself. A dark storm awaited the Malazan Empire, Whiskeyjack.'

'But something's happened.'

'Aye. The High Priest has, by design or chance, come into contact with the Warren of Chaos – an object, perhaps, forged within that warren. The protective seal around his severed hands was obliterated by that vast, uncontrolled surge of power. And, finding Fener, those hands ... pushed.'

'Hood's breath,' Whiskeyjack muttered, his eyes on the glittering river.

'And now,' Rake continued, 'the Tiger of Summer ascends to take his place. But Treach is young, much weaker, his warren but a paltry thing, his followers far fewer in number than Fener's. All is in flux. No doubt the Crippled God is smiling.'

'Wait a moment,' Whiskeyjack objected. 'Treach has ascended? That's one huge coincidence.'

'Some fates were foreseen, or so it seems.'

'By whom?'

'The Elder Gods.'

'And why are they so interested in all this?'

'They were there when the Crippled God fell – was dragged – down to this earth. The Fall destroyed many of them, leaving but a few survivors. Whatever secrets surround the Fallen One – where he came from, the nature of his aspect, the ritual itself that captured him – K'rul and his kin possess them. That they have chosen to become directly involved, now that the Crippled God has resumed his war, has dire implications as to the seriousness of the threat.'

'Quite an understatement, Lord.' Whiskeyjack said nothing for a time, then he sighed. 'Leading us back to Ganoes Paran and the House of Chains. All right, I understand why you want him to deny the Crippled God's gambit. I should warn you, however, Paran doesn't take orders well.'

'We must hope, then, that he sees which course is wisest. Will you advise him on our behalf?'

'I'll try.'

'Tell me, Whiskeyjack,' Rake said in a different tone, 'do you ever find the voice of a river unsettling?'

The Malazan frowned. 'To the contrary, I find it calming.'

'Ah. This, then, points to the essential difference between us.'

_Between mortals and immortals? Beru fend . . . Anomander Rake, I know precisely what you need. I've a small cask of Gredfallan ale, Lord. I would like to retrieve it, now, if you don't mind waiting?_

'A sound plan, Whiskeyjack.'

_And by dawn, may you find the voice grown calm._

The Malazan turned and made his way back to the encampment. As he approached the first row of tents, he paused and turned back to look at the distant figure, standing tall and motionless on the grassy ridge.

The sword Dragnipur, strapped crossways on Anomander Rake's back, hung like an elongated cross, surrounded in its own breath of preternatural darkness.
Alas, I don't think Gredfallan ale will be enough . . .

'And which warren will you choose for this?'

Quick Ben studied the sprawled bodies and the tumbled, blood-stained stones of the city wall. Spot-fires were visible through the gap, smoke blotting the night sky above dark, seemingly lifeless buildings. 'Rashan, I think,' he said.

'Shadow. I should have guessed.' Talamandas scrambled atop a heap of corpses then turned to look at the wizard. 'Shall we proceed?'

Quick Ben opened the warren, tightly leashed, and held it close about him. The sorcery swallowed him in shadows. Talamandas snickered, then approached.

'I shall ride your shoulder for this, yes?'

'If you insist,' the wizard grumbled.

'You leave me little choice. To control a warren by tumbling it before you and sweeping it up behind you may well reveal your mastery, but I am left with little room to manoeuvre within it. Though why we need bother with warrens at all right now is beyond me.'

'I need the practice. Besides, I hate being noticed.' Quick Ben gestured. 'Climb aboard, then.'

The sticksnare clambered up the wizard's leg, set its feet of bound twine on his belt, then dragged itself up Quick Ben's tunic. The weight, as Talamandas settled on his left shoulder, was insubstantial. Twig fingers closed on his collar. 'I can handle a tumble or two,' the sticksnare said, 'but don't make a habit of it.'

Quick Ben moved forward, slipping through the gap in the wall. The firelight threw stark slashes through the shadows, randomly painting glimpses of the wizard's body. Deep shadow cutting through any firelit scene would have been noticeable. He concentrated on blending into what surrounded him.

Flame, smoke and ashes. Vague moans from collapsed buildings; a few streets away, the mourning chant of Barghast.

'The Pannions are all gone,' Talamandas whispered. 'Why the need to hide?'

'It's my nature. Caution keeps me alive, now be quiet.'

He entered a street lined by Daru estates. While other avenues evinced the efforts of the White Face tribes to clear away bodies, no such task had taken place here. Pannion soldiery lay dead in appalling numbers, heaped around one estate in particular, its blackened gatehouse a maw ringed in dried blood. A low wall ran to either side of the gate. Dark, motionless figures stood guard along it, apparently perched on some kind of walkway halfway up the other side.

Crouched at the foot of another building, sixty paces away, Quick Ben studied the scene. The bitter breath of sorcery still clung to the air. On his shoulder, Talamandas hissed in sudden recognition.

'The necromancers! The ones who tore me from my barrow!'

'I thought you had nothing to fear from them any more,' Quick Ben murmured.

'I don't, but that does nothing to diminish my hatred or disgust.'

'That's unfortunate, because I want to talk to them.'

'Why?'

'To take their measure, why else?'
'Idiocy, Wizard. Whatever they are, is nothing good.'

'And I am? Now let me think.'

'You'll never get past those undead guards.'

'When I say let me think, I mean shut up.'

Grumbling, shifting about on Quick Ben's shoulder, Talamandas reluctantly subsided.

'We'll need a different warren for this,' the wizard finally said. 'The choice is this: Hood's own, or Aral Gamelon—'

'Aral what? I've never heard—'

'Demonic. Most conjurors who summon demons are opening a path to Gamelon – though they probably don't know it, not by its true name, anyway. Granted, one can find demons in other warrens – the Aaptorians of Shadow, for example. But the Korvalahrai and the Galayn, the Empire's favoured, are both of Gamelon. Anyway, if my instincts are accurate, there's both kinds of necromancy present in that estate – you did say there were two of them, didn't you?'

'Aye, and two kinds of madness.'

'Sounds interesting.'

'This is a whim! Have you learned nothing from your multiple souls, Wizard? Whims are deadly. Do something for no reason but curiosity and it closes like a wolf's jaws on your throat. And even if you manage to escape, it haunts you. For ever.'

'You talk too much, Sticksnare. I've made my decision. Time to move.' He folded the warren of Rashan about himself, then stepped forward.

'Ashes in the urn!' Talamandas hissed.

'Aye, Hood's own. Comforted by the familiarity? It's the safer choice, since Hood himself has blessed you, right?'

'I am not comforted.'

That wasn't too surprising, as Quick Ben studied the transformation around him. Death ran riot in this city. Souls crowded the streets, trapped in cycles of their own last moments of life. The air was filled with shrieks, wailing, the chop of weapons, the crushing collapse of stone and the suffocating smoke. Layered beneath this were countless other deaths – those that were set down, like successive snowfalls, on any place where humans gathered. Generation upon generation.

Yet, Quick Ben slowly realized, this conflagration was naught but echoes, the souls themselves ghostly. 'Gods below,' he murmured in sudden understanding. 'This is but memory – what the stones of the streets and buildings hold, memories of the air itself. The souls – they've all gone through Hood's Gate...'

Talamandas was motionless on his shoulder. 'You speak true, Wizard,' he muttered. 'What has happened here? Who has taken all these dead?'

'Taken, aye, under wing. They've been blessed, one and all, their pain ended. Is this the work of the Mask Council?'

The sticksnare spat, 'Those fools? Not likely.'

Quick Ben said nothing for a time, then he sighed. 'Capustan might recover, after all. I didn't think that was possible. Well, shall we walk with these ghosts?'

'Do we have to?'
Not replying, Quick Ben strode forward. The undead guards – Seerdomin and Urdomen – were dark smears, stains on Hood's own warren. But they were blind to his presence in the realm where the wizard now walked. Of the two necromancers residing within, one was now negated.

The only risk remaining was if the other one – the summoner – had released any demons to supplement the estate's defences.

Quick Ben strode through the gateway. The compound before him was clear of any bodies, though caked blood coated the flagstones here and there.

Twig fingers spasmed tight on his shoulder. 'I smell—'

The Sirinth demon had been squatting in front of the main house doors, draped in the lintel stone's shadow. It now grunted and heaved its bulk clear of the landing, coming into full view. Swathed in folds of toad-like skin, splay-limbed, with a wide, low head that was mostly jaws and fangs, the Sirinth massed more than a bhederin bull. In short bursts, however, it could be lightning fast.

A short burst was all it needed to reach Quick Ben and Talamandas.

The sticksnare shrieked.

Quick Ben lithely side-stepped, even as he unfolded yet another warren, this one layered over Hood's own. A backward stride took him into that warren, where heat flowed like liquid and dry amber light suffused the air.

The Sirinth wheeled, then dropped flat on its belly within Aral Gamelon.

Quick Ben edged further into the demonic warren.

Whining, the Sirinth sought to follow, only to be brought short by a now visible iron collar and chain, the chain leading back out – all the way, Quick Ben knew, to whatever binding circle the summoner had conjured when chaining this creature.

'Too bad, friend,' the wizard said as the demon squealed. 'Might I suggest a deal, Sirinth? I break the chain and you go find your loved ones. Peace between us.'

The creature went perfectly motionless. Folded lids slid back to reveal large, luminous eyes. In the mortal realm they'd just left, those eyes burned like fire. Here, within Aral Gamelon, they were almost docile.

*Almost. Don't fool yourself, Quick. This thing could gobble you up in one bite. 'Well?'

The Sirinth slithered sideways, stretched its neck.

Sorcery glowed from the collar and chain, the iron crowded with carved glyphs.

'I'll need to take a closer look,' Quick Ben told the demon. 'Know that Hood's warren remains with us—'

'Not well enough!' Talamandas hissed. 'Those undead guards have seen us!' 

'We've a few moments yet,' Quick Ben replied. 'If you shut up, that is. Sirinth, if you attack me when I come close, I'll reveal for you another chain about your neck – Hood's. Dead but not dead, trapped in the in-between. For ever. Understand me?'

The creature squealed again, but made no other move.

'Good enough.'

'You fool—'

Ignoring the sticksnare, Quick Ben stepped to the side of the huge demon. He knew that head could snap round, fast enough to be nothing more than a blur, the jaws opening to swallow head, shoulders – Talamandas included – and torso down to hips.
He studied the glyphs, then grunted. ‘Accomplished indeed. The key, however, to breaking this chaining lies in unravelling but a single thread. The challenge is finding the right one—’

‘Will you hurry! Those undead are converging! On us!’

‘A moment, please.’ Quick Ben leaned closer, squinting at the sigils. ‘Curious,’ he murmured, ‘this is Korelri script. High Korelri, which hasn’t been used in centuries. Well, easy enough then.’ He reached out, muttering a few words, and scored one glyph with the nail of his thumb. ‘Thus, changing its meaning—’ Gripping the chain on either side of the marred sigil, Quick Ben gave a quick yank.

The chain snapped.

The Sirinth lunged forward, then spun, jaws wide.

Talamandas screamed.

Quick Ben was already in the air, through the warren’s gate, back into Hood’s own, where he dipped a shoulder as he struck the flagstones, rolling over then back onto his feet – with Talamandas still clinging to his tunic. The wizard then froze.

They were surrounded by dark, insubstantial figures, now motionless as their quarry was no longer visible.

Wisely, Talamandas said nothing. Still crouching, Quick Ben slowly, silently edged between two undead guards, then padded clear, approaching the double doors.

‘Gods,’ the sticksnare moaned in a whisper, ‘why are we doing this?’

‘Because it's fun?’

The doors were unlocked.

Quick Ben slipped inside and shut the door behind them, the soft click of the latch seeming over-loud in the alcove.

‘So,’ Talamandas breathed, ‘which warren now?’

‘Ah, do I sense you’re getting into the spirit of the thing?’

‘Bad word to choose, mortal.’

Smiling, Quick Ben closed Hood’s own. It should be clear why I’m doing this, Sticksnare. I’ve been without warrens for too long. I need the practice. More, I need to know just how efficacious you are. And so far, so good. The poison is held at bay, unable to close on me. I’m pleased. He strode to the nearest wall, set both hands against the cool stone.

Talamandas chuckled. ‘D’riss. The Path of Stone. Clever bastard.’

Quick Ben pushed the warren open, slid into the wall.

There was nothing easy in this. Stone could be traversed easily enough – its resistance no more than water – but mortar was less yielding, tugging at his passage like the strands of a particularly stubborn spider’s web. Worse, the walls were thin, forcing him to edge along sideways.

He followed the wall’s course from room to room, working his way ever inward. Daru-style architecture was predictable and symmetrical. The main chamber of the ground floor would be central. Upper levels were more problematic, but more often than not the ground floor’s main chamber was vaulted, pushing the upper rooms to the building’s sides.

The rooms were visible to him, but just barely. Grainy, grey, the furniture smudged and indistinct. But living flesh positively glowed. ‘Stone knows blood, but cannot hold it. Stone yearns for life, yet can only mimic it.’ The words were ancient ones, a mason and sculptor who’d lived centuries ago in Unta. Appropriate enough when on
the Path of D'riss. When in the flesh of the Sleeping Goddess.

Slipping round a corner, Quick Ben caught his first sight of the main chamber.

A figure reclined on some kind of divan near the fireplace. He seemed to be reading a book. Another man stoked the fire's faintly pink, dull flames, muttering under his breath. Pacing back and forth on the mantel was a small creature, a crow or raven perhaps.

The man on the divan was speaking even as he flipped parchment pages in his book, his words made muted and brittle-sounding by the stone. 'When you're done there, Emancipor, return the guards to their positions on the wall. Having them standing in the courtyard all facing inward on nothing is suggestive of the ridiculous. Hardly a scene to inspire fear in potential intruders.'

'If you don't mind my saying so, master,' Emancipor said as he rose from before the hearth and wiped soot from his hands, 'if we've unwelcome company shouldn't we be doing something about it?'

'Much as I dislike losing my demons, dear servant, I do not assume that all visitors are malign. Dismissing my Sirinth was no doubt the only option available, and even then it must have been a risk-laden endeavour. The chain is but half of the geas, of course; the commands within the collar cannot so easily be defeated. Thus, some patience, now, until our guest decides to make formal his or her visit.'

Talamandas's acorn head touched Quick Ben's ear. 'Leave me here when you step through, Wizard. Treachery from this man is not just a likelihood, it's a damned certainty.'

Quick Ben shrugged. The sticksnare's weight left his shoulder.

Smiling, the wizard stepped from the warren, began brushing gritty dust from his tunic and rain-cape.

The seated man slowly closed his book without looking up. 'Some wine, Emancipor, for me and my guest.'

The servant spun to face Quick Ben. 'Hood's breath! Where did he come from?'

'The walls have ears, eyes and all the rest. Be on with your task, Emancipor.' The man finally lifted his head and met the wizard's gaze.

'Now that's a lizard's regard. Well, I've never quailed from the like before, so why should I now? Wine would be wonderful,' Quick Ben said, matching the seated man's Daru.

'Something ... flowery,' the necromancer added as the servant strode towards a side door.

The crow on the mantel had ceased its pacing and now studied the wizard with cocked head. After a moment, it resumed its back and forth ambling.

'Please, be seated. My name is Bauchelain.'

'Quick Ben.' The wizard walked to the plush chair opposite the necromancer and settled into it. He sighed.

'An interesting name. Aply chosen, if I may so presume. To have dodged the Sirinth's attack – I assume it attacked once you'd released it?'

'Clever,' Quick Ben conceded, 'locking a hold-over spell in that collar, one last command to kill whomever frees it. I assume that doesn't include you, its summoner.'

'I never free my demons,' Bauchelain said.

'Never?'

'Every exception to a magical geas weakens it. I allow none.'

'Poor demons!'

Bauchelain shrugged. 'I hold no sympathy for mere tools. Do you weep for your dagger when it breaks in
someone's back?"

'That depends on whether it killed the bastard or just made him mad.'

'Ahn, but then you weep for yourself.'

'I was making a joke.'

Bauchelain raised a single, thin eyebrow.

The subsequent silence was broken by Emancipor's return, bearing a tray on which sat a dusty bottle and two crystal goblets.

'Not a glass for yourself?' the necromancer asked. 'Am I so unegalitarian, Emancipor?'

'Uh, I took a swig below, master.'

'You did?'

'T'see if it was flowery.'

'And was it?'

'Not sure. Maybe. What's flowery?'

'Hmm, we must resume your education, I think, of such finer things. Flowery is the opposite of ... woody. Not bitter memory of sap, in other words, but something sweet, as of narcissus or skullcrown—'

'Those flowers are poisonous,' Quick Ben noted in faint alarm.

'But pretty and sweet in appearance, yes? I doubt any of us are in the habit of eating flowers, thus in analogy I sought visual cues for dear Emancipor.'

'Ah, I see.'

'Before you pour from that bottle, then, Emancipor. Was the aftertaste bitter or sweet?'

'Uh, it was kind of thick, master. Like iron.'

Bauchelain rose and grasped the bottle. He held it close, then sniffed the mouth. 'You idiot, this is blood from Korbal Broach's collection. Not that row, the one opposite. Take this back to the cellar.'

Emancipor's lined face had gone parchment-white. 'Blood? Whose?'

'Does it matter?'

As Emancipor gaped, Quick Ben cleared his throat and said, 'To your servant, I think the answer would be "yes, it does".'

The crow cackled from the mantelpiece, head bobbing.

The servant sagged on watery knees, the goblets on the tray clinking together.

Frowning, Bauchelain collected the bottle again and sniffed once more. 'Well,' he said, returning it to the tray, 'I'm not the one to ask, of course, but I think it's virgin's blood.'

Quick Ben had no choice but to enquire, 'How can you tell?'

Bauchelain regarded him with raised brows. 'Why, it's woody.'

*To Hood with plans.* Paran sat slouched on one of the lower benches in the Thrall's council chamber. The night outside seemed to have flowed into the vast, dusty room, dulling the torchlight along the walls. Before him, the
floor had been gutted, revealing an array of dust-caked outrigger canoes. The wrapped corpses that had once filled them had been removed by the Barghast in solemn ceremony, but, to the captain's senses, the most important artefacts had been left behind. His eyes never left the seafaring canoes, as if they held truths that might prove overwhelming, if only he could glean them.

The pain in his stomach rode dwindling echoes. He thought he now understood the source of his illness. He was not a man who welcomed power, but it had been thrust upon him regardless. Nothing so clear or obvious as a sword, such as Dragnipur; nothing that he could wield, cutting through enemies like an avenging demon who knelt only before cold justice. Yet, power none the less. Sensitivity to unseen currents, knowledge of the inter-connectedness that bound all things and everyone to everyone else. Ganoes Paran, who despised authority, had been chosen as an adjudicator. A mitigator of power whose task was to assert a structure – the rules of the game – upon players who resented every challenge to their freedom to do as they pleased.

Worse than a Malazan magistrate in Unta. Holding fast to the law, whilst being pressured by every influence imaginable, from rival factions to the wishes of the Empress herself. Prod and pull, push and tug, turning even the easiest and most straightforward of decisions into a nightmare.

No wonder my body recoils, seeks to reject what has been forced upon me.

He was alone in the Thrall's council chamber. The Bridgeburners had found the Gidrath barracks more to their style and were no doubt gambling and drinking themselves blind with the half-hundred Gidrath who comprised the Thrall's Inner Guard; whilst the priests of the Mask Council had retired for the night.

And it seemed Trake's Mortal Sword, the man named Gruntle, had initiated a friendship with Humbrall Taur's daughter, Hetan, in a manner that Paran suspected might eventually result in kin ties with the White Face clan – the two had made their way into the heart of the Thrall, no doubt in search of somewhere private. Much to the disgust of the woman, Stonny Menackis.

Shield Anvil Itkovian had led his troop back to the barracks near Jelarkan's Palace, to effect repairs and, come the morrow, begin the task of retrieving the refugees hidden in the tunnels beneath the city. The resurrection of Capustan would likely prove torturous and anguished, and the captain did not envy the Grey Sword the task.

We, on the other hand, will have moved on. Itkovian will need to find, among the survivors, someone with royal blood – no matter how thinned – to set on that stained throne. The city's infrastructure is in ruins. Who will feed the survivors? How long before trade is re-established with cities like Saltoan and Darujhistan? Hood knows the Barghast don't owe the people of Capustan anything . . .

Peace had come to his stomach, finally. He drew a tentative breath, slowly sighed. Power. His thoughts had a way of slipping into mundane considerations – a means to procrastination, he well knew, and it was a struggle to return to the one issue he would have to deal with sooner or later. A storm of plans, each one trying to make me into a fulcrum. I need only spread the fingers of one hand, and so encompass the entire Deck of Dragons. A truth I'd rather not recognize. But I feel those damned cards within me, like the barely articulated bones of a vast beast, so vast as to be unrecognizable in its entirety. A skeleton threatening to blow apart. Unless I can hold on, and that is the task forced upon me now. To hold it all together.

Players in the game, wanting no others. Players outside the game and wanting in. Players to the forefront and ones behind, moving in the shadows. Players who play fair, players who cheat. Gods, where do I begin to unravel all of this?

He thought about Gruntle, Mortal Sword to the newly ascended Treach. In a way, the Tiger of Summer had always been there, silently padding in Fener's wake. If the tales were true, the First Hero had lost his way long ago, surrendered entirely to the bestial instincts of his Soletaken form. Still, the sheer, overwhelming coincidence . . . Paran had begun to suspect that the Elder Gods had not orchestrated matters to the degree Nightchill had implied; that opportunism and serendipity was as much responsible for the turn of events as anything else. Otherwise, against the Elder Gods, none of us stand a chance, including the Crippled God. If it was all planned, then that plan would have had to involve Treach losing his way – thereby becoming a sleeper in the game, his threat to Fener deftly negated until the moment the First Hero was needed. And his death, too,
would have had to have been arranged, the timing made precise, so that he would ascend at the right moment.

And every event that led, ultimately, to Fener's extremity, his sudden, brutal vulnerability, would have had to have been known to the Elder Gods, down to the last detail.

Thus, unless we are all playing out roles that are predetermined and so inevitable – thereby potentially knowable by such beings as the Elder Gods – unless that, then, what each and every one of us chooses to do, or not to do, can have profound consequences. Not just on our own lives, but on the world – the worlds, every realm in existence.

He recalled the writings of historians who had asserted precisely that. The old soldier Duiker, for one, though he's long since fallen out of favour. Any scholar who accepts an Imperial robe is immediately suspect . . . for obvious reasons of compromised integrity and bias. Still, in his early days, he was a fierce proponent of individual efficacy.

The curse of great minds. Arriving young to an idea, surviving the siege that invariably assails it, then, finally, standing guard on the ramparts long after the war's over, weapons dull in leaden hands . . . damn, I'm wandering yet again.

So, he was to be the fulcrum. A position demanding a sudden burgeoning of his ego, the unassailable belief in his own efficacy. That's the last thing I'm capable of, alas. Plagued by uncertainty, scepticism, by all the flaws inherent in someone who's chronically without purpose. Who undermines every personal goal like a tree gnawing its own roots, if only to prove its grim opinion by toppling.

Gods, talk about the wrong choice . . .

A scuffling sound alerted Paran to the presence of someone else in the chamber. Blinking, he scanned the gloom. A figure was among the canoes, hulking, armoured in tarnished coins.

The captain cleared his throat. 'Paying a last visit?'

The Barghast warrior straightened.

His face was familiar, but it was a moment before Paran recognized the young man. 'Cafal, isn't it? Brother to Hetan.'

'And you are the Malazan captain.'

'Ganoes Paran.'

'The One Who Blesses.'

Paran frowned. 'No, that title would better fit Itkovian, the Shield Anvil—'

Cafal shook his head. 'He but carries burdens. You are the One Who Blesses.'

'Are you suggesting that if anyone is capable of relieving Itkovian's... burden ... then it's me? I need only ... bless him? Adjudicator, I'd thought. Obviously more complicated than that. The power to bless? Bern fend.'

'Not for me to say,' Cafal growled, his eyes glittering in the torchlight. 'You can't bless someone who denies your right to do so.'

'A good point. No wonder most priests are miserable.'

Teeth glimmered in either a grin or something nastier.

Oh, I think I dislike this notion of blessing. But it makes sense. How else does a Master of the Deck conclude arbitration? Like an Untan magistrate indeed, only there's something of the religious in this – and that makes me uneasy. Mull on that later, Ganoes . . .

'I was sitting here,' Paran said, 'thinking – every now and then – that there is a secret within those decaying
canoes.'

Cafal grunted.

'If I take that as agreement, would I be wrong?'

'No.'

Paran smiled. He'd learned that Barghast hated saying yes to anything, but an affirmative could be gleaned by guiding them into saying no to the opposite. 'Would you rather I leave?'

'No. Only cowards hoard secrets. Come closer, if you like, and witness at least one of the truths within these ancient craft.'

'Thank you,' Paran replied, slowly pushing himself upright. He collected a lantern and strode to the edge of the pit, then climbed down to stand on the mouldy earth beside Cafal.

The Barghast's right hand was resting on a carved prow.

Paran studied it. 'Battle scenes. On the sea.'

'Not the secret I would show you,' Cafal rumbled. 'The carvers possessed great skill. They hid the joins, and even the passing of centuries has done little to reveal their subterfuge. See how this canoe looks to have been carved of a single tree? It was, but none the less the craft was constructed in pieces – can you discern that, Ganoes Paran?'

The captain crouched close. 'Barely,' he said after a while, 'but only because some of the pieces have warped away from the joins. These panels with the battle scenes, for example—'

'Aye, those ones. Now, witness the secret.' Cafal drew a wide-bladed hunting knife. He worked the point and edge between the carved panel and its underlying contact. Twisted.

The battle-scene gunnel sprang free at the prow end. Within, a long hollow was visible. Something gleamed dull within it. Returning the knife to his belt, Cafal reached into the cavity and withdrew the object.

A sword, its water-etched blade narrow, single-edged, and like liquid in the play of torchlight. The weapon was overlong, tip flaring at the last hand-span. A small diamond-shaped hilt of black iron protected the sinew-wrapped grip. The sword was unmarked by its centuries unoiled and unsheathed.

'There is sorcery within that.'

'No.' Cafal raised the weapon, closing both hands in an odd finger-locking grasp around the grip. 'In our people's youth, patience and skill were wedded in perfect union. The blades we made were without equal then, and remain so now.'

'Forgive me, Cafal, but the hook-blades and spears I've seen among your warriors hardly evince singular skill.'

Cafal bared his teeth. 'No need to forgive. Indeed, you tread too kindly with your words. The weapons our smiths forge these days are poorly made. We have lost the ancient knowledge.'

'I can't imagine a wholly mundane sword to survive unscathed such neglect, Cafal. Are you sure it has not been imbued with—'

'I am. The blend of metals defies time's assault. Among them, metals that have yet to be rediscovered and now, with sorcery so prevalent, may never be.' He held the sword out to Paran. 'It looks unbalanced, yes? Top-heavy. Here.'

Paran accepted the weapon. It was as light as a dagger. 'Impossible,' he muttered. 'It must break—'

'Not easily, Captain. The flex seems stiff, yes? Thus you conclude it is brittle, but it is not. Examine the edge.
There are no nicks, yet this particular sword has seen battle many, many times. The edge remains true and sharp. This sword does not need mothering.'

Handing it back, Paran turned his gaze upon the canoes. 'And these craft possess more of such weapons?'

'They do.'

'Who will use them? The warchiefs?'

'No. Children.'

'Children?'

'Carefully selected, to begin their training with these swords. Imagine swinging this blade, Captain. Your muscles are tuned to something far heavier. You will either over-swing or over-compensate. A hard blow could spring it from your hand. No, the true potential of these swords can only be found in hands that know no other weapon. And much of what those children learn, they must do so by themselves – after all, how can we teach what we do not know?'

'And what will be the purpose of these swords? Of those young warriors who will wield them?'

'You may find an answer one day, Ganoes Paran.'

Paran was silent for a time. 'I think,' he finally said, 'I have gleaned another secret.'

'And what is that?'

**You will dismantle these canoes. Learn the art of making them.** 'Will the land remain your home for much longer, Barghast?'

Cafal smiled. 'No.'

'Thus.'

'Thus. Captain, Humbrall Taur would ask something of you. Would you hear his request from him, or may I voice it on his behalf?'

'Go ahead.'

'The Barghast would have their gods... blessed.'

'What? You don't need me for that—'

'That is true. We ask it none the less.'

'Well, let me think about it, Cafal. One of my problems is, I don't know how it's done. Do I just walk up to the bones and say "I bless you" or is something more complicated necessary?'

Cafal's heavy brows rose. 'You do not know?'

'No. You might want to call together all your shamans and discuss the matter.'

'Aye, we shall need to do just that. When we discover the ritual that is necessary, will you agree to it?'

'I said I'd think about it, Cafal.'

'Why do you hesitate?'

*Because I'm a Hood-damned fulcrum and what I choose to do could – will – change everything. I intend no offence. But I'm a cautious bastard.'*

'A man possessing power must act decisively, Ganoes Paran. Else it trickle away through his fingers.'
'When I decide to act, Cafal, it will be decisive. If that makes sense. One thing it won't be is precipitous, and if indeed I possess vast power then be glad for that.'

The Barghast warrior grunted. 'Perhaps your caution is wise, after all. I shall convey your words to my father.'

'So be it.'

'If you wish solitude now, find somewhere else. My kin are coming to retrieve the remaining weapons. This will be a busy night.'

'All right. I'll go for a walk.'

'Be careful, Ganoes Paran.'

The captain turned. 'Of what?'

'The Mask Council know who – what – you are, and they dislike it.'

'Why?'

Cafal grinned once more. 'Rivals do not sit well with the Mask Council. They have still not relented in acknowledgement of Keruli, who seeks to join their company. You – you might well be in a position to claim yourself as their master in all things. Eyes are darting within those masks, Captain.'

'Hood's breath,' Paran sighed. 'Who is Keruli, by the way?'

'K'rul's High Priest.'

'K'rul? The Elder God?'

'Expect Keruli to seek your blessing. On his god's behalf.'

Paran rubbed his brow, suddenly weary beyond belief. 'I've changed my mind,' he muttered. 'Never mind the walk.'

'What will you do?'

'Find a hole and crawl into it, Cafal.'

The warrior's laugh was harsh, and not quite as sympathetic as Paran would have liked.

Emancipor Reese had managed to find a more suitable bottle from the cellars and had filled the two goblets before hastily retreating from the room, his sickly pallor if anything even starker on his lined face.

Quick Ben was none the less tentative as he took his first sip. After a moment, he swallowed, then sighed.

Sitting across from him, Bauchelain half smiled. 'Excellent. Now, having made the effort to penetrate this estate's defences, you are here with some purpose in mind. Thus, you have my utmost attention.'

'Demonic summoning. It's the rarest and most difficult discipline among the necromantic arts.'

Bauchelain responded with a modest shrug.

'And the power it draws upon,' Quick Ben continued, 'while from Hood's own warren, is deeply tainted with Chaos. Striding both sides of that border between those warrens. As an aside, why do you think the summoning of demons is death-aspected?'

'The assertion of absolute control over a life-force, Quick Ben. The threat of annihilation is inherently death-aspected. Regarding your observation of the influence of the Warren of Chaos, do go on.'
‘The warrens have been poisoned.’

‘Ah. There are many flavours to chaotic power. That which assails the warrens has little to do with the elements of the Warren of Chaos with which I am involved.’

‘So, your access to your warrens has not been affected.’

‘I did not say that,’ Bauchelain replied, pausing to drink some wine. ‘The ... infection ... is an irritant, an unfortunate development that threatens to get worse. Perhaps, at some point in the future, I shall find need to retaliate upon whomever is responsible. My companion, Korbal Broach, has communicated to me his own growing concern – he works more directly through Hood's warren, and thus has felt the greater brunt.’

Quick Ben glanced over at the crow on the mantelpiece. ‘Indeed. Well,’ he added, returning his gaze to Bauchelain, ‘as to that, I can tell you precisely who is responsible.’

‘And why would you tell us, mage? Unless it be to elicit our help – I am assuming you are opposing this ... poisoner. And are in search of potential allies.’

‘Allies? Elicit your help? No, sir, you misunderstand me. I offer my information freely. Not only do I expect nothing in return, should you offer I will respectfully decline.’

‘Curious. Is yours a power to rival the gods, then?’

‘I don't recall referring to gods in this conversation, Bauchelain.’

‘True enough; however, the entity responsible for poisoning all the warrens is without doubt a formidable individual – if not a god then an aspirant.’

‘In any case,’ Quick Ben said with a smile, ‘I don't rival gods.’

‘A wise decision.’

‘But, sometimes, I beat them at their own game.’

Bauchelain studied the wizard, then slowly leaned back. ‘I find myself appreciating your company, Quick Ben. I am not easily entertained, but you have indeed proved- a worthy diversion this night, and for that I thank you.’

‘You're quite welcome.’

‘My companion, Korbal Broach, alas, would like to kill you.’

‘Can't please everyone.’

‘Very true. He dislikes being confused, you see, and you have confused him.’

‘Best he remain perched on the mantelpiece,’ Quick Ben quietly advised. ‘I don't treat hecklers very well.’

Bauchelain raised a brow.

The shadow of wings spread suddenly vast to Quick Ben's left, as Korbal Broach dropped from his position and began semblng even as he descended.

The Malazan flung his left arm out, waves of layered sorcery sweeping across the intervening space, to strike the necromancer.

Half man, half bedraggled crow, Korbal Broach had not completed his semblng into human form. The waves of power had yet to blossom. The necromancer was lifted from his feet by the magical impact, caught in the crest of that sorcery. It struck the wall above the fireplace, carrying the oddly winged, semi-human figure with it, then detonated.

Painted plaster exploded in a cloud of dust. The wall shook, crumpling inward at the point where Korbal
Broach hit – punching a hole through to whatever was on the other side. The last sight Quick Ben had of the man was that of his boots, before the roiling dust and twisting tendrils of power obscured the wall.

There was the sound of a heavy thump beyond, in what was probably a corridor, then the patter of plaster on the hearthstone was all that broke the silence.

Quick Ben slowly settled back into his chair.

'More wine?' Bauchelain asked.

'Please. Thank you. Apologies for the mess.'

'Think nothing of it. I have never before seen – what – six, perhaps seven warrens all unleashed at once, all intricately bound together in such complementary fashion. You, sir, are an artist. Will Korbal Broach recover?'

'I am your guest, Bauchelain. It would be poor form to kill your companion. After all, strictly speaking I am his guest, as well.'

With the chimney thoroughly compromised, the room was slowly filling with smoke.

'True,' Bauchelain admitted. 'Although, I reluctantly point out, he sought to kill you.'

'No need for dismay,' the Malazan responded. 'I was not greatly inconvenienced.'

'And that is what I find most astonishing. There was no sign of chaotic poison in your sorcery, Quick Ben. You can imagine the plethora of questions I would like to ask.'

There was a groan from the corridor.

'And, I confess,' Bauchelain continued, 'that curiosity is a rather obsessive trait of mine, often resulting in regrettable violence to the one being questioned, particularly when he or she is not as forthcoming as I would like. Now, six, seven warrens—'

'Six.'

'Six warrens, then – all at once – your claim to finding little inconvenience in the effort strikes me as bravado. Therefore, I conclude that you are, shall we say it bluntly: used up.'

'You make it clear that my welcome is at an end,' Quick Ben said, sighing as he set down the goblet.

'Not necessarily. You need only tell me everything, and we can continue in this civil fashion.'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible,' the Malazan replied. 'None the less, I will inform you that the entity poisoning the warrens is the Crippled God. You will have to consider ... retaliation ... against him. Rather sooner than you might think.'

'Thank you. I'll not deny I am impressed by your mastery of six warrens, Quick Ben. In retrospect, you should have held back on at least half of what you command.' The man made to rise.

'But, Bauchelain,' the wizard replied, 'I did.'

The divan, and the man on it, fared little better when struck by the power of a half-dozen bound warrens than had the wall and Korbal Broach moments earlier.

Quick Ben met Emancipor Reese in the smoky hallway leading to the estate's front doors. The servant had wrapped a cloth around the lower half of his face, his eyes streaming as he squinted at the wizard.

'Your masters require your attention, Emancipor.'

'They're alive?'
'Of course. Although smoke inhalation—'

The servant pushed past Quick Ben. 'What is wrong with all of you?' he barked.

'What do you mean?' the Malazan asked after him.

Emancipor half turned. 'Ain't it obvious? When you swat a wasp to the ground, you then use your heel, right? Otherwise, you're liable to get stung!'

'Are you encouraging me to kill your masters?'

'You're all Hood-damned idiots, that's what you are! Clean this up, Mancy! Scrub that down! Bury this in the garden! Pack those trunks – we're leaving in a hurry! It's my curse – no-one kills them! You think I like my job? Idiots! You think—'

The old man was still roaring as Quick Ben retreated outside.

Talamandas awaited him on the threshold. 'He's right, you know—'

'Quiet,' the wizard snapped.

In the courtyard beyond, the undead guards had all toppled from the walkway on the wall and lay sprawled on the flagstones, but movement was returning to them. Limbs wavered and twitched. Like armoured beetles on their backs. We'd better get out of here. Because, now, I am all used up.

'I'd almost moved to that wall you destroyed, you know.

'That would have been very unfortunate,' Quick Ben replied. 'Climb aboard – we're leaving.'

'Finally, some wisdom!'

Bauchelain's eyes opened. Emancipor looked down on him.

'We're in the garden, master,' the servant said. 'I dragged you and Korbal out. Doused the fire, too. Got to go open all the windows now ...'

'Very good, Emancipor,' the grey-bearded necromancer groaned after a moment. 'Emancipor,' he called when the servant made to move away.

'Master?'

'I confess ... to a certain ... confusion. Do we possess some chronic flaw, Emancipor?'

'Sir?'

'Underestima— oh, never mind, Emancipor. Be about your tasks, then.'

'Aye, master.'

'Oh, and you've earned a bonus for your efforts – what do you wish?'

The servant stared down at Bauchelain for a dozen heartbeats, then he shook his head. 'It's all right, master. Part of my job. And I'll be about it, now.'

The necromancer raised his head to watch the old man trudge back into the house. 'Such a modest man,' he breathed. He looked down the length of his tattered, bruised body, and raggedly sighed. 'What's left in my wardrobe, I wonder?'

Insofar as he could recall – and given recent events – not much.
Shrouded once more in shadow, Quick Ben made his way down the rubble-littered street. Most of the fires had either died down or been extinguished, and not one of the remaining structures showed any light behind shutters or from gaping windows. The stars commanded the night sky, though darkness ruled the city.

'Damned eerie,' Talamandas whispered.

The wizard softly grunted. 'That's rich, coming from someone who's spent generations in an urn in the middle of a barrow.'

'Wanderers like you have no appreciation of familiarity,' the sticksnare sniffed.

The dark mass of the Thrall blotted the skyline directly ahead. Faint torchlight from the square before the main gate cast the structure's angled stones in dulled relief. As they entered an avenue that led to the concourse they came upon the first knot of Barghast, surrounding a small fire built from broken furniture. Tarps slung between the buildings down the avenue's length made the passage beyond a kind of tunnel, strikingly similar to market streets in Seven Cities. Figures lay sleeping along the edges down the entire length. Various cookfires painted smoke-stained, mottled patterns of light on the undersides of the tarps. A good many Barghast warriors remained awake, watchful.

'Try wending unseen through that press, Wizard,' Talamandas murmured. 'We'll have to go round, assuming you still cling to your bizarre desire to slink like a mouse in a hut full of cats. In case you've forgotten, those are my kin—'

'Be quiet,' Quick Ben commanded under his breath. 'Consider this another test of our partnership – and the warrens.'

'We're going straight through?'

'We are.'

'Which warren? Not D'riss again, please – these cobbles—'

'No no, we'd end up soaked in old blood. We won't go under, Talamandas. We'll go over. Serc, the Path of the Sky.'

'Thought you'd exhausted yourself back at the estate.'

'I have. Mostly. We could sweat a bit on this one.'

'I don't sweat.'

'Let's test that, shall we?' The wizard unveiled the warren of Serc. Little alteration was discernible in the scene around them. Then, slowly, as Quick Ben's eyes adjusted, he detected currents in the air, the layers of cold and warm flowing parallel to the ground, the spirals coiling skyward from between the tarps, the wake of passing figures, the heat-memory of stone and wood.

'Looks sickly,' the sticksnare muttered. 'You would swim those currents?'

'Why not? We're almost as insubstantial as the air we see before us. I can get us started, but the problem then is keeping me afloat. You're right – I've no reserves left. So, it's up to you, Talamandas.'

'Me? I know nothing of Serc'

'I'm not asking you to learn, either. What I want is your power.'

'That wasn't part of the deal!'

'It is now.'

The sticksnare shifted and twitched on Quick Ben's shoulder. 'By drawing on my power, you weaken the protection I offer against the poison.'
'And we need to find that threshold, Talamandas. I need to know what I can pull from you in an emergency.'

'Just how nasty a situation are you anticipating when we finally challenge the Crippled God?' the sticksnare demanded. 'Those secret plans of yours – no wonder you're keeping them secret!'

'I could have sworn you said you were offering yourself up as a sacrifice to the cause – do you now balk?'

'At madness? Count on it, Wizard!'

Quick Ben smiled to himself. 'Relax, I'm not stoking a pyre for you. Nor have I any plans to challenge the Crippled God. Not directly. I've been face to face with him once, and once remains enough. Even so, I was serious about finding that threshold. Now, pull the cork, shaman, and let's see what we can manage.'

Hissing with fury, Talamandas growled reluctant assent.

Quick Ben rose from the ground, slipped forward on the nearest current sweeping down the length of the street. The flow was cool, dipping down beneath the tarps. A moment before reaching the downdraught, the wizard nudged himself upward, into a spiral of heat from one of the fires. They shot straight up.

'Dammit!' Quick Ben snapped as he spun and cavorted on the column of heat. Gritting his teeth, the wizard reached for the sticksnare's power – and found what he had suspected to be the truth all along.

Hood's. Through and through. Of the Barghast gods, barely a drop of salty piss. The damned newcomers are stretched far too thin. Wonder what's drawing on their energies? There's a card in the Deck, in the House of Death, that's been a role unfilled for a long, long time. The Magi. I think it's just found a face – one painted on a stupid acorn. Talamandas, you may have made a terrible mistake. And as for you, Barghast gods, here's some wisdom to heed in the future. Never hand your servants over to another god, because they're not likely to stay your servants for long. Instead, that god's likely to turn them into weapons . . . aimed directly at your backs.

Dear Barghast gods, you're in a world of predators, nastier by far than what was around in the past. Lucky for you I'm here.

He drew on that power, harshly.

The sticksnare writhed, twig fingers digging into the wizard's shoulder and neck.

In his mind, Quick Ben closed an implacable grip on the Lord of Death's power, and pulled.

Come to me, bastard. We're going to talk, you and I.

Within his clenched hand was the rough weave of cloth, stretching, bunching. The breath of Death flowed over the wizard, the presence undeniable, heavy with rage.

And, in the clutch of a mortal, entirely helpless.

Quick Ben grunted a laugh. 'So much for thresholds. You want to ally with me, Hood? All right, I'll give you fair consideration, despite the deception. But you're going to have to tell me what you're up to.'

'Damned fool!' Hood's voice was thunderous in the wizard's skull, launching waves of pain.

'Quieter,' Quick Ben gritted. 'Or I'll drag you through hide and all and Fener won't be the only god who's fair game.'

'The House of Chains must be denied!'

The wizard blinked, knocked sideways by Hood's statement. 'The House of Chains? It's the poison we're trying to excise, isn't it? Burn's fever – the infected warrens—'

'The Master of the Deck must be convinced, mortal. The Crippled God's House is finding . . . adherents—'

'Wait a moment. Adherents? Among the pantheon?'
'Betrayal, aye. Poliel, Mistress of Pestilence, aspires to the role of Consort to the King in Chains. A Herald has been . . . recruited. An ancient warrior seeks to become Reaver; whilst the House has found, in a distant land, its Mortal Sword. Mowri now embraces the Three – Cripple, Leper and Fool – which are in place of Spinner, Mason and Soldier. Most disturbing of all, ancient power trembles around the last of the dread cards . . . mortal, the Master of the Deck must not remain blind to the threat.'

Quick Ben scowled. 'Captain Paran's not the blinkered type, Hood. Indeed, he likely sees things clearer than even you – far more dispassionately, at least, and something tells me that cold reason is what will be needed come the time to decide. In any case, the House of Chains may be your problem, but the poison within the warrens is mine. That, and what it's doing to Burn.

'Misdirection, wizard – you are being led astray. You will find no answers, no solutions within the Pannion Domin, for the Seer is at the heart of an altogether different tale.'

'I'd guessed as much, Hood. Even so, I plan on unravelling the bastard – and his power.'

'Which will avail you nothing.'

'That's what you think,' Quick Ben replied, grinning. 'I am going to call upon you again, Hood.'

'And why should I answer? You've not heard a word I've—'

'I have, but consider this, Lord. The Barghast gods may be young and inexperienced, but that won't last. Besides, young gods are dangerous gods. Scar them now and they'll not forget the one who delivered the wound. You've offered to help, so you'd better do just that, Hood.'

'You dare threaten me—'

'Now who's not listening? I am not threatening you, I am warning you. And not just about the Barghast gods, either. Treach has found a worthy Mortal Sword – can you not feel him? Here I am, a thousand paces or more away from him, with at least twenty walls of stone between us, and I can feel the man. He's wrapped in the pain of a death – someone close, whose soul you now hold. He's no friend of yours, Hood, this Mortal Sword.'

'Do you not think I welcomed all that he has delivered? Treach promised me souls, and his human servant has provided them.'

'In other words, the Tiger of Summer and the Barghast gods have followed through on their sides of the deal. Now, you'd better do the same, and that includes relinquishing Talamandas when the time comes. Hold to the spirit of the agreement, Hood ... unless you learned nothing from the mistakes you made with Dassem Ultor ...'

The wizard felt seething rage burgeon from the Lord of Death, yet the god remained silent.

'Aye,' Quick Ben growled, 'think on that. In the mean-time, you're going to ease loose your power, sufficient to carry me over this crowd of Barghast, and into the plaza in front of the Thrall. Then you're going to withdraw, far enough to give Talamandas the freedom he's supposed to have. Hover behind his painted eyes, if you so desire, but no closer. Until I decide I need you once more.'

'You will be mine one day, mortal—'

'No doubt, Hood. In the meantime, let's just luxuriate in the anticipation, shall we?' With these words, the wizard released his grip on the god's cloak. The presence flinched back.

Power flowed steady, the currents of air drawing Quick Ben and the sticksnare clinging to his shoulder over the tops of the canopies.

Talamandas hissed. 'What has happened? I, uh, vanished for a moment.'

'Everything's fine,' the wizard murmured. 'Does the power feel true, Sticksnare?'

'Aye, it does. This, this I can use.'
'Glad to hear it. Now, guide us to the plaza.'

A thin gauze of old smoke dulled the stars overhead. Captain Paran sat on the wide steps of the Thrall’s main entrance. Directly ahead, at the end of a wide avenue, stood the gatehouse. Visible through its open doorway, in the plaza beyond, firelight from Barghast camps gleamed through gathering mists.

The Malazan was exhausted, yet sleep would not come to him. His thoughts had wandered countless paths since he’d left Cafal’s company two bells earlier. Barghast shoulder-men still worked in the chamber, dismantling the canoes, collecting ancient weapons. Outside that room and beyond that activity, the Thrall seemed virtually deserted, lifeless.

The empty halls and corridors led Paran inexorably to what he imagined his parents’ estate in Unta might now look like, with his mother and father dead, Felisin chained to a line in some mining pit a thousand leagues away, and dear sister Tavore dwelling in a score opulent chambers in Laseen’s palace.

A house alone with its memories, looted by servants and guards and the street’s gutter rats. Did the Adjunct ever ride past? Did her thoughts turn to it in the course of her busy day?

She was not one to spare a moment to sentiment. Cold-eyed, hers was a brutal rationality, pragmatism with a thousand honed edges – to cut open anyone foolish enough to come close.

The Empress would be well pleased with her new Adjunct.

And what of you, Felisin? With your wide smile and dancing eyes? There is no modesty in the Otataral Mines, nothing to shield you from the worst of human nature. You’ll have been taken under wing none the less, by some pimp or pit-thug.

A flower crushed underfoot.

Yet your sister has it in mind to retrieve you – that much I know of her. She might well have thrown in a guardian or two for the length of your sentence.

But she’ll not be rescuing a child. Not any more. No smile, and something hard and deadly in those once-dancing eyes. You should have found another way, sister. Gods, you should have killed Felisin outright – that would have been a mercy.

And now, now I fear you will some day pay dearly . . .

Paran slowly shook his head. His was a family none would envy. Tom apart by our own hands, no less. And now, we siblings, each launched on our separate fates. The likelihood of those fates’ one day converging never seemed so remote.

The worn steps before him were flecked with ash; as if the only survivor in this city was the stone itself. The darkness felt solemn, sorrowful. All the sounds that should have accompanied the night, in this place, were absent. Hood feels close this night. . .

One of the massive double doors behind him swung open. The captain glanced back over a shoulder, then nodded. ‘Mortal Sword. You look well... rested.’

The huge man grimaced. ‘I feel beaten to within a finger’s breadth of my life. That’s a mean woman.’

‘I’ve heard men say that of their women before, and always there’s a pleased hint to the complaint. As I hear now.’

Gruntle frowned. ‘Aye, you’re right. Funny, that.’

‘These stairs are wide. Have a seat if you like.’

‘I would not disturb your solitude, Captain.’
'Please do, it's nothing I would regret abandoning. Too many dark thoughts creep in when I'm alone.'

The Mortal Sword moved forward and slowly settled down onto the step at Paran's side, his tattered armour – straps loose – rustling and clinking. He rested his forearms on his knees, the gauntleted hands dangling. 'I share the same curse, Captain.'

'Fortunate, then, that you found Hetan.'

The man grunted. 'Problem is, she's insatiable.'

'In other words, you're the one in search of solitude, which my presence has prevented.'

'So long as you don't claw my back, your company is welcome.'

Paran nodded. 'I'm not the catty type – uh, sorry.'

'No need. If Trake ain't got a sense of humour that's his problem. Then again, he must have, since he picked me as his Mortal Sword.'

Paran studied the man beside him. Behind the barbed tattoos was a face that had lived hard years. Weathered, roughly chiselled, with eyes that matched those of a tiger's now that the god's power was within his flesh and blood. None the less, there were laugh lines around those eyes. 'Seems to me Trake chose wisely ...'

'Not if he expects piety, or demands vows. Hood knows, I don't even like fighting. I'm not a soldier and have no desire to be. How, then, am I supposed to serve the God of War?'

'Better you, I think, than some blood-lusting square-foot with a single eyebrow, Gruntle. Reluctance to unsheathe those swords and all they represent seems a good thing to me. The gods know it's rare enough at the moment.'

'Not sure about that. This whole city was reluctant. The priests, the Gidrath, even the Grey Swords. If there'd been any other way... He shrugged. 'The same for me. If it wasn't for what happened to Harllo and Stonny, I'd be down in the tunnels right now, gibbering with the rest of them.'

'Stonny's your friend with the broken rapier, right? Who's Harllo?'

Gruntle turned his head away for a moment. 'Another victim, Captain.' Bitterness filled his tone. 'Just one more on the trail. So I hear that your Malazan army's just west of here, come to join this death-cursed war. Why?'

'A temporary aberration. We ran out of enemies.'

'Soldiers' humour. I never could understand it. Is fighting that important to you?'

'If you mean me, personally, then no, it isn't. But for men like Dujek Onearm and Whiskeyjack, it's the sum total of their lives. They're makers of history. Their gift is the power to command. What they do revises the scholar's maps. As for the soldiers who follow them, I'd say that most of them see it as a profession, a career, probably the only one they're any good at. They are the physical will of the commanders they serve, and so are their own makers of history, one soldier at a time.'

'And what happens if their commanders are suicidal fools?'

'It's a soldier's lot to complain about their officers. Every mud-crusted footman is an artist at second-guessing, master strategists after the fact. But the truth is, the Malazan Empire has a tradition of superb, competent commanders. Hard and fair, usually from the ranks, though I'll grant you my own noble class has made destructive inroads on that tradition. Had I myself followed a safer path, I might well be a Fist by now – not through competence, of course, or even experience. Connections would have sufficed. The Empress has finally recognized the rot, however, and has already acted upon it, though likely too late.'

'Then why in Hood's name would she have outlawed Dujek Onearm?'
Paran was silent for a moment, then he shrugged. 'Politics. Expedience can force even the hand of an Empress, I suppose.'

'Has the sound of a feint to me,' Gruntle muttered. 'You don't cut loose your best commander in a fit of pique.'

'You might be right. Alas, I'm not the one who can either confirm or deny. There's some old wounds still festering between Laseen and Dujek, in any case.'

'Captain Paran, you speak too freely for your own good – not that I'm a liability, mind you. But you've an openness and an honesty that might earn you the gallows some day.'

'Here's some more, Mortal Sword. A new House has appeared, seeking membership in the Deck of Dragons. It belongs to the Crippled God. I can feel the pressure – the voice of countless gods, all demanding that I deny my sanction, since it seems that I am the one cursed with that responsibility. Do I bless the House of Chains, or not? The arguments against such a blessing are overwhelming, and I don't need any god whispering in my head to apprise me of that.'

'So, where is the problem, Captain?'

'It's simple. There's a lone voice crying out, deep within me, so buried as to be almost inaudible. A lone voice, Gruntle, demanding the very opposite. Demanding that I must sanction the House of Chains. I must bless the Crippled God's right to a place within the Deck of Dragons.'

'And whose voice cries out such madness?'

'I think it's mine.'

Gruntle was silent for a dozen heartbeats, yet Paran felt the man's unhuman eyes fixed on him. Eventually, the Mortal Sword looked away and shrugged. 'I don't know much about the Deck of Dragons. Used for divinations, yes? Not something I've ever pursued.'

'Nor I,' Paran admitted.

Gruntle barked a laugh, sharp and echoing, then he slowly nodded. 'And what did you say of me earlier? Better a man who hates war to serve the God of War than one who lusts for it. Thus, why not a man who knows nothing of the Deck of Dragons to adjudicate it rather than a lifelong practitioner?'

'You may have something there. Not that it alleviates my sense of inadequacy.'

'Aye, just that.' He paused, then continued, 'I felt my god recoil at your words, Captain – your instincts on the Crippled God's House of Chains. But as I said before, I'm not a follower. So I guess I saw it different. If Trake wants to tremble on four watery legs that's his business.'

'Your lack of fear has me curious, Gruntle. You seem to see no risk in legitimizing the House of Chains. Why is that?'

The man shrugged his massive shoulders. 'But that's just it, isn't it. Legitimizing. Right now, the Crippled God's outside the whole damned game, meaning he's not bound by any rules whatsoever—'

Paran suddenly sat straight. 'You're right. Abyss take me, that's it. If I bless the House of Chains then the Crippled God becomes ... bound—'

'Just another player, aye, jostling on the same board. Right now, he just keeps kicking it whenever he gets the chance. When he's on it, he won't have that privilege. Anyway, that's how it seems to me, Captain. So when you said you wanted to sanction the House, I thought: why the fuss? Sounds perfectly reasonable to me. The gods can be damned thick-witted on occasion – probably why they need us mortals to do the straight thinking when straight thinking's required. Listen to that lone voice, lad, that's my advice.'

'And it's good advice—'
'Maybe, or maybe not. I might end up being roasted over the eternal fires of the Abyss by Trake and all the other gods for having given it.'

'I'll have company, then,' Paran said, grinning.

'Good thing we both hate solitude.'

'That's a soldier's humour, Gruntle.'

'Is it? But I was being serious, Captain.'

'Oh.'

Gruntle glanced over. 'Got you.'

A sliding downdraught of cool air brought Quick Ben onto the gritty flagstones of the plaza. A dozen paces ahead loomed the gatehouse. Beyond it, seated side by side on the Thrall's wide, low steps, were Captain Paran and the Mortal Sword.

'Just the two I wanted to talk with,' the wizard muttered, relinquishing the Warren of Serc.

'No more arguments, please,' Talamandas replied from his perch on Quick Ben's shoulder. 'Those are two powerful men—'

'Relax,' the wizard said. 'I'm not anticipating a confrontation.'

'Well, I'll make myself unseen, just in case.'

'Suit yourself.'

The sticksnare vanished, though the wizard could still feel his meagre weight, and the twig fingers gripping his cloak.

The two men looked up as Quick Ben approached.

Paran nodded a greeting. 'Last time I saw you, you were racked with fever. I'm glad to see you're better. Gruntle, this is Quick Ben, a soldier in the Bridgeburners.'

'A mage.'

'That, too.'

Gruntle studied Quick Ben for a moment, and Paran sensed a bestial presence shifting uneasily behind the man's amber, feline eyes. Then the Daru said, 'You smell of death and it's not to my liking.'

Quick Ben started. 'Indeed? I've been consorting with the wrong company lately. Unpalatable, agreed, but, alas, necessary.'

'Is it just that?'

'I hope so, Mortal Sword.'

A brutal threat glared for a moment in Gruntle's eyes, then, slowly, dimmed. He managed a shrug. 'It was a Bridgeburner who saved Stonny's life, so I'll keep my reins taut. At least until I see if it wears off.'

'Consider it,' Paran said to Quick Ben, 'an elaborate way of saying you need to bathe soon.'

'Well,' the wizard replied, eyes on the captain, 'humour from you makes for a change.'

'Plenty of changes,' Paran agreed, 'of late. If you're looking to rejoin the company they're in the Gidrath barracks.'
'Actually, I bring word from Whiskeyjack.'

Paran sat straighter. 'You've managed to contact him? Despite the poisoned warrens? Impressive, Wizard. Now you have my utmost attention. Has he new orders for me?'

'Another parley has been requested by Brood,' Quick Ben said. 'With all the commanders, including Gruntle here, and Humbrall Taur and whomever's left of the Grey Swords. Can you make the request known to the other principals here in Capustan?'

'Aye, I suppose so. Is that it?'

'If you've a report to make to Whiskeyjack, I can convey it.'

'No thank you. I'll save that for when we meet in person.'

Quick Ben scowled. Be that way, then. 'Regarding the rest, best we speak in private, Captain.'

Gruntle made to rise but Paran reached out and halted the motion.

'I can probably anticipate your questions right here and now, Quick Ben.'

'Maybe you can but I'd rather you didn't.'

'Too bad for you, then. I'll make it plain. I have not yet decided whether or not to sanction the House of Chains. In fact, I haven't decided anything about anything, and it might be some time before that changes. Don't bother trying to pressure me, either.'

Quick Ben raised both hands. 'Please, Captain. I have no intention of pressuring you, since I was the victim of such an effort only a short while ago, by Hood himself, and it's left me riled. When someone warns me to follow one course of action, my instinct is to do the very opposite. You're not the only one inclined to stir the manure.'

Gruntle barked a laugh. 'Such droll understatement! Seems I've found perfect company this night. Do go on, Wizard.'

'Only one more thing to add,' Quick Ben continued, studying Paran. 'An observation. Might be a wrong one, but I don't think so. You got sick, Captain, not from resisting the power forced upon you, but from resisting yourself. Whatever your instincts are demanding, listen to them. Follow them, and Abyss take the rest. That's all.'

'Is that your advice,' Paran quietly asked, 'or Whiskeyjack's?'

Quick Ben shrugged. 'If he was here, he'd say no different, Captain.'

'You've known him a long time, haven't you?'

'Aye, I have.'

After a moment, Paran nodded. 'I'd just about reached the same conclusion myself, this night, with Gruntle's help, that is. Seems the three of us are about to make some very powerful beings very angry.'

'Let 'em squeal,' the Mortal Sword growled. 'Hood knows, we've done more than our share, while they sat back and laughed. Time's come to pull the gauntlet onto the other hand.'

Quick Ben sighed under his breath. All right, Hood, so I didn't really try, but only because it was clear that Paran wasn't inclined to heed you. And maybe I see why, now that I think on it. So, for what it's worth, consider this advice: there will be a House of Chains. Accept it, and prepare for it. You've ample time . . . more or less.

Oh, one more thing, Hood. You and your fellow gods have been calling out the rules uncontested for far too long. Step back, now, and see how us mortals fare ... I think you're in for a surprise or two.
Wan, dirt-smeared, but alive. The survivors of Capustan emerged from the last pit mouth as the sky paled to the east, blanched dwellers from the city’s roots, shying from the torchlight as they stumbled onto the concourse, where they milled, as if lost in the place they had once known as home.

Shield Anvil Itkovian sat once more astride his warhorse, even though any quick movement made him sway, head spinning with exhaustion and the pain of his wounds. His task now was to be visible, his sole purpose was his presence. Familiar, recognizable, reassuring.

Come the new day, the priests of the Mask Council would begin a procession through the city, to add their own reassurance – that authority remained, that someone was in control, that things – life – could now begin again. But here, in the still darkness – a time Itkovian had chosen to ease the shock of the surrounding ruination – with the priests sleeping soundly in the Thrall, the Grey Swords, numbering three hundred and nineteen in all when including those from the tunnels, were positioned at every tunnel mouth and at every place of convergence.

They were there to ensure martial law and impart a sombre order to the proceedings, but their greatest value, as Itkovian well knew, was psychological.

*We are the defenders. And we still stand.*

While grieving was darkness, victory and all it meant was a greying to match the dawn, a lessening of the oppression that was loss, and of the devastation that slowly revealed itself on all sides. There could be no easing of the conflict within each and every survivor – the brutal randomness of fate that plagued the spirit – but the Grey Swords made of themselves a simple, solid presence. They had become, in truth, the city's standard.

*And we still stand.*

Once this task was complete, the contract was, to Itkovian's mind, concluded. Law and order could be left to the Gidrath from the Thrall. The surviving Grey Swords would leave Capustan, likely never to return. The question now occupying the Shield Anvil concerned the company's future. From over seven thousand to three hundred and nineteen: this was a siege from which the Grey Swords might never recover. But even such horrific losses, if borne alone, were manageable. The expelling of Fener from his warren was another matter. An army sworn to a god bereft of its power was, as far as Itkovian was concerned, no different from any other band of mercenaries: a collection of misfits and a scattering of professional soldiers. A column of coins offered no reliable backbone; few were the existent companies that could rightly lay claim to honour and integrity; few would stand' firm when flight was possible.

Recruiting to strength had become problematic. The Grey Swords needed sober, straight-backed individuals; ones capable of accepting discipline of the highest order; ones for whom a vow held meaning.

*Twin Tusks, what I need is fanatics . . .*  

At the same time, such people had to be without ties, of any sort. An unlikely combination.

And, given such people could be found, to whom could they swear? Not Trake – that army's core already existed, centred around Gruntle.

There were two other war-aspected gods that Itkovian knew of; northern gods, rarely worshipped here in the midlands or to the south.

*What did Hetan call me? She never likened me to a cat, or a bear. No. In her eyes, I was a wolf.*

*Very well, then . . .*  

He raised his head, scanned over the heads of the milling survivors in the concourse until he spied the other lone rider.

She was watching him.
Itkovian gestured her over.

It was a few moments before she could pick her horse through the press and reach his side. 'Sir?'

'Find the captain. We three have a task before us, sir.'

The woman saluted, swung her mount round.

He watched her ride onto a side street, then out of sight. There was a strong logic behind his decision, yet, for him, it felt hollow, as if he personally was to have no part to play in what was to come beyond the act of preparation – no subsequent role in what had to be. None the less, the survival of the Grey Swords took precedence over his own wishes; indeed, his own life. It has to be this way. I can think of no other. A new Reve must be fashioned. Even in this, I am not yet done.

Captain Norul had found a horse for herself. Her face was aged beneath the rim of her helm: sleep had been denied them all for too long. She said nothing as she and the recruit reined in beside the Shield Anvil.

'Follow me, sirs,' Itkovian said, wheeling his mount.

They rode through the city, the sky paling to cerulean blue overhead, and left through the north gate. Encamped on the hills a third of a league away were the Barghast, the yurts and tents sparsely patrolled by a modest rearguard. Smoke rose from countless fires as the camp's old men and women began the morning meal. Children already ran down the uneven aisles, quieter than their city counterparts, but no less energetic.

The three Grey Swords crossed the looted remains of the Pannion lines and rode directly for the nearest Barghast camp.

Itkovian was not surprised to see a half-dozen old women gathering to meet them at the camp's edge. There is a current that carries us to this, and you witches have felt it as surely as have I, and thus the trueness is made known and plain. The realization did little to diminish the bleakness of his resolution. Consider it but one more burden, Shield Anvil, one for which you were made as you were for all the others.

They drew rein before the Barghast elders.

No-one spoke for a long moment, then one old woman cackled and gestured. 'Come, then.'

Itkovian dismounted, his companions following suit. Children appeared to take the reins of the three horses and the beasts were led away.

The elders, led by the spokeswoman, set off down the camp's main path, to a large yurt at the far end. The entrance was flanked by two Barghast warriors. The old woman hissed at them and both men retreated.

Itkovian, the recruit and the captain followed the elders into the yurt's interior.

'Rare is the man who comes to this place,' the spokeswoman said as she hobbled to the other side of the central hearth and lowered herself onto a bundle of furs.

'I am honoured—' 

'Don't be!' she replied with a cackle. 'You would have to beat a warrior senseless and drag him, and even then it's likely his brothers and friends would attack you before you reached the entrance. You, a young man, are among old women, and there is nothing in the world more perilous!'

'But look at him!' another woman cried. 'He has no fear!'

'The hearth of his soul is nothing but ashes,' a third sniffed.

'Even so,' the first woman retorted, 'with what he now seeks, he would promise a firestorm to a frozen forest. Togctha and Farand, the lovers lost to each other for eternity, the winter hearts that howl in the deep fastnesses of Laederon and beyond – we have all heard those mournful cries, in our dreams. Have we not? They come
closer – only not from the north, oh no, not the north. And now, this man.' She leaned forward, lined face indistinct behind the hearth's smoke. 'This man ...'

The last words were a sigh.

Itkovian drew a deep breath, then gestured to the recruit. 'The Mortal Sword—'

'No,' the old woman growled.

The Shield Anvil faltered. 'But—'

'No,' she repeated. 'He has been found. He exists. It is already done. Look at her hands, Wolf. There is too much caring in them. She shall be the Destriant.'

'Are you – are you certain of this?'

The old woman nodded towards the captain. 'And this one,' she continued, ignoring Itkovian's question, 'she is to be what you were. She will accept the burden – you, Wolf, have shown her all she must know. The truth of that is in her eyes, and in the love she holds for you. She would be its answer, in kind, in blood. She shall be the Shield Anvil.'

The other elders were nodding agreement, their eyes glittering in the gloom above beaked noses – as if a murder of crows now faced Itkovian.

He slowly turned to Captain Norul. The veteran looked stricken.

She faced him. 'Sir, what—'

'For the Grey Swords,' Itkovian said, struggling to contain his own welling of pain and anguish. 'It must be done, sir,' he rasped. 'Togg, Lord of Winter, a god of war long forgotten, recalled among the Barghast as the wolf-spirit, Togctha. And his lost mate, the she-wolf, Fanderay. Farand in the Barghast tongue. Among our company, now, more women than men. A Reve must be proclaimed, kneeling before the wolf god and the wolf goddess. You are to be the Shield Anvil, sir. And you,' he said to the recruit – whose eyes were wide – 'are to be the Destriant. The Grey Swords are remade, sirs. The sanction is here, now, among these wise women.'

The captain stepped back, armour clanking. 'Sir, you are the Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords—'

'No. I am the Shield Anvil of Fener, and Fener, sir, is... gone.'

'The company is virtually destroyed, sir,' the veteran pointed out. 'Our recovery is unlikely. The matter of quality—'

'You will require fanatics, Captain. That cast of mind, of breeding and culture, is vital. You must search, sir, you must needs find such people. People with nothing left to their lives, with their faith dismantled. People who have been made ... lost.'

Norul was shaking her head, but he could see growing comprehension in her grey eyes.

'Captain,' Itkovian continued inexorably, 'the Grey Swords shall march with the two foreign armies. South, to see the end of the Pannion Domin. And, at a time deemed propitious, you will recruit. You will find the people you seek, sir, among the Tenescowri.'

 Fear not, I shall not abandon you yet, my friend. There is much you must learn.

And, it seems, no end to my purpose.

He saw the bleakness come to her, saw it, and struggled against the horror of what he had done. Some things should never be shared. And that is my most terrible crime, for to the title – the burden that is Shield Anvil – I gave her no choice.

I gave her no choice.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

There were dark surprises that day.

The Year of the Gathering
Koralb

'We are being followed.'

Silverfox turned in her saddle, eyes narrowing. She sighed. 'My two Malazan minders.' She hesitated, then added, 'I doubt we'll dissuade them.'

Kruppe smiled. 'Clearly, your preternaturally unseen departure from the camp was less than perfect in its sorcerous efficacy. More witnesses, then, to the forthcoming fell event. Are you shy of audiences, lass? Dreadful flaw, if so—'

'No, Kruppe, I am not.'

'Shall we await them?'

'Something tells me they prefer it this way – at a distance. We go on, Daru. We're almost there.'

Kruppe scanned the low grass-backed hills on all sides. The sun's morning light was sharp, stripping away the last of shadows in the broad, shallow basins. They were, barring the two Malazan soldiers a thousand paces behind them, entirely alone. 'A modest army, it seems,' he observed. 'Entrenched in gopher holes, no doubt.'

'Their gift, and curse,' Silverfox replied. 'As dust, in all things, the T'lan Imass.'

Even as she spoke – their mounts carrying them along at a slow trot – shapes appeared on the flanking hills. Gaunt wolves, loping in silence. The T'lan Ay, at first only a score to either side, then in their hundreds.

Kruppe's mule brayed, ears snapping and head tossing. 'Be calmed, beast!' the Daru cried, startling the animal yet further.

Silverfox rode close and stilled the mule with a touch to its neck.

They approached a flat-topped hill between two ancient, long-dry river beds, the channels wide, their banks eroded to gentle slopes. Ascending to the summit, Silverfox reined in and dismounted.

Kruppe hastily followed suit.

The T'lan Ay remained circling at a distance. The wolves numbered in the thousands, now, strangely spectral amidst the dust lifted into the air by their restless padding.

Arriving behind Rhivi and Daru, and ignored by the T'lan Ay, the two marines walked their horses up the slope.

'It's going to be a hot one,' one commented.

'Plenty hot,' the other woman said.

'Good day to miss a scrap, too.'

'That it is. Wasn't much interested in fighting Tenescowri in any case. A starving army's a pathetic sight. Walking skeletons—'

'Curious image, that,' Kruppe said. 'All things considered.'
The two marines fell silent, studying him.

'Excuse my interrupting the small talk,' Silverfox said drily. 'If you would all take position behind me. Thank you, no, a little farther back. Say, five paces, at the very least. That will do. I'd prefer no interruptions, if you please, in what follows.'

Kruppe's gaze – and no doubt that of the women flanking him – had gone past her, to the lowlands surrounding the hill, where squat, fur-clad, desiccated warriors were rising from the ground in a sea of shimmering dust. A sudden, uncannily silent conjuration.

As dust, in all things . . .

But the dust had found shape.

Uneven ranks, the dull glimmer of flint weapons a rippling of grey, black and russet brown amidst the betel tones of withered, polished skin. Skull helms, a few horned or antlered, made of every slope and every basin a spread of bone, as of stained, misaligned cobbles on some vast plaza. There was no wind to stir the long, ragged hair that dangled beneath those skullcaps, and the sun's light could not dispel the shadow beneath helm and brow ridge that swallowed the pits of the eyes. But every gaze was fixed on Silverfox, a regard of vast weight.

Within the span of a dozen heartbeats, the plain to all sides had vanished. The T'lan Imass, in their tens of thousands, now stood in its place, silent, motionless.

The T'lan Ay were no longer visible, ranging beyond the periphery of the amassed legions. Guardians. Kin, Hood-forsworn.

Silverfox turned to face the T'lan Imass.

Silence.

Kruppe shivered. The air was pungent with undeath, the gelid exhalation of dying ice, filled with something like loss.

Despair. Or perhaps, after this seeming eternity, only its ashes.

There is, all about us, ancient knowledge – that cannot be denied. Yet Kruppe wonders, are there memories? True memories? Of enlivened flesh and the wind's caress, of the laughter of children? Memories of love?

When frozen between life and death, in the glacial in-between, what can exist of mortal feeling? Not even an echo. Only memories of ice, of ice and no more than that. Gods below . . . such sorrow . . .

Figures approached the slope before Silverfox. Weaponless, robed in furs from ancient, long-extinct beasts. Kruppe's eyes focused on one in particular, a broad-shouldered Bonecaster, wearing an antlered skullcap and the stained fur of an arctic fox. With a shock the Daru realized that he knew this apparition.

Ah, we meet again, Pran Chole. Forgive me, but my heart breaks at the sight of you – at what you have become.

The antlered Bonecaster was the first to address Silverfox. 'We are come,' he said, 'to the Second Gathering.'

'You have come,' Silverfox grated, 'in answer to my summons.'

The Bonecaster slowly tilted his head. 'What you are was created long ago, guided by the hand of an Elder God. Yet, at its heart, Imass. All that follows has run in your blood from the moment of your birth. The wait, Summoner, has been long. I am Pran Chole, of Kron T'lan Imass. I stood, with K'ru'l, to attend your birth.'

Silverfox's answering smile was bitter. 'Are you my father, then, Pran Chole? If so, this reunion has come far too late. For us both.'

Despair flooded Kruppe. This was old anger, held back overlong, now turning the air gelid and brittle. A
dreadful exchange to mark the first words of the Second Gathering.

Pran Chole seemed to wilt at her words. His desiccated face dropped, as if the Bonecaster was overcome with shame.

No, Silverfox, how could you do this?

'Where you then went, daughter,' Pran Chole whispered, 'I could not follow.'

'True,' she snapped. 'After all, you had a vow awaiting you. A ritual. The ritual, the one that turned your hearts to ash. All for a war. But that is what war is all about, isn't it? Leaving. Leaving home. Your loved ones – indeed, the very capacity of love itself. You chose to abandon it all. You abandoned everything! You abandoned—' She cut her words off suddenly.

Kruppe closed his eyes for a brief moment, so that he might in his mind complete her sentence. You abandoned . . . me.

Pran Chole's head remained bowed. Finally, he raised it slightly. 'Summoner, what would you have us do?'

'We will get to that soon enough.'

Another Bonecaster stepped forward, then. The rotted fur of a large brown bear rode his shoulders and it seemed the beast itself had reared behind the shadowed eyes. 'I am Okral Lorn,' he said in a voice like distant thunder. 'All the Bonecasters of Kron T'lan Imass now stand before you. Agkor Choom, Bendal Home, Ranag Ilm, and Brold Chood. Kron, as well, who was chosen as War Leader at the First Gathering. Unlike Pran Chole, we care nothing for your anger. We played no role in your creation, in your birth. None the less, you cling to a misapprehension, Summoner. Pran Chole can in no way be considered your father. He stands here, accepting the burden of your rage, for he is what he is. If you would call anyone your father, if you so require a face upon which hatred can focus, then you must forbear, for the one you seek is not among us.'

The blood had slowly drained from Silverfox's face, as if she'd not been prepared for such brutal condemnation flung back at her by this Bonecaster. 'N-not among you?'

'Your souls were forged in the Warren of Tellann, yet not in the distant past – the past in which Pran Chole lived – not at first, at any rate. Summoner, the unveiled warren of which I speak belonged to the First Sword, Onos T'oolan. Now clanless, he walks alone, and that solitude has twisted his power of Tellann—'

'Twisted? How?'

'By what he seeks, by what lies at the heart of his desires.'

Silverfox was shaking her head, as if striving to deny all that Okral Lorn said. 'And what does he seek?'

The Bonecaster shrugged. 'Summoner, you will discover that soon enough, for Onos T'oolan has heard your call to the Second Gathering. He will, alas, be rather late.'

Kruppe watched as Silverfox slowly returned her gaze to Pran Chole, whose head was bowed once more.

In assuming the responsibility for her creation, this Bonecaster offered her a gift – a focus for her anger, a victim to stand before its unleashing. I do remember you, Pran Chole, there in my dream-world. Your face, the compassion in your eyes. Would I the courage to ask: were you Imass once, in truth, all like this?

Another pair was emerging from the ranks. In the silence that followed Okral Lom's words, the foremost one spoke. 'I am Ay Estos, of Logros T'lan Imass.' The furs of arctic wolves hung from the Bonecaster, who was taller, leaner than the others.

Silverfox's reply was almost distracted. 'I greet you, Ay Estos. You are given leave to speak.'

The T'lan Imass bowed in acknowledgement, then said, 'Logros could but send two Bonecasters to this Gathering, for the reason I would now tell you.' He paused, then, as Silverfox made no reply to that, he continued. 'Logros T'lan Imass hunts renegades – our own kin, who have broken from the Vow. Crimes have
been committed, Summoner, which must be answered. I have come, then, on behalf of the clans of Logros.'

Silverfox shook herself, visibly wrenching her gaze from Pran Chole. She drew a deep breath, straightened. 'You said,' she said tonelessly, 'that another Bonecaster of Logros is present.'

The wolf-clad T'lan Imass stepped to one side. The figure standing behind him was hugely boned, the skull beneath the thin, withered flesh bestial. She wore a scaled, leathery cloak of skin that hung down to the ground behind her. Unadorned by a helm, the broad, flat skull revealed only a few remaining patches of skin that each bore but a few strands of long, white hair.

'Olar Ethil,' Ay Estos said. 'First among the Bonecasters. Eleint, the First Soletaken. She has not journeyed with me, for Logros set for her another task, which has taken her far from the clans. Until this day, we among the Logros had not seen Olar Ethil in many years. Eleint, will you speak of success or failure in what you have sought?'

The First Bonecaster tilted her head, then addressed Silverfox. 'Summoner. As I neared this place, you commanded my dreams.'

'I did, though I knew not who you were. We can discuss that another time. Tell me of this task set for you by Logros.'

'Logros sent me in search of the remaining T'lan Imass armies, such as we knew from the First Gathering. The Ifayle, the Kerluhm, the Bentract and the Orshan.'

'And did you find them?' she asked.

'The four remaining clans of Bentract T'lan Imass are on Jacuruku, I believe, yet trapped within the Warren of Chaos. I searched there, Summoner, without success. Of the Orshan, the Ifayle and Kerluhm, I report my failure in discovering any sign. It follows that we must conclude they no longer exist.'

Silverfox was clearly shaken by Olar Ethil's words. 'So many...' she whispered, 'lost?' A moment later Kruppe saw her steel herself. 'Olar Ethil, what inspired Logros to despatch you to find the remaining armies?'

'Summoner, the First Throne found a worthy occupant. Logros was commanded so by the occupant.'

'An occupant? Who?'

'A mortal known then as Kellanved, Emperor of Malaz.'

Silverfox said nothing for a long moment, then, 'Of course. But he no longer occupies it, does he?'

'He no longer occupies it, Summoner, yet he has not yielded it.'

'What does that mean? Ah, because the Emperor didn't die, did he?'

Olar Ethil nodded. 'Kellanved did not die. He ascended, and has taken the Throne of Shadow. Had he died in truth, the First Throne would be unoccupied once more. He has not, so it is not. We are at an impasse.'

'And when this ... event ... occurred – the result was your ceasing to serve the Malazan Empire, leaving Laseen to manage on her own for the first, crucial years of her rule.'

'They were uncertain times, Summoner. Logros T'lan Imass was divided unto itself. The discovery of surviving Jaghut in the Jhag Odhan proved a timely, if short-lived, distraction. Clans among us have since returned to the Malazan Empire's service.'

'And was the schism responsible for the renegades the rest now pursue?'

Ah, her mind returns, sharply honed. This is fell information indeed. Renegades among the T'lan Imass. . .

'No, Summoner. The renegades have found another path, which as yet remains hidden from us. They have, on occasion, employed the Warren of Chaos in their flight.'
Chaos? I wonder, to whom do these renegade T’lan Imass now kneel? No, muse on it not. Still a distant threat, Kruppe suspects. All in its own time . . .

Silverfox asked, ’What Soletaken shape do you assume, Olar Ethil?’

’When I veer, I am as an undead twin to Tiam, who spawned all dragons.’

Nothing more was added. The thousands of T’lan Imass stood motionless, silent. A score heartbeats passed in Kruppe’s chest. Finally, he cleared his throat and stepped closer to Silverfox. ’It appears, lass, that they await your command – whatever command that might be. A reasonable resolu—’

Silverfox swung to face him. ’Please,’ she grated. ’No advice. This is my Gathering, Kruppe. Leave me to it.’

’Of course, my dear. Humblest apologies. Please do resume your hesitation.’

She made a sour face. ’Impudent bastard.’

Kruppe smiled.

Silverfox turned back to the awaiting T’lan Imass. ’Pran Chole, please forgive my earlier words.’

He raised his head. ’Summoner, it is I who must ask for forgiveness.’

’No. Okral Lorn was right in condemning my anger. I feel as if I have awaited this meeting for a thousand lifetimes – the expectation, the pressure . . .’

Kruppe cleared his throat. ’A thousand lifetimes, Silverfox? Scry more closely those who stand before you—’

’Thank you, that’s enough, Kruppe. Believe me, I am quite capable of castigating myself without any help from you.’

’Of course,’ the Daru murmured.

Silverfox settled her gaze on Pran Chole once more. ’I would ask of you and your kin a question.’

’We await, Summoner.’

’Are there any Jaghut left?’

’Of pure blood, we know of but one who remains in this realm. One, who hides not in the service of a god, or in service to the Houses of the Azath.’

’And he will be found at the heart of the Pannion Domin, won’t he?’

’Yes.’

’Commanding K’Chain Che’Malle undead. How can that be?’

Kruppe noted the hesitation in Pran Chole as the Bonecaster replied. ’We do not know, Summoner.’

’And when he is destroyed, Pran Chole, what then?’

The Bonecaster seemed taken aback by the question. ’Summoner, this is your Gathering. You are flesh and blood – our flesh and blood, reborn. When the last Jaghut is slain—’

’A moment, if you please!’ Kruppe said, edging another step forward. Silverfox hissed in exasperation but the Daru continued. ’Pran Chole, do you recall worthy Kruppe?’

’I do.’

’Worthy, clever Kruppe, yes? You said you know of but one Jaghut. No doubt accurate enough. None the less, saying such is not quite the same as saying there is but one left, is it? Thus, you are not certain, are you?’
Olar Ethil replied. 'Mortal, other Jaghut remain. Isolated. Hidden – they have learned to hide very well indeed. We believe they exist, but we cannot find them.'

'Yet you seek an official end to the war, do you not?'

A susurration of motion rippled through the undead ranks.

Silverfox wheeled on him. 'How did you know, damn you?'

Kruppe shrugged. 'Sorrow unsurpassed and unsurpassing. They in truth seek to become dust. Had they eyes, Kruppe would see the truth no plainer writ. The T'lan Imass wish oblivion.'

'Which I would only grant if all the Jaghut on this world had ceased to exist,' Silverfox said. 'For that is the burden laid upon me. My intended purpose. The threat of tyranny removed, finally, once and for all time. Only then could I grant the T'lan Imass the oblivion they seek – so the Ritual demands of me, for that is a linkage that cannot be broken.'

'You must make the pronouncement, Summoner,' Okral Lorn said.

'Yes,' she replied, still glaring at Kruppe.

'Your words,' Pran Chole added, 'can shatter the Ritual's bindings.'

Her head snapped round. 'So easily? Yet-' She faced the Daru once more, and scowled. 'Kruppe, you force into the open an unpleasant truth—'

'Aye, Silverfox, but not the same truth as that which you seem to see. No, Kruppe has unveiled a deeper one, far more poignant.'

'She crossed her arms. 'And that is?'

Kruppe studied the sea of undead figures, narrowed his gaze on the shadowed sockets of countless eyes. After a long moment, he sighed, and it was a sigh ragged with emotion. 'Ah, my dear, look again, please. It was a pathetic deceit, not worth condemnation. Understand, if you will, the very beginning. The First Gathering. There was but one enemy, then. One people, from whom tyrants emerged. But time passes, aye? And now, dominators and tyrants abound on all sides – yet are they Jaghut? They are not. They are human, for the most part, yes?

'The truth in all its layers? Very well. Silverfox, the T'lan Imass have won their war. Should a new tyrant emerge from among the few hidden Jaghut, he or she will not find the world so simple to conquer as it once was. There are gods to oppose the effort; nay, there are mere ascendants! Men such as Anomander Rake, women such as Korlat – have you forgotten the fate of the last Jaghut Tyrant?

'The time has passed, Silverfox. For the Jaghut, and thus, for the T'lan Imass.' Kruppe rested a hand on her shoulder and looked up into her eyes. 'Summoner,' he whispered, 'these indomitable warriors are ... weary. Weary beyond all comprehension. They have existed for hundreds of thousands of years, for one sole cause. And that cause is now ... a farce. Pointless. Irrelevant. They want it to end, Silverfox. They tried to arrange it with Kellanelved and the First Throne, but the effort failed. Thus, they gave shape to you, to what you would become. For this one task.

'Redeem them. Please.'

Pran Chole spoke, 'Summoner, we shall destroy the Jaghut who hides within this Pannion Domin. And then, we would ask for an end. It is as Kruppe has said. We have no reason to exist, thus we exist without honour, and it is destroying us. The renegades Logros T'lan Imass hunts are but the first. We shall lose more of our kin, or so we fear.'

Kruppe saw that Silverfox was trembling, but her words were tightly controlled as she addressed the antlered shaman. 'You create me as the first flesh and blood Bonecaster in almost three hundred thousand years. The first, and, it seems, the last.'
'Do as we ask, Summoner, and the remainder of your life is yours.'

'That life? I am neither Rhivi nor Malazan. I am not even truly human. It is what all of you do not grasp!' She jabbed a finger at Kruppe and the two marines to complete an all-encompassing gesture. 'None of you! Not even Paran, who thinks – no, what he thinks I will deal with in my own time – it is not for any of you. T'lan Imass! I am your kin, damn you! Your first child in three hundred thousand years! Am I to be abandoned again?'

Kruppe stepped back. Again? Oh, gods below—'Silverfox—'

'Silence!'

But there was no silence. Instead, a rustling and creaking whispered through the air, and Silverfox and Kruppe swung to the sound.

To see tens of thousands of T'lan Imass lowering themselves to their knees, heads bowing.

Olar Ethil was the last standing. She spoke. 'Summoner, we beg you to release us.' With those words, she too settled onto the ground.

The scene twisted a knife in Kruppe's very soul. Unable to speak, barely able to breathe, he simply stared out at the broken multitude in growing horror. And when Silverfox gave answer, the Daru's heart threatened to burst.

'No.'

In the distance, on all sides, the undead wolves began to howl.

'Hood's breath!' one of the marines swore.

'Aye, theirs is a voice of such unearthly sorrow, it tears at the mortal mind. Oh, K'rul, what are we to do now?

'One assumes a lack of complexity in people whose lives are so short.'

Whiskeyjack grinned sourly. 'If that's meant to be an apology, you'll have to do better, Korlat.'

The Tiste Andii sighed, ran a hand through her long black hair in a very human gesture.

'Then again,' the Malazan continued, 'from you, woman, even a grunt will do.'

Her eyes flashed. 'Oh? And how am I to take that?'

'Try the way it was meant, lass. I've not enjoyed the last few days much, and I'd rather we were as before, so I will take what I can get. There, as simple as I can make it.'

She leaned in her saddle and laid a hand against his chain-clothed arm. 'Thank you. It seems I am the one needing things simple.'

'To that, my lips are sealed.'

'You are a wise man, Whiskeyjack.'

The plain before them, at a distance of two thousand paces and closing, swarmed with Tenescowri. There was no order to their ranks, barring the lone rider who rode before them, a thin, gaunt youth, astride a spine-bowed roan dray. Immediately behind the young man – whom Whiskeyjack assumed to be Anaster – ranged a dozen or so women. Wild-haired, loosing random shrieks, there was an aura of madness and dark horror about them.

'Women of the Dead Seed, presumably,' Korlat said, noting his gaze. 'There is sorcerous power there. They
are the First Child's true bodyguard, I believe.'

Whiskeyjack twisted in his saddle to examine the Malazan legions formed up behind him fifty paces away. 'Where is Anomander Rake? This mob could charge at any moment.'

'They will not,' Korlat asserted. 'Those witches sense my Lord's nearness. They are made uneasy, and cry out caution to their chosen child.'

'But will he listen?'

'He had bett—'

A roaring sound shattered her words.

The Tenescowri were charging, a surging tide of fearless desperation. A wave of power from the Women of the Dead Seed psychically assailed Whiskeyjack, made his heart thunder with a strange panic.

Korlat hissed between her teeth. 'Resist the fear, my love!'

Snarling, Whiskeyjack drew his sword and wheeled his horse round to face his troops. The sorcerous assault of terror had reached them, battering at the lines. They rippled, but not a single soldier stepped back. A moment later, his Malazans steadied.

"Ware!' Korlat cried. 'My Lord arrives in his fullest power!'

The air seemed to descend on all sides, groaning beneath a vast, invisible weight. The sky darkened with a palpable dread.

Whiskeyjack's horse stumbled, legs buckling momentarily before the animal regained its balance. The beast screamed.

A cold, bitter wind whistled fiercely, flattening the grasses before the commander and Korlat, then it struck the charging mass of Tenescowri.

The Women of the Dead Seed were thrown back, staggering, stumbling, onto the ground where they writhed. Behind them, the front runners in the mob tried to stop and were overrun. Within a single heartbeat, the front ranks collapsed into chaos, figures seething over others, bodies trampled or pushed forward in a flailing of limbs.

The silver-maned black dragon swept low over Whiskeyjack's head, sailing forward on that gelid gale.

The lone figure of Anaster, astride his roan horse that had not even flinched, awaited him. The front line of the Tenescowri was a tumbling wall behind the First Child.

Anomander Rake descended on the youth.

Anaster straightened in his saddle and spread his arms wide.

Huge talons snapped down. Closed around the First Child and plucked him from the horse.

The dragon angled upward with its prize.

Then seemed to stagger in the air.

Korlat cried out. 'Gods, he is as poison!'

The dragon's leg whipped to one side, flinging Anaster away. The young man spun, cartwheeling like a tattered doll through the air. To plunge into the mob of Tenescowri on the far right, where he disappeared from view.

Righting himself, Anomander Rake lowered his wedge-shaped head as he closed on the peasant army. Fanged mouth opened.
Raw Kurald Galain issued from that maw. Roiling darkness that Whiskeyjack had seen before, long ago, outside the city of Pale. But then, it had been tightly controlled. And more recently, when led by Korlat through the warren itself; again, calmed. But now, the Elder Warren of Darkness was unleashed, wild.

So there's another way into the Warren of Kurald Galain – right down that dragon's throat.

A broad, flattened swath swept through the Tenescowri. Bodies dissolving to nothing, leaving naught but ragged clothing. The dragon's flight was unswerving, cutting a path of annihilation that divided the army into two seething, recoiling halves.

The first pass completed, Anomander Rake lifted skyward, banked around for another.

It was not needed. The Tenescowri forces had broken, figures scattering in all directions. Here and there, Whiskeyjack saw, it turned on itself, like a hound biting its own wounds. Senseless murder, self-destruction, all that came of blind, unreasoning terror.

The dragon glided back over the writhing mobs, but did not unleash its warren a second time.

Then Whiskeyjack saw Anomander Rake's head turn.

The dragon dropped lower, a wide expanse clearing before it as the Tenescowri flung themselves away, leaving only a half-score of figures, lying prone but evincing motion none the less – slowly, agonizingly attempting to regain their feet.

The Women of the Dead Seed.

The dragon, flying now at a man's height over the ground, sembled, blurred as it closed on the witches, reformed into the Lord of Moon's Spawn – who strode towards the old women, hand reaching up to draw his sword.

'Korlat—'

'I am sorry, Whiskeyjack.'

'He's going to—'

'I know.'

Whiskeyjack stared in horror as Anomander Rake reached the first of the women, a scrawny, hunchbacked hag half the Tiste Andii's height, and swung Dragnipur.

Her head dropped to the ground at her feet on a stream of gore. The body managed an eerie side-step, as if dancing, then crumpled.

Anomander Rake walked to the next woman.

'No – this is not right—'

'Please—'

Ignoring Korlat's plea, Whiskeyjack spurred his horse forward, down the slope at a canter, then a gallop as they reached level ground.

Another woman was slain, then a third before the Malazan arrived, sawing his reins to bring his horse to a skidding halt directly in Rake's path.

The Lord of Moon's Spawn was forced to halt his stride. He looked up in surprise, then frowned.

'Stop this,' Whiskeyjack grated. He realized he still held his sword unsheathed, saw Rake's unhuman eyes casually note it before the Tiste Andii replied.

'To one side, my friend. What I do is a mercy—'
'No, it is a judgement, Anomander Rake. And,' he added, eyes on Dragnipur's black blade, 'a sentence.'

The Lord's answering smile was oddly wistful. 'If you would have it as you say, Whiskeyjack. None the less, I claim the right to judgement of these creatures.'

'I will not oppose that, Anomander Rake.'

'Ah, it is the ... sentence, then.'

'It is.'

The Lord sheathed his sword. 'Then it must be by your hand, friend. And quickly, for they recover their powers.'

He flinched in his saddle. 'I am no executioner.'

'You'd best become one, or step aside. Now.'

Whiskeyjack wheeled his horse round. The seven remaining women were indeed regaining their senses, though he saw in the one nearest him a glaze of incomprehension lingering still in her aged, yellowed eyes.

_Hood take me_

He kicked his mount into motion, readied his blade in time to drive its point into the nearest woman's chest.

Dry skin parted almost effortlessly. Bones snapped like twigs. The victim reeled back, fell.

Pushing his horse on, Whiskeyjack shook the blood from his sword, then, reaching the next woman, he swung cross-ways, opened wide her throat.

He forced a cold grip onto his thoughts, holding them still, concentrated on the mechanics of his actions. No errors. No pain-stretched flaws for his victims. Precise executions, one after another, instinctively guiding his horse, shifting his weight, readying his blade, thrusting or slashing as was required.

One, then another, then another.

Until, swinging his mount around, he saw that he was done. It was over.

His horse stamping as it continued circling, Whiskeyjack looked up.

To see Onearm's Host lining the ridge far to his left – the space between them littered with trampled bodies but otherwise open. Unobstructed.

His soldiers.

Lining the ridge. Silent.

_To have witnessed this . . . Now, I am indeed damned. From this, no return. No matter what the wards of explanation, of justification. No matter the crimes committed by my victims. I have slain. Not soldiers, not armed opponents, but creatures assailed by madness, stunned senseless, uncomprehending._

He turned, stared at Anomander Rake.

The Lord of Moon's Spawn returned the regard without expression.

_This burden – you have taken it before, assumed it long ago, haven't you? This burden, that now assails my soul, it is what you live with – have lived with for centuries. The price for the sword on your back—_

'You should have left it with me, friend,' the Tiste Andii said quietly. 'I might have insisted, but I would not cross blades with you. Thus,' he added with a sorrowful smile, 'the opening of my heart proves, once more, a curse. Claiming those I care for, by virtue of that very emotion. Would that I had learned my lesson long ago, do you not agree?''
'It seems,' Whiskeyjack managed, 'we have found something new to share.'

Anomander Rake's eyes narrowed. 'I would not have wished it.'

'I know.' He held hard on his control. 'I'm sorry I gave you no choice.'

They regarded each other.

'I believe Korlat's kin have captured this Anaster,' Rake said after a moment. 'Will you join me in attending to him?'

Whiskeyjack flinched.

'No, my friend,' Rake said. 'I yield judgement of him. Let us leave that to others, shall we?'

_In proper military fashion, you mean. That rigid structure that so easily absolves personal responsibility. Of course. We've time for that, now, haven't we? 'Agreed, Lord. Lead on, if you please.'_

With another faint, wistful smile, Anomander Rake strode past him.

Whiskeyjack sheathed his bloodied sword, and followed.

He stared at the Tiste Andii's broad back, at the weapon that hung from it. _Anomander Rake, how can you bear this burden? This burden that has so thoroughly broken my heart?_

_But no, that is not what so tears at me._

_Lord of Moon's Spawn, you asked me to step aside, and you called it a mercy. I misunderstood you. A mercy, not to the Women of the Dead Seed. But to me. Thus your sorrowed smile when I denied you._

_Ah, my friend, I saw only your brutality – and that hurt you._

_Better, for us both, had you crossed blades with me._

_For us both._

_And I – I am not worth such friends. Old man, foolish gestures plague you. Be done with it. Make this your last war._

_Make it your last._

Korlat waited with her Tiste Andii kin, surrounding the gaunt figure that was Anaster, First Child of the Dead Seed, at a place near where the youth had landed when thrown by Anomander Rake.

Whiskeyjack saw tears in his lover's eyes, and the sight of them triggered a painful wrench in his gut. He forced himself to look away. Although he needed her now, and perhaps she in turn needed him to share all that she clearly comprehended, it would have to wait. He resolved to take his lead from Anomander Rake, for whom control was both armour and, if demanded by circumstance, a weapon.

Riders were approaching from the Malazan position, as well as from Brood's. There would be witnesses to what followed — _and that I now curse such truths is true revelation of how far I have fallen. When, before, did I ever fear witnesses to what I did or said? Queen of Dreams, forgive me. I have found myself in a living nightmare, and the monster that stalks me is none other than myself._

_Reining his horse to a halt before the gathered Tiste Andii, Whiskeyjack was able to examine Anaster closely for the first time._

_Disarmed, bruised and blood-smeared, his face turned away, he looked pitiful, weak and small._

_But that is always the way with leaders who have been broken. Whether kings or commanders, defeat withers them—_
And then he saw the youth's face. Something had gouged out one of his eyes, leaving a welter of deep red blood. The remaining eye lifted, fixed on Whiskeyjack. Intent, yet horrifyingly lifeless, a stare both cold and casual, curious yet vastly – fundamentally – indifferent. 'The slayer of my mother,' Anaster said in a lilting voice, cocking his head as he continued to study the Malazan.

Whiskeyjack's voice was hoarse. 'I am sorry for that, First Child.'

'I am not. She was insane. A prisoner of herself, possessed by her own demons. Not alone in that curse, we must presume.'

'Not any more,' Whiskeyjack answered.

'It is as a plague, is it not? Ever spreading. Devouring lives. That is why you will, ultimately, fail. All of you. You become what you destroy.'

The tone of Anomander Rake's response was shockingly vulgar. 'No more appropriate words could come from a cannibal. What, Anaster, do you think we should do with you? Be honest, now.'

The young man swung his singular gaze to the Lord of Moon's Spawn. Whatever self-possession he contained seemed to falter suddenly with that contact, for he reached up a tentative hand to hover before the bloodied eye-socket, and his pale face grew paler. 'Kill me,' he whispered.

Rake frowned. 'Korlat?'

'Aye, he lost control, then. His fear has a face. One that I have not seen before—'

Anaster turned on her. 'Shut up! You saw nothing!'

'There is darkness within you,' she replied in calm tones. 'Virulent cousin to Kurald Galain. A darkness of the soul. When you falter, child, we see what hides within it.'

'Liars!' he hissed.

'A soldier's face,' Anomander Rake said. He slowly faced westward. 'From the city. From Capustan.' He turned back to Anaster. 'He is still there, isn't he? It seems, mortal, that you have acquired a nemesis – one who promises something other than death, something far more terrible. Interesting.'

'You do not understand! He is Itkovian! Shield Anvil! He wishes my soul! Please, kill me!'

Dujek and Caladan Brood had arrived from the allied lines, as well as Kallor and Arthans. They sat on their horses, watchful, silent.

'Perhaps we will,' the Lord of Moon's Spawn replied after a moment. 'In time. For now, we will take you with us to Capustan—'

'No! Please! Kill me now!'

'I see no absolution in your particular madness, child,' Anomander Rake said. 'No cause for mercy. Not yet. Perhaps, upon meeting the one – Itkovian? – who so terrifies you, we will judge otherwise, and so grant you a swift end. As you are our prisoner, that is our right. You might be spared your nemesis after all.' He faced Brood and the others. 'Acceptable?'

'Aye,' Dujek growled, eyes on Whiskeyjack.

'Agreed,' Brood said.

Anaster made a desperate attempt to snatch a dagger from a Tiste Andii warrior beside him, which was effortlessly denied. The youth collapsed, then, weeping, down onto his knees, his thin frame racked by heaves.

'Best take him away,' Anomander Rake said, studying the broken figure. 'This is no act.'
That much was plain to everyone present.

Whiskeyjack nudged his horse to come alongside Dujek.

The old man nodded in greeting, then muttered, 'That was damned unfortunate.'

'It was.'

'From the distance, it looked—'

'It looked bad, High Fist, because it was.'

'Understand, Whiskeyjack, I comprehend your ... your mercy. Rake's sword – but, dammit, could you not have waited?'

Explanations, sound justifications crowded Whiskeyjack's mind, but all he said was, 'No.'

'Executions demand procedures—'

'Then strip me of my rank, sir.'

Dujek winced, looked away. He sighed roughly. 'That's not what I meant, Whiskeyjack. I know well enough the significance of such procedures – the real reason for their existing in the first place. A sharing of necessary but brutal acts—'

'Diminishes the personal cost, aye,' Whiskeyjack answered in low tones. 'No doubt Anomander Rake could have easily managed those few souls added to his legendary list. But I took them instead. I diminished his personal cost. A paltry effort, granted, and one he asked me not to do. But it is done now. The issue is ended.'

'The issue is anything but,' Dujek grated. 'I am your friend—'

'No.' We're not at risk of crossing blades, so there won't be any sharing of this one. 'No,' he repeated. Not this time.

He could almost hear Dujek's teeth grinding.

Korlat joined them. 'A strange young man, the one known as Anaster.'

The two Malazans turned at her words.

'Does that surprise you?' Dujek asked.

'She shrugged. 'There was much hidden within the darkness of his soul, High Fist. More than just a soldier's face. He could not bear leading his army. Could not bear to see the starvation, the loss and desperation. And so was resolved to send it to its death, to absolute annihilation. As an act of mercy, no less. To relieve the suffering.

'For himself, he committed crimes that could only be answered with death. Execution at the hands of those survivors among his victims. But not a simple death – he seeks something more. He seeks damnation as his sentence. An eternity of damnation. I cannot fathom such self-loathing.'

'I can, for I feel as if I am tottering on the very edge of that steep slope myself. One more misstep ...'

Whiskeyjack looked away, towards the Malazan legions massed on the distant ridge. The sun flashing from armour and weapons was blinding, making his eyes water.

Dujek moved his horse away, rejoining Artanthos, Brood and Kallor.

Leaving Whiskeyjack alone with Korlat.

She reached up, touched his gauntleted hand.

He could not meet her gaze, continued studying the motionless lines of his soldiers.
'My love,' she murmured. 'Those women – they were not defenceless. The power they drew on came from the Warren of Chaos itself. My Lord's initial attack was intended to destroy them; instead, it but left them momentarily stunned. They were recovering. And, in their awakened power, they would have unleashed devastation. Madness and death, for your army. This entire day could have been lost.'

He grimaced. 'I do not rail at necessity,' he said.

'It seems ... you do.'

'War has its necessities, Korlat, and I have always understood that. Always known the cost. But, this day, by my own hand, I have realized something else. War is not a natural state. It is an imposition, and a damned unhealthy one. With its rules, we willingly yield our humanity. Speak not of just causes, worthy goals. We are takers of life. Servants of Hood, one and all.'

'The Women of the Dead Seed would have killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, Whiskeyjack—'

'And I have commanded the same, in my time, Korlat. What difference is there between us?'

'You are not afraid of the questions that follow such acts,' she said. 'Those that you willingly ask of yourself. Perhaps you see that as self-destructive ruthlessness, but I see it as courage – a courage that is extraordinary. A man less brave would have left my Lord to his unseemly task.'

'These are pointless words, Korlat. The army standing over there has witnessed its commander committing murder—'

Korlat's hissing retort shocked him. 'Do not dare underestimate them!'

'Underest—'

'I have come to know many of your soldiers, Whiskeyjack. They are not fools. Perhaps many of them – if not most – are unable to articulate their fullest understanding, but they understand none the less. Do you not think that they – each in his or her own way – have faced the choice you faced this morning? The knife-point turn of their lives? And every one of them still feels the scar within them.'

'I see little—'

'Whiskeyjack, listen to me. They witnessed. They saw, in fullest knowing. Damn you, I know this for I felt the same. They hurt for you. With every brutal blow, they felt the old wounds within them resonate in sympathy. Commander, your shame is an insult. Discard it, or you will deliver unto your soldiers the deepest wound of all.'

He stared down at her. 'We're a short-lived people,' he said after a long moment. 'We lack such complexity in our lives.'

'Bastard. Remind me to never again apologize to you.'

He looked back once more at the Malazan legions. 'I still fear to face them at close range,' he muttered.

'The distance between you and them has already closed, Whiskeyjack. Your army will follow you into the Abyss, should you so command.'

'The most frightening thought uttered thus far today.'

She made no reply to that.

'Aye, war's imposition – of extremities. Harsh, yet simple. It is no place for humanity, no place at all. 'Dujek was displeased,' he said.

'Dujek wants to keep his army alive.'

His head snapped round.
Her eyes regarded him, cool and gauging.

'I have no interest in usurping his authority—'

'You just did, Whiskeyjack. Laseen's fear of you being damned, the natural order has reasserted itself. She could handle Dujek. That's why she demoted you and put him in charge. Gods, you can be dense at times!' He scowled. 'If I am such a threat to her, why didn't she—' He stopped, closed his mouth. Oh, Hood. Pale. Darujhistan. It wasn't the Bridgeburners she wanted destroyed. It was me.

'Guard your trust, my love,' Korlat said. 'It may be that your belief in honour is being used against you.'

He felt himself go cold inside.

Oh, Hood.

Hood's marble balls on an anvil. . .

Coll made his way down the gentle slope towards the Mhybe's wagon. Thirty paces to the right were the last of the Trygalle Trade Guild's carriages, a group of shareholders throwing bones on a tarp nearby. Messengers rode in the distance, coming from or returning to the main army's position a league to the southwest.

Murillio sat with his back to one of the Rhivi wagon's solid wood wheels, eyes closed. They opened upon the councillor's arrival.

'How does she fare?' Coll asked, crouching down beside him.

'It is exhausting,' Murillio replied. 'To see her suffer those nightmares – they are endless. Tell me the news.'

'Well, Kruppe and Silverfox haven't been seen since yesterday; nor have those two marines Whiskeyjack had guarding the Mhybe's daughter. As for the battle ...' Coll looked away, squinting southwestward. 'It was short-lived. Anomander Rake assumed his Soletaken form. A single pass dispersed the Tenescowri. Anaster was captured, and, uh, the mages in his service were ... executed.'

'Sounds unpleasant,' Murillio commented.

'By all reports it was. In any case, the peasants are fleeing back to Capustan, where I doubt they will be much welcome. It's a sad fate indeed for those poor bastards.'

'She's been forgotten, hasn't she?'

Coll did not need to ask for elaboration. 'A hard thing to swallow, but aye, it does seem that way.'

'Outlived her usefulness, and so discarded.'

'I cling to a faith that this is a tale not yet done, Murillio.'

'We are the witnesses. Here to oversee the descent. Naught else, Coll. Kruppe's assurances are nothing but wind. And you and I, we are prisoners of this unwelcome circumstance – as much as she is, as much as that addled Rhivi woman who comes by to comb her hair.'

Coll slowly swung to study his old friend. 'What do you suggest we do?' he asked. Shrugging, Murillio growled, 'What do most prisoners do sooner or later?'

'They try to escape.'

'Aye.'

Coll said nothing for a long moment, then he sighed. 'And how do you propose we do that? Would you just
leave her? Alone, untended—'

'Of course not. No, we take her with us.'

'Where?'

'I don't know! Anywhere! So long as it's away.'

'And how far will she need to go to escape those nightmares?'

'We need only find someone willing to help her, Coll. Someone who does not judge a life by expedience and potential usefulness.'

'This is an empty plain, Murillio.'

'I know.'

'Whereas, in Capustan ...'

The younger man's eyes narrowed. 'By all accounts, it's little more than rubble.'

'There are survivors. Including priests.'

'Priests! ' he snorted. 'Self-serving confidence artists, swindlers of the gullible, deceivers of—'

'Murillio, there are exceptions to that—'

'I've yet to see one.'

'Perhaps this time. My point is, if we're to escape this – with her – we've a better chance of finding help in Capustan than out here in this wasteland.'

'Saltoan—'

'Is a week or more away, longer with this wagon. Besides, the city is Hood's crusted navel incarnate. I wouldn't take Rallick Nom's axe-wielding mother to Saltoan.'

Murillio sighed. 'Rallick Nom.'

'What of him?'

'I wish he were here.'

'Why?'

'So he could kill someone. Anyone. The man's a wonder at simplifying matters.'

Coll grunted a laugh. ' "Simplifying matters." Wait until I tell him that one. Hey, Rallick, you're not an assassin, you know, you're just a man who simplifies.'

'Well, it's a moot point in any case, since he disappeared.'

'He's not dead.'

'How do you know?'

'I just know. So, Murillio, do we wait until Capustan?'

'Agreed. And once there, we follow the example of Kruppe and Silverfox. We slip away. Vanish. Hood knows, I doubt anyone will notice, much less care.'

Coll hesitated, then said, 'Murillio, if we find someone – someone who can do something for the Mhybe – well, it's likely to be expensive.'
The man shrugged. 'I've been in debt before.'

'As have I. So long as it's understood that this will likely mean our financial ruin, and all that might be achieved is a kinder end to her life.'

'A worthwhile exchange, then.'

Coll did not ask for another affirmation of his friend's resolve. He knew Murillio too well for that. Aye, it's naught but coin, isn't it? No matter the amount, a fair exchange to ease an old woman's suffering. One way or the other. For at least we will have cared – even if she never again awakens and thus knows nothing of what we do. Indeed, it is perhaps better that way. Cleaner. Simpler . . .

The howl echoed as if from a vast cavern. Echoed, folded in on itself until the mourning call became a chorus. Bestial voices in countless numbers, voices that stripped away the sense of time itself, that made eternity into a single now.

The voices of winter.

Yet they came from the south, from the place where the tundra could go no further; where the trees were no longer ankle-high, hut rose, still ragged, wind-tom and spindly, over her head, so that she could pass unseen – no longer towering above the landscape.

Kin answered that howl. The pursuing beasts, still on her trail, yet losing her now, as she slipped among the black spruce, the boggy ground sucking hungrily at her bare feet, the black' stained water swirling thick and turgid as she waded chill pools. Huge mosquitoes swarmed her, each easily twice the size of those she knew on the Rhivi Plain. Blackflies crawled in her hair, bit her scalp. Round leeches like black spots covered her limbs.

In her half-blind flight she had stumbled into a spatulate antler, jammed in the crotch of two trees at eye-level. The gouge a tine had made under her right cheek still trickled blood.

It is my death that approaches. That gives me strength. I draw from that final moment, and now they cannot catch me.

They cannot catch me.

The cavern lay directly ahead. She could not yet see it, and there was nothing in the landscape to suggest a geology natural to caves, but the echoing howl was closer.

The beast calls to me. A promise of death, I think, for it gives me this strength. It is my siren call—

Darkness drew down around her, and she knew she had arrived. The cavern was a shaping of a soul, a soul lost within itself.

The air was damp and cool. No insects buzzed or lit on her skin. The stone under the soles of her feet was dry.

She could see nothing, and the howl had fallen silent.

When she stepped forward she knew it was her mind that moved, her mind alone, leaving her body, questing out, seeking that chained beast.

'Who?'

The voice startled her. A man's voice, muffled, taut with pain.

'Who comes?'

She did not know how to answer, and simply spoke the first words that came into her head. 'It is I.'

'I?'
'A – a mother . . .'

The man's laugh grated harshly. 'Another game, then? You've no words, Mother. You've never had them. You've whimpers and cries, you've warning growls, you've a hundred thousand wordless sounds to describe your need – that is your voice and I know it well.'

'A mother.'

'Leave me. I am beyond taunting. I circle my own chain, here in my mind. This place is not for you. Perhaps, in finding it, you think you've defeated my last line of defence. You think you now know all of me. But you've no power here. Do you know, I imagine seeing my own face, as if in a mirror.

'But it's the wrong eye – the wrong eye staring back at me. And worse, it's not even human. It took me a long time to understand, but now I do.

'You and your kind played with winter. Omtose Phellack. But you never understood it. Not true winter, not the winter that is not sorcery, but born of the cooling earth, the dwindling sun, the shorter days and longer nights. The face I see before me, Seer, it is winter's face. A wolf's. A god's.'

'My child knows wolves,' the Mhybe said.

'He does indeed.'

'Not he. She. I have a daughter—'

'Confusing the rules defeats the game, Seer. Sloppy—'

'I am not who you think I am. I am – I am an old woman. Of the Rhivi. And my daughter wishes to see me dead. But not a simple passage, not for me. No. She's sent wolves after me. To rend my soul. They hunt my dreams – but here, I have escaped them. I've come here to escape.'

The man laughed again. 'The Seer has made this my prison. And I know it to be so. You are the lure of madness, of strangers' voices in my head. I defy you. Had you known of my real mother, you might have succeeded, but your rape of my mind was ever incomplete. There is a god here, Seer, crouched before my secrets. Fangs bared. Not even your dear mother, who holds me so tight, dares challenge him. As for your Omtose Phellack – he would have confronted you at that warren's gate long ago. He would have denied it to you, Jaghut. To all of you. But he was lost. Lost. And know this, I am helping him. I am helping him to find himself. He's growing aware, Seer.'

'I do not understand you,' the Mhybe replied, faltering as despair slowly stole through her. This was not the place she had believed it to be. She had indeed fled to another person's prison, a place of personal madness. 'I came here for death—'

'You'll not find it, not in these leathery arms.'

'I am fleeing my daughter—'

'Flight is an illusion. Even Mother here comprehends that. She knows I am not her child, yet she cannot help herself. She even possesses memories, of a time when she was a true Matron, a mother to a real brood. Children who loved her, and other children – who betrayed her. And left her to suffer for eternity.

'She never anticipated an escape from that. Yet when she found herself free at last, it was to discover that her world had turned to dust. Her children were long dead, entombed in their barrows – for without a mother, they withered and died. She looked to you, then, Seer. Her adopted son. And showed you your power, so that she could use it. To recreate her world. She raised her dead children. She set them to rebuilding the city. But it was all false, the delusion could not deceive her, could only drive her mad.

'And that,' he continued, 'is when you usurped her. Thus, her child has made her a prisoner once more. There is no escaping the paths of our lives, it seems. A truth you're not prepared to face, Seer. Not yet.'
‘My child has made me a prisoner as well,’ the Mhybe whispered. ‘Is this the curse of all mothers?’

‘It is the curse of love.’

A faint howl rang through the dark air.

‘Hear that?’ the man asked. ‘That is my mate. She’s coming. I looked for so long. For so long. And now, she’s coming.’

The voice had acquired a deeper timbre with these words. It seemed to be no longer the man's voice.

And now,' the words continued, 'now, I answer.’

His howl tore through her, flung her mind back. Out of the cavern, out beyond the straggly forests, back onto the tundra's barren plain.

The Mhybe screamed.

Her wolves answered. Triumphantly.

They had found her once again.

A hand touched her cheek. 'Gods, that was bloodcurdling.'

A familiar voice, but she could not yet place it.

Another man spoke, 'There is more to this than we comprehend, Murillio. Look at her cheek.'

'She has clawed herself—'

'She cannot lift her arms, friend. And look, the nails are clean. She did not inflict this wound on herself.'

'Then who did? I've been here all this time. Not even the old Rhivi woman has visited since I last looked upon her – and there was no wound then.'

'As I said, there is a mystery here ...'

'Coll, I don't like this. Those nightmares – could they be real? Whatever pursues her in her dreams – are they able to physically damage her?'

'We see the evidence—'

'Aye, though I scarce believe my own eyes. Coll, this cannot go on.'

'Agreed, Murillio. First chance in Capustan . . .'

'The very first. Let's move the wagon to the very front of the line – the sooner we reach the streets the better.'

'As you say.'
CHAPTER TWENTY

It is a most ancient tale. Two gods from before the time of men and women. Longing and love and loss, the beasts doomed to wander through the centuries.

A tale of mores, told with the purpose of no resolution. Its meaning, gentle readers, lies not in a soul-warming conclusion, but in all that is unattainable in this world.

Who then could have imagined such closure?

Winter’s Love
Silbaratha

The heart of the vast palace lay buried in the cliff. Seas born to the east of the bay battered the cliff’s jagged hooves, lifting spray to darken the rockface. Immediately beyond the broken shore’s rough spars, the waters of Coral Bay pitched into inky blackness, fathoms deep. The city’s harbour was little more than a narrow, crooked cut on the lee side of the cliff, a depthless fissure that opened a split nearly bisecting the city. It was a harbour without docks. The sheer faces of the sides had been carved into long piers, surmounted by causeways. At high tide level, mooring rings had been driven into the living stone. Broad sweeps of thick netting, twice the height of an ocean trader’s masts, spanned the entire breadth of water from the harbour’s mouth all the way to its apex. Where no tethered anchor could touch the fjord’s bottom, and where the shores themselves offered no strand, no shallows whatsoever, a ship’s anchors were drawn upward. The cat-men, as they were called – that strange, almost tribal collection of workers who lived with their wives and children in shacks on the netting and whose sole profession was the winching of anchors and the tethering of sway-lines – had made of the task artistry in motion.

From the wide, sea-facing battlement of the palace, the sealskin-roofed huts and driftwood sheds of the cat-men were like a scattering of brown pebbles and beach detritus, snagged on netting that was thread-like with distance. No figures scampered between the structures. No smoke rose from the angled hood-chimneys. Had he an eagle’s eye, Toc the Younger would have had no trouble seeing the salt-dried bodies tangled here and there in the netting; as it was, he could only take the Seerdomin’s word for it that those small, bedraggled smudges were indeed corpses.

The trader ships no longer came to Coral. The cat-men had starved. Every man, every woman, every child. A legendary and unique people within the city had become extinct.

The observation had been delivered in a detached tone, but Toc sensed an undercurrent in the nameless warrior-priest’s words. The huge man stood close, one hand gripping Toc’s left arm above the elbow. To keep him from flinging himself from the cliff. To keep him standing upright. What had begun as one task had quickly become the other. This reprieve from the clutches of the Matron was but temporary. The Malazan’s broken body had no strength left within it. Muscles had atrophied. Warped bones and seized joints gave him the flexibility of dry wood. His lungs were filled with fluid, making his drawn breath a wheeze, his exhalation a milky gurgle.

The Seer had wanted him to see. Coral. The palace fortress – often assailed, by Elingarth warships and pirate fleets, never taken. His vast cordon of mages, the thousand or more K’Chain Che’Malle K’ell Hunters, the elite legions of his main army. The defeats to the north meant little to him; indeed, he would yield Setta, Lest and Maurik; he would leave the invaders to their long, exhausting march – through scorched lands that offered no sustenance; where even the wells had been fouled. As for the enemies to the south, there was now a vast stretch of rough sea to impede their progress – a sea the Seer had filled with shattered mountains of ice. There were no boats to be found on the far shore in any case. A journey to the western end of Ortinal Cut would take months. True, the T’lan Imass could cross the water, as wave-borne dust. But it would have to fight the fierce currents the entire way, currents that plunged into the depths on cold streams, that swept in submerged rivers eastward, out into the ocean.
The Seer was well satisfied, said the nameless Seerdomin. Pleased enough to yield Toc this momentary mercy. Out from his Mother's arms.

The chill, salty wind whipped at his face, tugged at his ragged, long, dirty hair. His clothes were little more than crusted strips – the Seerdomin had given him his cloak, which Toc had wrapped about himself like a blanket. It had been this gesture that had hinted to the Malazan that the man at his side still possessed a shred of humanity.

The discovery had brought water to his eyes.

Clarity had been reborn within him, aided by the Seerdomin's detailed account of the battles to the south. Perhaps it was insanity's final, most convincing delusion, but Toc clung to it none the less. He stared southward across the wind-whipped seas. The mountainous shoreline on the far side was barely visible.

They had surely reached it by now. They might well be standing on the beach, staring bleakly towards him, and all that lay in between. Baaljagg would not be discouraged. A goddess hid within her, driving ever onward, ever onward, to find her mate.

The mate who hides within me. We'd travelled, side by side, all unknowing of the secrets within each other. Ah, such brutal irony . . . And perhaps Tool would not be daunted. Time and distance meant nothing to the T'lan Imass. The same, no doubt, was true for the three Seguleh – they still had their singular message to deliver, after all. Their people's invitation to war.

But Lady Envy...

Mistress of adventure, seduced by serendipity – true, she was angry, now. That much was clear from the Seerdomin's reportage. Affronted was a better description, Toc corrected. Sufficient to see her temper flare, but that temper was not a driven thing. She was not one to smoulder, not one to kindle deep-bedded fires of vengeance. She existed for distraction, for wayward whims.

Lady Envy, and likely her wounded, hurting dog, Garath, would turn away now, at last. Tired of the hunt, they would not set to themselves the task of pursuit, not across this violent sea with its glowing, awash leviathans of jagged ice.

He told himself not to be disappointed, but a pang of sadness twisted within him at the thought. He missed her, not as a woman – not precisely, in any case. No, the immortal face she presents, I think. Unburdened, a trickster's glint to her millennial regard. I teased her, once . . . danced around that nature . . . made her stamp her foot and frown. As only an immortal could do when the unlikely brunt of such mocking. I turned the knife. Gods, did I truly possess such audacity?

Well, dear Lady, I humbly apologize, now. I am not the brave man I once was, if it was indeed bravery and not simple stupidity. Mocking's been taken from my nature. Never to return, and perhaps that's a good thing. Ah, I can see you nod most wholeheartedly at that. Mortals should not mock, for all the obvious reasons. Detachment belongs to gods, because only they can afford its price. So be it.

Thank you, Lady Envy. No recriminations will pursue you. It was well run.

'You should have seen Coral in its day, Malazan.'

'It was your home, wasn't it?'

'Aye. Though my home now is in the heart of my Seer.'

'Where the winds are even colder,' Toc muttered.

The Seerdomin was silent for a moment.

Toc was expecting a blow from a gauntleted fist, or a painful wrench from the hand gripping his frail arm.
Either one would have been an appropriate response; either one would have elicited an approving nod from the Seer. Instead, the man said, 'This is a summer day, but not like the summer days I remember in my youth. Coral’s wind was warm. Soft, caressing as a lover’s breath. My father, he fished out beyond the cut. Up along the coast north of here. Vast, rich shoals. He’d be gone for a week or more with every season’s run. We’d all go down to the causeway to watch the fleets return, to see our father’s orange sail among the barques.'

Toc glanced up at the man, saw the smile, the glimmering echo of a child’s joy in his eyes.

Saw them die once more.

'He came back the last time ... to find that his family had embraced the Faith. His wife, to the Tenescowri. His sons, to the ranks, eldest begun schooling as Seerdomin. He did not throw his lines to me on that day – seeing my uniform. Seeing my mother – hearing her mindless shrieks. Seeing my brothers with spears in hand, my sisters naked and clinging to men thrice their age. No, he swung the boom, tacked onto the offshore breeze.

'I watched his sail until I could see it no more. It was my way, Malazan—'

'Of saying goodbye,' Toc whispered.

'Of saying good luck. Of saying ... well done.'

Destroyer of lives. Seer, how could you have done this to your people?

A distant bell rang in the palace behind them.

The Seerdomin’s grip tightened. 'The allotted time is done.'

'Back to my own embrace,' Toc said, his gaze straining to catch, one last time, the world before him. Remember this, for you will not see it again, Toc the Younger.

'Thank you for the use of your cloak,' he said.

'You are welcome, Malazan. These winds were once warm. Come, lean on me while we walk – your weight is as nothing.'

They slowly made their way towards the building. 'Easily borne, you mean.'

'I did not say that, Malazan. I did not say that.'

The gutted tenement seemed to shiver a moment before collapsing in a cloud of dust. The cobbles of the street trembled beneath Shield Anvil Itkovian’s boots and thunder shook the air.

Hedge turned to him, grinning through the smears of soot. 'See? Easy.'

Itkovian answered the Bridgeburner with a nod, watched as Hedge rejoined his fellow sappers and they set off for the next unrecoverable building.

'At the very least,' Captain Norul said beside him as she brushed dust from her surcoat, 'there will be no shortage of material.'

The morning was hot, the sun bright. Life was returning to Capustan. People with scarves covering their faces crawled through the rubble of their homes. Bodies were still being retrieved as wreckage was cleared away, wrapped and thrown onto fly-swarmed wagons. The air of the street stank with decay, but it seemed that the horses they rode had long since grown used to it.

'We should proceed, sir,' the captain said.

They resumed their journey. Beyond the west gate were gathering the official representatives – the contingent that would set out to meet the approaching armies of Dujek Onearm and Caladan Brood. The parley was set to take place in three bells’ time.
Itkovian had left the company’s new Destriant in command. Tenescowri refugees were arriving from the plain by the hundreds. Those few who’d attempted to enter Capustan had been set upon by the survivors. Reports of peasants being torn apart by frenzied mobs had reached the Shield Anvil. In response he had sent the Grey Swords out to establish an internment camp outside the west wall. Food was scarce. Itkovian wondered how his new Destriant was managing. At the very least, shelters were being prepared for the hapless refugees.

*Who will soon become recruits. Those who survive the next few weeks in any case. It’s likely the Grey Swords’ coffers will be emptied purchasing food and supplies from the Barghast. Fener grant – no, Togg grant that the investment will prove worthwhile.*

He was not looking forward to the parley. Indeed, the truth was, he had no real business attending it. The captain at his side was now the commander of the Grey Swords. His role as her adviser was dubious; she was capable of representing the company’s interests without any help from him.

They approached the west gate, which now resembled nothing more than a massive hole in the city's wall.

Leaning against one of the burnt-out, most fallen gate-towers, Gruntle watched them with a half-grin on his barbed face. Stonny Menackis paced nearby, apparently in a temper.

'Now there's only Humbrall Taur to wait for,' Gruntle said.

'Itkovian frowned as he reined in. 'Where is the Mask Council’s retinue?''

'Stonny spat. 'They’ve gone ahead. Seems they want a private chat first.'

'Relax, lass,' Gruntle rumbled. 'Your friend Keruli's with them, right?''

'Everything not the point! They hid. While you and the Grey Swords here kept them and their damned city alive!''

'None the less,' Itkovian said, 'with Prince Jelarkan dead and no heir apparent, they are Capustan's ruling body.'

'And they could damn well have waited!'

Captain Norul twisted in her saddle to look back up the avenue. 'Humbrall Taur's coming. Perhaps, if we rode fast enough, we could catch them.'

'Is it important?' Itkovian asked her.

'Sir, it is.'

He nodded. 'I concur.'

'Let's ready our horses, Stonny,' Gruntle said, pushing himself from the wall.

They set out across the plain, Humbrall Taur, Hetan and Cafal equally awkward on their borrowed mounts. The Barghast had been none too pleased by the Mask Council’s attempted usurpation – old enmities and mistrust had flared to life once more. By all reports, the approaching armies were still a league, perhaps two, distant. Keruli, Rath’Hood, Rath’Burn and Rath’Shadowthrone were in a carriage, drawn by the three horses of the Gidrath that had not been butchered and eaten during the siege.

Itkovian recalled the last time he had ridden this road, recalled faces of soldiers now dead. Farakalian, Torun, Sidlis. Behind the formality imposed by the Reve, these had been his friends. A truth I dared not approach. Not as Shield Anvil, not as a commander. But that has changed. They are my own grief, as difficult to bear as those tens of thousands of others.

He pushed the thought away. Control was still necessary. He could afford no emotions.

They came within sight of the priests' carriage.
Stonny snarled in triumph. 'Won't they be delighted!'

'Ease on the gloating, lass,' Gruntle advised. 'We reach them now in all innocence—'

'Do you think me an idiot? Do you think me incapable of subtlety? I'll have you know—'

'All right, woman,' her companion growled. 'Forget I spoke—'

'I always do, Gruntle.'

The Gidrath driver drew the carriage to a halt as they rode up. A window shutter slid to one side and Rath' Shadowthrone's masked face appeared, the expression neutral. 'How fortunate! The rest of our honourable entourage!'

Itkovian sighed under his breath. _There was nothing subtle in that tone, alas._

'Honourable?' Stonny queried, brows lifting, 'I'm surprised you recognize the concept, Priest.'

'Ah.' The mask swivelled to her. 'Master Keruli's wench. Shouldn't you be on your knees?'

'I'll give you a knee, runt – right between the—'

'Well now!' Gruntle said loudly. 'We're all here. I see outriders ahead. Shall we proceed?'

'We're early,' Rath'Shadowthrone snapped.

'Aye, and that's unfortunately unprofessional of us. Never mind. We can continue at the slowest pace possible, to give them time to prepare.'

'A wise course, in the circumstances,' Rath' Shadowthrone conceded. The mask's hinged lips twisted into a broad smile, then the head withdrew and the shutter slid back in place.

'I am going to cut that man into very small pieces,' Stonny said in a bright tone.

'We all appreciated your sense of subtlety, lass,' Gruntle muttered.

'And well you should, oaf.'

Itkovian stared at the woman, then at the caravan captain, wondering.

Corporal Picker sat on the dusty steps of what had once been a temple. Her back and shoulders ached from throwing chunks of masonry since dawn.

Blend must have been hovering nearby for she appeared with a waterskin. 'You look thirsty.'

Picker accepted it. 'Funny how you do your vanishing act whenever there's hard work to be done.'

'Well, I brought you water, didn't I?'

Picker scowled.

Across the street Captain Paran and Quick Ben were saddling horses, preparing to head out to the reunion with Onearm's Host and Brood's army. They'd been uncommonly cosy since meeting up once more, making Picker suspicious. Quick Ben's schemes were never pleasant.

'I'd rather we were all going,' she muttered.

'To the parley? Why? This way everyone else does the walking.'

'Easier to be lurking about, is it? Weighed down with a half-full waterskin. You'd be saying different if you'd been tossing rocks with the rest of us, Blend.'
The lean woman shrugged. 'I've been busy enough.'

'Doing what?'

'Gathering information.'

'Oh yeah. Whose whispering you been listening in on, then?'

'People. Us and them, here and there.'

'Them? Who's _them_?'

'Uh, let's see. Barghast. Grey Swords. A couple of loose-lipped Gidrath from the Thrall. Three acolytes from the temple behind you—'

Picker flinched, swiftly rose to cast a nervous eye on the fire-scorched building behind her. 'Which god, Blend? No lies—'

'Why would I lie, Corporal? Shadowthrone.'

Picker grunted. 'Spyin' on the sneaks, was you? And what were they talking about?'

'Some bizarre plan of their master's. Vengeance against a couple of necromancers holed up in an estate just up the street.'

'The one with all the bodies out front and the smelly guards on the walls?'

'Presumably the same and none other.'

'All right, so let's hear the report on the rest of them.'

'The Barghast are crowing. Agents of the Mask Council are buying food to feed the citizens. The Grey Swords are buying food, too, to feed a fast-growing camp of Tenescowri refugees outside the city. The White Faces are getting rich.'

'Hold on, Blend. Did you say Tenescowri refugees? What are the Grey Swords up to? Hood knows there's enough corpses lying around for those cannibals, why give 'em _real_ food? Why feed the evil bastards at all?'

'Sound questions,' Blend agreed. 'Certainly, I admit my own curiosity was piqued.'

'No doubt you've come up with a theory, too.'

'I have assembled the puzzle, to be more precise. Disparate facts. Observances. Offhand comments believed to be uttered in private, overheard by none other than the faithful servant standing before you—'

'Oponn's quivering knees, woman, get on with it!'

'You never did appreciate a good gloat. All right. The Grey Swords were sworn to Fener. They weren't just a mercenary company, more like damned crusaders to the holy cause of war. And they took it seriously. Only something's happened. They've lost their god—'

'No doubt there's a tale there.'

'Indeed, but it's not relevant.'

'Meaning you don't know it.'

'Precisely. The point is, the company's surviving officers rode off to the Barghast camps, found a gaggle of tribal witches waiting for them, and together they all arranged a reconsecration.'

'You mean they switched gods. Oh no, don't tell me Treach—'
'No, not Treach. Treach already has his crusaders.'

'Oh, right. Must be Jhess, then. Mistress of Weaving. They're all taking up knitting, but fiercely—'

'Not quite. Togg. And Fanderay, the She-Wolf of Winter – Togg's long lost mate. Recall the story? You must have heard it when you were a child, assuming you were ever a child—'

'Careful, Blend.'

'Sorry. Anyway, the Grey Swords were virtually wiped out. They're looking for recruits.'

Picker's brows rose. 'The Tenescowri? Hood's breath!'

'Makes sense, actually.'

'Sure. If I needed an army I'd look first to people who eat each other when things get tough. Absolutely. In an instant.'

'Well, that's an unfortunate angle to take. It's more a question of finding people with no lives—'

'Losers, you mean.'

'Uh, yes. No ties, no loyalties. Ripe for arcane rituals of induction.'

Picker grunted again. 'Mad. Everyone's gone mad.'

'Speaking of which,' Blend murmured.

Captain Paran and Quick Ben rode up.

'Corporal Picker.'

'Aye, Captain?'

'Do you know where Spindle is right now?'

'No idea, sir.'

'I'd suggest you keep better track of your squad, then.'

'Well, he went off with Sergeant Antsy. Someone's come up from the tunnels, claiming to be Prince Arard – some dispossessed ruler from one of the cities south of the river. The man was demanding to speak with a representative of Onearm's Host and since we couldn't find you at the time ...'

Paran cursed under his breath. 'Let me get this straight. Sergeant Antsy and Spindle elected themselves to be Onearm's Host's official representatives to take audience with a prince? Antsy? Spindle?'

Beside the captain, Quick Ben choked back a laugh, earning a glare from Paran.

'Detoran volunteered, too,' Picker added in an innocent tone. 'So it was the three of them, I think. Maybe a few others.'

'Mallet?'

She shook her head. 'He's with Hedge, sir. Tending to healing and whatever.'

'Captain,' Quick Ben interjected. 'We'd best start our journey. Antsy will stall as soon as he gets confused, and he usually gets confused immediately after the making of introductions. Detoran won't say a thing and likely none of the others will, either. Spindle might babble, but he's wearing a hairshirt. It should be all right.'

'Really? And shall I hold you to that, Wizard?'

Quick Ben's eyes widened.
'Never mind,' Paran growled, gathering his reins. 'Let's quit this city ... before we find ourselves in a whole new war. Corporal Picker.'

'Sir?'

'Why are you just standing here on your own?'

She quickly glanced around. 'The bitch,' she whispered.

'Corporal?'

'Nothing. Sorry, sir. I was just resting.'

'When you're done resting, Corporal, go retrieve Antsy, Spindle and the others. Send Arard to the Thrall, with word that the real representatives of Onearm's Host will see him shortly, should he wish an audience.'

'Understood, Captain.'

'I hope so.'

She watched the two men ride off down the street, then spun around. 'Where are you, you coward?'

'Sir?' Blend queried, emerging from the shadows of the temple's entrance.

'You heard me.'

'I'd noted something inside this hovel, went to investigate—'

'Hovel? Shadowthrone's sacred abode, you mean.'

She was pleased to see Blend suddenly pale. 'Oh. I'd, uh, forgotten.'

'You panicked. Hee hee. Blend panicked. Smelled a scene about to happen and fled into the nearest building like a rabbit down a bolt-hole! Just wait until I tell the others—'

'An unseemly version,' Blend sniffed, 'malignly twisting a purely coincidental occurrence. They'll not believe you.'

'That's what you—'

'Oh oh.'

Blend vanished once again.

Startled, Picker looked round.

Two black-cloaked figures were coming down the street, making directly for the corporal.

'Dear soldier,' the taller, pointy-bearded one called out.

Her hackles rose at the imperious tone. 'What?'

A thin brow arched. 'Respect is accorded ourselves, woman. We demand no less. Now listen. We are in need of supplies to effect the resumption of our journey. We require food, clean water and plenty of it, and if you could direct us to a clothier ...'

'At once. Here—' She stepped up to him and drove her gauntleted fist full into his face. The man's feet flew out from under him and he struck the cobbles with a meaty smack. Out cold.

Blend stepped up behind the other man and cracked him in the head with the pommel of her short sword. With a high-pitched grunt, he crumpled.

Closing fast behind them was an old man in ragged servant garb. He skidded to a halt five paces away and
raised his hands. 'Don't hit me!' he shrieked.

Picker frowned. 'Now why would we do that? Are these two ... yours?'

The manservant's expression was despondent. 'Aye,' he sighed, lowering his hands.

'Advise them,' Picker said, 'of proper forms of address. When they awaken.'

'Absolutely, sir.'

'We should get moving, Corporal,' Blend said, eyes on the two unconscious men.

'Yes. Yes, please!' the manservant begged.

Picker shrugged. 'I see no point in dawdling. Lead on, soldier.'

Paran and Quick Ben rode within a thousand paces of the Tenescowri encampment, which lay north of the road, on their right. Neither man spoke until they were well past, then the captain sighed. 'That looks to be trouble fast approaching.'

'Oh? Why?'

Paran shot his companion a startled glance, then returned his gaze to the road. 'The lust for vengeance against those peasants. The Capans might well swarm out through the gate and slaughter them, with the Mask Council's blessing. And why, Wizard, do I think I see some-thing out of the comer of my eye? There, on your shoulder. Then, when I look more closely, it's gone.

'That'd be a mistake for the Mask Council,' Quick Ben commented. 'The Grey Swords looked ready to defend their guests, if those pickets and trenches were any indication.'

'Aye, they're anticipating becoming very unpopular, with what they're now up to.'

'Recruiting. Then again, why not? That mercenary company paid a high price defending the city and its citizens.'

'The memory of their heroic efforts could vanish in an eye's wink, Wizard. There's only a few hundred Grey Swords left, besides. Should a few thousand Capans charge them—'

'I wouldn't worry, Captain. Even the Capans – no matter how enraged – would hesitate before crossing those soldiers. They're the ones who survived, after all. As I said, the Mask Council would be foolish to hold the grudge. We'll discover more at the parley, no doubt.'

'Assuming we're invited. Quick Ben, we'd do better with a private conversation with Whiskeyjack. I personally have very little to say to most of the others who will be present. I have a report to deliver, in any case.'

'Oh, I wasn't planning on speaking at the parley, Captain. Just listening.'

They had left the occupied areas behind and now rode down an empty road, the rolling plain stretching out on their right, the bluffs marking the river three hundred paces distant on their left.

'I see riders,' Quick Ben said. 'North.'

Paran squinted, then nodded. 'It's happened.'

'What has?'

'The Second Gathering.'

The wizard shot him a glance. 'The T'lan Imass? How do you know?'
Because she's stopped reaching out to me. Tattersail, Nightchill, Bellurdan — something's happened. Something . . . unexpected. And it's left them reeling. 'I just know, Wizard. Silverfox is the lead rider.'

'Your vision must be as a hawk's.'

Paran said nothing. I don't need eyes. She's coming.

'Captain, does Tattersail's soul still dominate within Silverfox?'

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'All I will say, however, is that whatever faith we held to that we could predict Silverfox's actions should now be dispensed with.'

'What has she become, then?'

'A Bonecaster in truth.'

They reined in to wait for the four riders. Kruppe's mule seemed to be competing for the lead position, the short-legged beast slipping between a frenzied trot and a canter, the round Daru wobbling and bouncing atop the saddle. Two Malazan marines rode behind Silverfox and Kruppe, looking relaxed.

'Would that I had seen,' Quick Ben murmured, 'what her companions had seen.'

Yet nothing went as planned. I can see that in her posture — the bridled anger, the diffidence — and, buried deep, pain. She's surprised them. Surprised, and defied. And the T'lan Imass have answered in an equally unexpected way. Even Kruppe looks off-balanced, and not just by that pitching mule.

Silverfox was staring at him as she drew rein, an expression that Paran could not define. As I had sensed, she's thrown up a wall between us — gods, but she looks like Tattersail! A woman, now. No longer the child. And the illusion of years spanning our parting is complete — she's become guarded, a possessor of secrets that as a child she would not have hesitated to reveal. Hood's breath, every time we meet it seems I must readjust . . . everything.

Quick Ben spoke, 'Well met. Silverfox, what—'

'No.'

'Excuse me?'

'No, Wizard. I have no explanations that I am prepared to voice. No questions that I will answer. Kruppe has already tried, too many times. My temper is short — do not test it.'

Guarded, and harder. Much, much harder.

After a moment, Quick Ben shrugged. 'Be that way, then.'

'I am that way,' she snapped. 'The anger you would face is Nightchill's, and the rest of us will do nothing to restrain it. I trust I am understood.'

Quick Ben simply grinned. Cold, challenging.

'Kind sirs!' Kruppe cried. 'By chance would you be riding to our fair armies? If so, we would accompany you, delighted and relieved to return to said martial bosom. Delighted indeed, with the formidable company of yourselves. Relieved, as Kruppe has said, by the welcoming destination so closely pending. Impatient, it must be admitted, for the resumption of the journey. Incorrigibly optimistic—'

'That will do, Kruppe,' Silverfox growled.

'Ahem, of course.'

If anything truly existed between us, it is now over. She has left Tattersail behind. She is indeed a Bonecaster, now. The realization triggered a weaker pang of loss than he had expected. Perhaps we both have
moved on. The pressure of what we have grown into, our hearts cannot overcome.

So be it. No self-pity. Not this time. We’ve tasks before us.

Paran gathered his reins. ‘As Kruppe has said. Let us resume – we’re already late as it is.’

A large sheet of burlap had been raised over the hilltop to shield the parley from the hot afternoon sun. Malazan soldiers ringed the hill in a protective cordon, crossbows cradled in their arms.

Eyes on the figures beneath the tarp, Itkovian halted his horse and dismounted a dozen paces from the guards. The Mask Council’s carriage had also stopped, the side-doors swinging open to the four representatives of Capustan.

Hetan had clambered down from her horse with a relieved grunt and now came alongside Itkovian. She thumped his back. ‘I’ve missed you, wolf!’

‘The wolves may be all around me, sir,’ Itkovian said, ‘but I make no such claim for myself.’

‘The tale’s run through the clans,’ Hetan said, nodding. ‘Old women never shut up.’

‘And young women?’ he asked, still studying the figures on the hilltop.

‘Now you dance on danger, dear man.’

‘Forgive me if I offended.’

‘I would forgive you a smile no matter its reason. Aye, not likely. If you’ve humour you hide it far too well. This is too bad.’

He regarded her. ‘Too bad? Do you not mean tragic?’

Her eyes narrowed, then she hissed in frustration and set off up the slope.

Itkovian watched her for a moment, then shifted his attention to the priests who were now gathered beside the carriage. Rath’Shadowthrone was complaining.

‘They would have us all winded! A gentler slope and we could have stayed in the carriage—’

‘Sufficient horses and we might have done the same,’ Rath’Hood sniffed. ‘This is calculated to insult—’

‘It is nothing of the sort, comrades,’ Keruli murmured. ‘Even now, swarms of biting insects begin their assault upon our fair selves. I suggest you cease complaining and accompany me to the summit and its saving wind.’ With that, the small, round-faced man set off.

‘We should insist – ow!’

The three scrambled after Keruli, deer-flies buzzing their heads.

Humbrall Taur laughed. ‘They need have only smeared themselves in bhederin grease!’

Gruntle replied, ‘They’re slippery enough as it is, Warchief. Besides, it’s a far more fitting introduction for our visitors – three masked priests stumbling and puffing and waving at phantoms circling their heads. At least Keruli’s showing some dignity, and he’s probably the only one among them with a brain worthy of the name.’

‘Thank the gods!’ Stonny cried.

Gruntle turned to her. ‘What? Why?’

‘Well, you’ve just used up your entire store of words, oaf. Meaning you’ll be silent for the rest of the day!’

The huge man’s grin was far more feral than he intended.
Itkovian watched the two Daru set off, followed by Humbral Taur, Hetan and Cafal.

Captain Norul said, ‘Sir?’

‘Do not wait for me,’ he replied. ‘You now speak for the Grey Swords, sir.’

She sighed, strode forward.

Itkovian slowly scanned the landscape. Apart from the cordon encircling the base of the hill, the two foreign armies were nowhere to be seen. There would be no blustery display of strength to intimidate the city’s representatives – a generous gesture that might well be lost on the priests; which was unfortunate indeed, since Rath'Hood, Rath'Burn and Rath'Shadowthrone were in serious need of humbling.

Fly-bitten and winded would have to do.

He cast an appraising glance at the Malazan guards. Their weapons, he noted, were superbly crafted, if a little worn. The repairs and mending on their armour had been done in the field – this was an army a long way from home, a long way from resupply annexes. Dark-skinned faces beneath battered helms studied him in return, expressionless, perhaps curious that he had remained here, with only a silent Gidrath carriage-driver for company.

I am garbed as an officer. Misleading details, now. He drew off his gauntlets, reached up and removed the brooch denoting his rank, let it drop to the ground. He pulled free the grey sash tied about his waist and threw it to one side. Finally, he unstrapped his visored helm.

The soldier closest to him stepped forward then.

Itkovian nodded. ‘I am amenable to an exchange, sir.’

‘It would hardly be fair,’ the man replied in broken Daru.

‘Forgive me if I disagree. The silver inlay and gold crest may well suggest an ornamental function to my war-helm, but I assure you, the bronze and iron banding are of the highest quality, as are the cheek-guards and the webbing. Its weight is but a fraction more than the one you presently bear.’

The soldier was silent for a long moment, then he slowly unstrapped his camailed helm. ‘When you change your mind—’

‘I shall not.’

‘Yes. Only, I was saying, when you change your mind, seek me out and not a single harsh thought to the return. I am named Azra Jael. Eleventh squad, fifth cohort, the third company of marines in Onearm’s Host.’

‘I am Itkovian ... once a soldier of the Grey Swords.’

They made the exchange.

Itkovian studied the helm in his hands. ‘Solidly fashioned. I am pleased.’

‘Aren steel, sir. Hasn’t needed hammering out once, so the metal’s sound. The camaile’s Napan, yet to see a sword-cut.’

‘Excellent. I am enriched by the exchange and so humbled.’

The soldier said nothing.

Itkovian looked up to the summit. ‘Would they be offended, do you think, if I approached? I’ll not venture an opinion, of course, but I would hear—’

The soldier seemed to be struggling against some strong emotion, but he shook his head. ‘They would be honoured by your presence, sir.’
Itkovian half smiled. 'I think not. Besides, I'd rather they did not notice, if truth be told.'

'Swing round the hill, then. Come up from behind, sir.'

'Good idea. Thank you, sir, I will. And thank you, as well, for this fine helm.'

The man simply nodded.

Itkovian strode through the cordon, the soldiers to either side stepping back a measured pace to let him pass, then saluting as he did so.

*Misplaced courtesy, but appreciated none the less.*

He made his way to the hill's opposite side. The position revealed to him the two encamped armies to the west. Neither one was large, but both had been professionally established, the Malazan forces marked by four distinct but connected fortlets created by mounded ridges and steep-sided ditches. Raised trackways linked them.

*I am impressed by these foreigners. And I must now conclude that Brukhalian was right – could we have held, these would have proved more than a match to Septarch Kulpath's numerically superior forces. They would have broken the siege, if we but could have held ...*

He began the ascent, the Malazan helm tucked under his left arm.

The wind was fierce near the summit, driving the insects away. Reaching the crest, Itkovian paused. The sun-tarp on its poles was fifteen paces directly ahead. On this, the backside of the formal meeting place, sat a row of water casks and ornate crates bearing the sigil of the Trygalle Trade Guild – well recognizable as the traders had first become established in Elingarth, Itkovian's homeland. Eyes resting on that sigil, he felt proud on their behalf for their evident success.

A large table had been set up beneath the tarp, but everyone stood beyond it, under the sun, as if the formalities of introductions were not yet complete.

*Perhaps there has already been a disagreement. Probably the Mask Council, voicing their complaints.*

Itkovian angled to his left and walked quietly forward, intending to take position in the leeside of the tarp, close to the water casks.

Instead, a Malazan officer noticed him and leaned towards another man. A short exchange followed, then the other man, also a commander of the Malazans, slowly turned to study Itkovian.

A moment later everyone else was doing the same.

Itkovian halted.

A large warrior, hammer strapped to his back, stepped forward. 'The man we have been waiting to meet. You are Itkovian, Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords. Defender of Capustan. I am Caladan Brood—'

'Your pardon, sir, but I am no longer Shield Anvil, and no longer a soldier of the Grey Swords.'

'So we have been told. None the less, please come forward.'

Itkovian did not move. He studied the array of faces fixed on him. 'You would unveil my shame, sir.'

The warrior frowned. 'Shame?'

'Indeed. You called me the defender of Capustan, and in that I must accept the mocking title, for I did not defend Capustan. The Mortal Sword Brukhalian commanded that I hold the city until your arrival. I failed.'

No-one spoke. A half-dozen heartbeats passed.

Then Brood said, 'No mockery was intended. And you failed only because you could not win. Do you
understand me, sir?'

Itkovian shrugged. 'I comprehend your argument, Caladan Brood, but I see little value in debating semantics. I would, if you so permit, stand to one side of these proceedings. I shall venture no comments or opinions, I assure you.'

'Then the loss is ours,' the warrior growled.

Itkovian glanced at his captain and was shocked to see her weathered cheeks streaked with tears.

'Would you have us argue your value, Itkovian?' Brood asked, his frown deepening.

'No.'

'Yet you feel that you have no worth here at this gathering.'

'It may be that I am not yet done, sir, but such responsibilities that I must one day embrace are mine to bear, and thus must be borne alone. I lead no-one, and so have no role in those discussions that are to be undertaken here. I would only listen. It is true that you have no cause to be generous—'

'Please,' Caladan Brood cut in. 'Enough. You are welcome, Itkovian.'

'Thank you.'

As if in silent agreement the dignitaries ended their immobility and approached the large, wooden table. The priests of the Mask Council sat themselves down at one end. Humbrall Taur, Hetan and Cafal took positions behind the chairs closest to them, making it clear that they would stand during the proceedings. Gruntle and Stonny sat opposite each other near the middle, the Grey Swords' new Shield Anvil beside the latter. Caladan Brood and the two Malazan commanders – one of them, Itkovian now saw, one-armed – sat down at the end opposite the priests. A tall, grey-haired warrior in full-length chain stood two paces behind Brood, on his left. A Malazan standard-bearer hovered behind his commanders to the right.

Cups were filled from a jug of watered wine, yet even before the task had been completed for everyone present, Rath'Hood was speaking.

'A more civilized location for this historic gathering would have been at the Thrall, the palace from which the rulers of Capustan govern—'

'Now that the prince is dead, you mean,' Stonny drawled, her lip curling. 'The place has no floor, in case you forgot, Priest.'

'You could call that a structural metaphor, couldn't you?' Gruntle asked her.

'You might, being an idiot.'

Rath'Hood tried again. 'As I was saying—'

'You weren't saying, you were posturing.'

'This wine is surprisingly good,' Keruli murmured. 'Given that this is a martial gathering, the location seems appropriate. I, for one, have a question or two for the commanders of the foreign army.'

The one-armed commander grunted, then said, 'Ask them.'

'Thank you, High Fist, I will. First of all, someone is missing, true? Are there not Tiste Andii among you? And their legendary leader, Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn, should he not be present? Indeed, one wonders at the disposition of Moon's Spawn itself — the tactical advantages of such an edifice—'

'Pause there, if you will,' Brood interrupted. 'Your questions assume ... much. I do not think we've advanced to point of discussing tactics. As far as we are concerned, Capustan is but a temporary stop in our march; its liberation by the Barghast was a strategic necessity, but only the first of what will doubtless be many in this
war. Do you now suggest, High Priest, that you wish to contribute to the campaign in some direct fashion? It
would seem that your primary concern at the moment is the rebuilding of your city.'

Keruli smiled. 'Thus, questions are exchanged, but as yet, no answers.'

Brood frowned. 'Anomander Rake and the majority of his Tiste Andii have returned to Moon's Spawn. They
– and it – shall have a role in this war, but there will be no further elaboration on that subject.'

'Just as well Rake isn't here,' Rath'Shadowthrone said, his mask fixed in a sneer. 'He's hopelessly
unpredictable and outright murderous company.'

'To which your god can attest,' Keruli smiled, then turned back to Brood. 'Sufficient answers to warrant the
like in return. As you point out, the Mask Council's overriding concern is with the reparation of Capustan. None
the less, my companions here are all – beyond impromptu governors – servants to their respective gods. No-one
here can be entirely unaware of the tumultuous condition of the pantheon. You, Caladan Brood, carry Burn's
hammer, after all, and continue to struggle with the responsibilities that entails. Whilst the Grey Swords, bereft
of one god, have chosen to kneel before two others – a mated, if riven, pair. My once-caravan captain, Gruntle,
is reborn as a new god's Mortal Sword. The Barghast gods have been rediscovered, and so represent an ancient
horde of untested power and disposition. Indeed, in surveying those gathered here, the only truly unaspected
agents at this table are High Fist Dujek and his second, Whiskeyjack. The Malazans.'

Itkovian saw the suddenly closed expression of the warlord, Caladan Brood, and wondered at the hammer's
responsibilities that Keruli had so blithely mentioned.

The standing, grey-haired warrior broke the ensuing silence with a barking laugh. 'You conveniently forgot
yourself, Priest. Of the Mask Council, yet unmasked. Indeed, unwelcome in their company, it seems. Your
companions make their gods plain, but not you, and why is that?'

Keruli's smile was benign, unperturbed. 'Dear Kallor, how you've withered under your curse. Do you still
cart that meaningless throne with you? Yes, I had guessed as much—'

'I thought it was you,' Kallor hissed. 'Such a paltry disguise—'

'Issues of physical manifestation have proved problematic.'

'You've lost your power.'

'Not entirely. It has ... evolved, and so I am forced to adjust, and learn.'

The warrior reached for his sword. 'In other words, I could kill you now—'

'I am afraid not,' Keruli sighed. 'Only in your dreams, perhaps. But then, you no longer dream, do you,
Kallor? The Abyss takes you into its embrace each night. Oblivion, your own personal nightmare.'

Without turning, Brood rumbled, 'Remove your hand from your weapon, Kallor. My patience with you has
stretched to its limit.'

'This is no priest sitting before you, Warlord!' the warrior rasped. 'It is an Elder God! K'rul himself.'

'I had gathered as much,' Brood sighed.

For a half-dozen heartbeats no-one spoke, and Itkovian could almost hear the grating, jarring shift of power.
An Elder God was among them. Seated, expression benign, at this table.

'A limited manifestation,' Keruli said, then, 'to be more precise.'

'It had better be,' Gruntle interjected, his feline eyes fixed squarely on him, 'given Harllo's fate.'

Sorrow flitted across the Elder God's smooth, round features. 'Profoundly so, at the time, I am afraid. I did all
that I could, Gruntle. I regret that it proved insufficient.'
'So do I.'

'Well!' Rath'Shadowthrone snapped. 'You can hardly sit on the Mask Council, then, can you?'

The Malazan named Whiskeyjack burst out laughing, the sound startling everyone at the table.

Stonny twisted in her seat to the High Priest of Shadow. 'Does your god truly know how small your brain really is? What is the issue? Elder Gods don't know the secret handshake? His mask is too realistic?'

'He's immortal, you slut!'

'Kind of guarantees seniority,' Gruntle commented. 'Eventually...'

'Do not make light of this, eater of rats!'

'And if you dare throw that word again at Stonny, I will kill you,' the Daru said. 'As for making light, it is hard not to. We're all trying to swallow the implications of all this. An Elder God has stepped into the fray ... against what we'd thought to be a mortal empire – by the Abyss, what have we got ourselves into? But you, your first and solitary thought is fixated on membership in your paltry, over-inflated council. Shadowthrone must be cringing right now.'

'He's likely used to it,' Stonny grated, sneering at the High Priest, 'when it comes to this bag of slime.'

Rath'Shadowthrone gaped at her.

'Let's get back to the task before us,' Brood said. 'Your words are accepted, K'rul. The Pannion Domin concerns all of us. As gods and priests, no doubt you can find your own roles in countering whatever threats are manifesting against the pantheon and the warrens – though we both know that the source of those threats is not directly associated with the Pannion Seer. My point is, we are here to discuss the organization of the forces that will now march with us south of the river, into the heart of the Domin. Mundane considerations, but essential none the less.'

'Accepted,' K'rul replied. 'Provisionally,' he added.

'Why provisionally?'

'I anticipate a few masks coming off in these proceedings, Warlord.'

Humbrall Taur cleared his throat. 'The course is simple enough,' he growled. 'Cafal.'

His son nodded. 'A division of forces, lords. One to Setta, the other to Lest. Convergence at Maurik, then onward to Coral. The White Face Barghast shall march with Onearm's Host, for it was by their efforts that we are here and my father likes this man's sense of humour' – he gestured towards Whiskeyjack, whose brows rose – 'as do our gods. It is further advisable that the Grey Swords, now recruiting from the Tenescowri, be in the other army, for the White Faces will not abide said recruits.'

The company's new Shield Anvil spoke. 'Agreeable, assuming Caladan Brood and his disparate forces can stomach our presence.'

'Can you truly find anything worthwhile in such creatures?' Brood asked her.

'Ve are all worthwhile, sir, once we assume the burden of forgiveness and the effort of absolution.' She looked over then and met Itkovian's eyes.

And this is my lesson? he wondered. Then why am I both proud and pained by her words? No, not her words, precisely. Her faith. A faith that, to my sorrow, I have lost. This is envy you feel, sir. Discard it.

'We shall manage, then,' Caladan Brood said after a moment.

Dujek Onearm sighed and reached for his cup of wine. 'So resolved. Easier than you'd imagined, Brood, wouldn't you say?'
The warlord bared his teeth in a satisfied, if hard, grin. 'Aye. We're all riding the same track. Good.'

'Time to proceed, then,' Rath'Burn said, eyes on Caladan Brood, 'to other issues. You are the one who was gifted the hammer, the focus of Burn's power. To you was entrusted the task of awakening her at the time of her greatest need—'

The warlord's grin grew feral. 'And so destroy every civilization on this world, aye. No doubt you judge her need as sufficiently pressing, High Priestess.'

'And you dare not?' she snapped, leaning forward with both hands on the table. 'You have deceived her!'

'No. I have constrained her.'

His reply left her momentarily speechless.

'There's a rug-seller's shop,' Gruntle said, 'in Darujhistan. To cross its floor is to scale layer upon layer of woven artistry. Thus are the lessons of mortals laid down before the gods. Pity that they keep stumbling so – you'd think they'd have learned by now.'

Rath'Burn wheeled on him. 'Silence! You know nothing of this! If Brood does not act, Burn will die! And when she dies, so too does all life on this world! That is the choice, you fool! Topple a handful of corrupt civilizations or absolute annihilation – what would you choose?'

'Well, since you're asking—'

'I withdraw the question, for you are clearly as insane as the warlord here. Caladan Brood, you must yield the hammer. To me. Here and now. In the name of Burn, the Sleeping Goddess, I demand it.'

The warlord rose, unslung the weapon. 'Here, then.' He held it out in his right hand.

Rath'Burn's eyes blinked, then she shot upright, strode round the table.

She grasped the hammer's copper-wrapped handle in both hands.

Brood released it.

The weapon plunged earthward. The snaps of the woman's wrist bones cut through the air. Then she screamed, even as the hill trembled to the impact of the hammer's massive head. Cups bounced on the table, splashed red wine across its surface. Rath'Burn had fallen to her knees, no longer holding the weapon, her broken arms cradled on her lap.

'Artanthos,' Dujek said, his eyes on Brood – who looked down on the woman with a dispassionate regard – 'find us a healer. A good one.'

The soldier standing behind the High Fist headed off.

The warlord addressed the High Priestess. 'The difference between you and your goddess, woman, is faith. A simple thing, after all. You see only two options open to me. Indeed, so did the Sleeping Goddess, at first. She gave to me the weapon, and gave to me the freedom to choose. It has taken a long while for me to understand what else she gave to me. I have withheld acting, withheld making that choice, and thought myself a coward. Perhaps I still am, yet a small measure of wisdom has finally lodged itself in my head—'

'Burn's faith,' K'rul said. 'That you would find a third choice.'

'Aye. Her faith.'

Artanthos reappeared with another Malazan, but Brood held out a hand to halt them. 'No, I will heal her myself. She was not to know, after all'

'Too generous,' K'rul murmured. 'She abandoned her goddess long ago, Warlord.'
’No journey is too long,’ Brood replied, lowering himself to kneel before Rath'Burn.

Itkovian had last seen High Denul unveiled by Destriant Karnadas, and that fraught with the infection poisoning the warrens. What he saw now was ... clean, unaffected, and appallingly powerful.

K'rul rose suddenly, looked around.

Rath'Burn gasped.

The Elder God's odd actions drew Itkovian's attention, and he followed K'rul's gaze. To see that another group had arrived on the hilltop, standing at a distance to the right of the tarp. Captain Paran was the only one among the four newcomers that Itkovian recognized, and he was not the man at whom the Elder God was looking.

A dark-skinned, tall and lean man, faintly smiling, was watching the proceedings from the back of the group, focused, it seemed, on Brood. After a moment, some instinct made him glance at K'rul. The man answered the Elder God's rapt attention with a slight, strangely uneven shrug – as if some invisible weight burdened his left shoulder.

Itkovian heard K'rul sigh.

Rath'Burn and Caladan Brood rose together, then. Her bones had been knitted. No swelling or bruising marred her bared forearms. She stood as if in shock, leaning against the warlord.

’What is this?’ Kallor demanded. ’That warren bore no sign of poison.’

’Indeed,’ K'rul smiled. ’It seems the illness has been pushed back from this location. Temporary, yet sufficient. Perhaps this is another lesson in the powers of faith ... which I shall endeavour to heed ...’

Itkovian's eyes narrowed. He speaks with two meanings. One, for us. A deeper second meaning, for that man standing over there.

A moment later the large, heavy-set woman standing beside Captain Paran approached the table.

Seeing her, Kallor backed off a step.

’Careless,’ she drawled to the warlord, who spun at her words, ’dropping your hammer like that.’

’Silverfox. We'd wondered if we would see you again.’

’Yet you sent Korlat out to track me, Warlord.’

’Only to ascertain your whereabouts and direction of travel. It appears she got lost, for she has yet to return.’

’A temporary misdirection. My T'lan Ay now surround her and are guiding her back here. Unharmed.’

’I am relieved to hear that. By your words, I assume that the Second Gathering has taken place.’

’It has.’

Whiskeyjack had seen Captain Paran and was approaching him for a private word. The tall, dark-skinned man moved to join them.

’Tell us, then,’ the warlord continued, ’has another army joined in the proceedings?’

’My T'lan Imass have tasks before them that will require a journey to the Pannion Domin. To your advantage, should there be more K'Chain Che'Malle K'ell Hunters, for we will deal with them.’

’Presumably, you've no intention of elaborating on these tasks that you mentioned.’

’Warlord, they are private matters, and have no bearing on you or your war.’
'Don't believe her,' Kallor growled. 'They want the Seer, for they know what he is – a Jaghut Tyrant.'

Silverfox faced Kallor. 'And should you capture the Pannion Seer, what would you do with him? He is insane, his mind twisted by the taint of the Warren of Chaos and the Crippled God's manipulations. Execution is the only option. Leave that to us, for we exist to kill Jaghut—'

'Not always,' Dujek interjected.

'What do you mean?'

'Did not one of your T’lan Imass accompany the Adjunct Lorn when she freed the Jaghut Tyrant south of Darujhistan?'

Silverfox looked troubled. 'The Clanless One. Yes. An event I do not as yet understand. None the less, that Tyrant was awakened from a cursed sleep, only to die in truth—'

A new voice spoke. 'Actually, while a little worse for wear, Raest was admirably animate the last time I saw him.'

Silverfox spun. 'Ganoes, what do you mean? The Tyrant was slain.'

The small, round man now standing beside Captain Paran drew a handkerchief from a sleeve and mopped his brow. 'Well, as to that ... not quite, Kruppe reluctantly advises. Matters were somewhat confused, alas—'

'A House of the Azath took the Jaghut Tyrant,' K'rul explained. 'The Malazan plan, as I understand it, was to force Anomander Rake's hand – a confrontation that was intended to weaken him, if not see him slain outright. Raest never did come face to face with the Lord of Moon's Spawn, as it turned out—'

'I see little relevance in all this,' Silverfox cut in. 'If the Clanless One has indeed broken his vow, then he will have to answer to me.'

'My point was,' Dujek said, 'you make a claim that the T’lan Imass and what they do or don't do is separate from everyone and everything else. You insist on detachment, but, as a veteran of the Malazan campaigns, I tell you that what you assert is patently untrue.'

'Perhaps indeed the Logros T’lan Imass grew ... confused. If so, such ambivalence is past. Unless, of course, you would challenge the authority that I was born to.'

No-one spoke in answer to that.

Silverfox nodded. 'Very well. You have been told of the position of the T’lan Imass. We will have this Jaghut Tyrant. Does anyone here wish to counter our claim?'

'From the implicit threats in your tone, woman,' Brood grated, 'that would be a foolhardy position to take. I for one will not squabble and tug the Seer's limbs.' He swung to Dujek. 'High Fist?'

The one-armed soldier grimaced, then shook his head.

Itkovian's attention was drawn to the short, fat Daru, for some reason he could not have hoped to explain. A benign smile curved those full, slightly greasy lips.

This is a most fell gathering of powers here. Yet why do I believe that the very epicentre of efficacy lies with this strange little man? He holds even K'rul's regard, as would an admiring companion rest eyes upon a lifelong ... prodigy of sorts, perhaps. A prodigy whose talents have come to overwhelm his master's. But there is no envy in that regard, nor even pride – which always whispers of possessiveness, after all. No, the emotion is far more subtle, and complex . . .

'We have matters of supply to discuss,' Caladan Brood finally said. The High Priestess still leaned on him. He now guided her back to her chair, with surprising gentleness, and spoke to her in low tones. She nodded in reply.
'The Barghast,' Cafal said, 'have come prepared. Your numbers are manageable.'

'And the price?' Dujek asked.

The young warrior grinned. 'You'll find it palatable ... more or less.'

Silverfox strode away, as if she had said all she'd intended to say and had no interest in the mundane matters still needing discussion. Itkovian noted that Captain Paran, his dark-skinned companion and Whiskeyjack had already departed. Gruntle seemed to have begun dozing in his chair, oblivious of Stonny's scowl opposite him. Rath'Hood and Rath'Shadowthrone were slumped in their chairs, masks angled into morose expressions – leaving Itkovian to wonder at how much control the priests had over those lacquered, hinged contrivances.

The new Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords sat motionless, her gaze fixed on Itkovian with unveiled sorrow.

And . . . pity.

I am a distraction. Very well. He stepped back, turned about and made his way towards the back of the tarp.

He was surprised to find Paran, Whiskeyjack and the dark-skinned man waiting there. A tall, martial woman with midnight skin had joined them and now studied Itkovian with extraordinary, almond-shaped eyes the colour of sun-bleached grass.

Meeting that gaze, Itkovian almost staggered. Fener's tusks, such sadness – an eternity of loss . . . empty existence—

She broke the contact with a startled, then alarmed, expression.

Not for me. Not for my embrace. Not that. Some wounds can never be healed, some memories should never be reawakened. Cast no light upon that darkness, sir. It is too much— He came then to another realization.

Fener was gone, and with the god had vanished his protection. Itkovian was vulnerable as he had never been before. Vulnerable to the world's pain, to its grief.

'Itkovian, we were hoping,' Captain Paran said, 'that you'd come. This is my commander, Whiskeyjack. And Quick Ben, of the Bridgeburners. And the Tiste Andii is Korlat, second to Anomander Rake. We are pleased with your company, Itkovian. Will you join us?'

'I've a restless cask of Gredfallan ale in my tent,' Whiskeyjack said.

My vow— 'A welcome invitation, sirs. I accept. Thank you. Mistress,' he added to Korlat, 'my deepest apologies.'

'They are mine to make,' she replied. 'I was unguarded, and carelessly unmindful of all that you are.'

The three Malazans looked back and forth at the two of them, but none ventured a query or comment.

'Allow me,' Whiskeyjack finally said, setting off down the slope towards the Host's camp.

The Bridgeburner, Quick Ben, paced alongside Itkovian. 'Well, it seems Silverfox has surprised us all this day.'

'I do not know her, sir, and so can make no observation as to her disposition.'

'You sensed nothing from her?'

'I did not say that.'

The man flashed a white grin. 'True enough. You didn't.'

'She has done a terrible wrong, sir, yet upon her shoulders it weighs nothing.'

The breath hissed between Quick Ben's teeth. 'Nothing? Are you certain? Hood's breath, that's not good. Not good at all.'
'Nightchill,' Paran said behind them.

Quick Ben threw a glance over a shoulder. 'You think?'

'I know, Wizard. And, to make matters worse, Nightchill was – is – a whole lot more than what we'd thought. Not just a High Mage of the Empire. She's all hard edges – her mate Bellurdan was her balance, but of the Thelomen I sense nothing.'

'And Tattersail?'

'In the shadows. Observing, but without much interest, it seems.'

'A woman named Silverfox was the subject,' Itkovian murmured, 'yet you speak of three others.'

'Sorry. All reborn within Silverfox. It's a long story.'

He nodded. 'All perforce needing to live with one another, no matter how disparate their individual natures.'

'Aye,' Paran sighed. 'Not surprising that there'd be a war of wills—'

'There is no war within her,' Itkovian said.

'What?'

'They walk in agreement, sir. She is calm within.'

They reached level ground, approached the Malazan camp. Whiskeyjack and Korlat strode side by side and close, a half-dozen paces ahead.

'Now that,' Quick Ben muttered, 'is the most surprising revelation this day.'

'So far,' Paran pointed out. 'Something tells me we're not done yet.'

'Gentlemen!' a voice wheezed behind them. 'A moment please, whilst Kruppe's formidable yet sadly short legs propel self hastily into your company!'

The elaborate statement was sufficient to close the distance as the three men paused to permit Kruppe's breathless arrival, upon which they resumed their walk.

'Wind of fortune!' Kruppe panted. 'Carrying to Kruppe all your words—'

'How convenient,' Quick Ben wryly muttered. 'And no doubt you've a comment or ten to make on the subject of Silverfox.'

'Indeed! Kruppe was witness, after all, to said dreadful Gathering. Yet all alarm subsequent to said events has grown quiet within oneself, for truths have marched out from the darkness to prostrate themselves at Kruppe's slippered feet.'

'That conjures up an image of you stumbling and falling flat on your face, Daru,' the wizard commented.

'Carelessly constructed, Kruppe allows, yet none of you have ever seen Kruppe dance! And dance he can, with breathtaking artistry and grace – nay! He glides like an unbroken egg on a greased skillet. Stumble? Fall? Kruppe? Never!'

'You'd mentioned truths,' Paran reminded him.

'Ah yes! Truths, squirming like puppies around Kruppe, upon which he laid patting hand on each one and all in turn, as would any kindly master. The result? Kruppe advises that all is well within Silverfox! Be at ease. Be calmed. Be ... lieve – uh ...'

'Was that a stumble?'
'Nonsense. Even linguistic confusion has value.'

'Really? How so?'

'Uh, the matter is too subtle for mere words, alas. We must not stray too far from the subject at hand, or foot, which was the matter of truths—'

'Squirming like puppies.'

'Indeed, Captain. Like wolf puppies, to be more precise.'

The two Malazans stopped suddenly, followed a moment later by Itkovian, as Kruppe's dream-like, mesmerizing stream of words revealed sudden substance, as if swirling before a rock. A rock... one of Kruppe's truths? These Malazans are used to this—or simply smarter than I.

'Out with it,' Paran growled.

'Out with what, precisely, dear Captain? Kruppe revels in sly ambiguity, after all, and so hoards his secrets as must any respectable hoarder of secrets... must. Does the subject concern this honour-bound ex-mercenary who walks alongside us? Indirectly, yes. Or, rather, the company he has so recently departed. Indirectly, Kruppe utters once more. Two ancient gods, once mere spirits, the first to run with mortals—those T'lan Imass of flesh and blood of so long ago—the most ancient of companions. And their kin, who followed in kind, and run still with the T'lan Imass.

'Two wolf-gods, yes? Does anyone here not recall the bedtime story of their separation, their eternal search for one another? Of course, all of you do. Such a sorrowful story, the kind impressionable children never forget. But what drove them apart? How goes the tale? Then one day horror visited the land. Horror from the dark sky. Descending to shatter the world. And so the lovers were thrown apart, never again to embrace. And it goes on blah blah and so forth and forthwhich.

'Gentlemen, the horror was of course the Fallen One's fateful descent. And whatever healing was demanded of the surviving powers proved a difficult, burdensome task. The Elder Gods did what they could, but understand, they were themselves younger than the two wolf-gods, and, more significantly, they did not find ascendancy walking in step with humans—or those who would one day become humans, that is—'

'Stop, please!' Paran snapped.

'Kruppe cannot! To pause here would be to lose all that must be said! The dimmest of memories are all that remain, and even they are succumbing to the gathering gloom! Frail fragments come as fraught dreams, and the promise of reunion and rebirth are lost, unrecognized, the redemption promised wandering a tundra alone, howling with the wind—yet salvation is at hand! Disparate spirits are united in their resolve! A spirit of hard edges, to hold the others to their course despite all the pain that others must bear. Another spirit, to clasp hard the hurt of abandonment until it can find proper answer! And yet a third spirit, filled with love and compassion—if somewhat witless, granted—to so flavour the pending moment. And a fourth, possessing the power to achieve the necessary reparation of old wounds—'

'Fourth?' Quick Ben sputtered. 'Who's the fourth in Silverfox?'

'Why, the seed-child of a T'lan Imass Bonecaster, of course. Pran Chole's daughter, the one whose true name is indeed the one by which we all know her!'

Itkovian's gaze flicked past Kruppe, to see Korlat and Whiskeyjack twenty paces off, standing in front of a large tent, looking back at the group. No doubt curious, yet maintaining a respectful distance.

'Thus, Kruppe advises one and all,' the Daru resumed after a moment, his tone deeply satisfied, pudgy fingers lacing together to rest on his paunch, 'faith. Patience. Await what must be awaited.'

'And you call that an explanation?' Paran demanded, scowling.

'The very paradigm of explication, dear friends. Cogent, clear, if somewhat quaintly couched. Precision is a
precise art. Poignancy is pre-eminent and precludes prevarication. Truths are no trivial thing, after all—'

   Itkovian swung towards Whiskeyjack and Korlat and set off.

   Paran called out, 'Itkovian?'

   'I was reminded of that Gredfallan ale,' he replied over a shoulder. 'It has been years, yet I find the need suddenly overwhelming, sir.'

   'I concur. Wait up.'

   'Wait, indeed, you three! What of Kruppe's own prodigious thirst?'

   'By all means,' Quick Ben replied, setting off in the wake of Itkovian and Paran, 'quaintly quench it – just do so somewhere else.'

   'Oh ho! But is that not Whiskeyjack waving Kruppe hence? Generous, kindly soldier, is Whiskeyjack! A moment! Kruppe would catch up!'

The two marines sat on boulders that were part of an old tipi ring, fifteen paces from where Silverfox stood. Shadows were stretching as the day closed over the prairie.

   'So,' one of them muttered, 'how long do you think?'

   'I'd guess she's communing with them T'lan Imass. See the swirls of dust around her? Could be all night.'

   'I'm hungry.'

   'Yeah, well, I admit I've been eyeing your leather straps, darling.'

   'Problem is, they've forgotten about us.'

   'That's not the problem. It's maybe we ain't needed no more. She doesn't need bodyguards. Not dirt-nosed mortals like us, anyway. And we've already seen what we were supposed to see, meaning we're overdue on making a report.'

   'We weren't supposed to report, love. Remember? Anyone wants news from us they come by for a conversation.'

   'Right, only nobody's come by for a while now. Which was my point in the first place.'

   'Doesn't mean we should up and walk away. Besides, here's somebody coming now ...'

   The other marine twisted in her seat. After a moment, she grunted. 'Nobody we're supposed to report to. Hood knows, I don't even recognize 'em.'

   'Sure you do. One, anyway. That's the Trygalle trader-sorceress, Haradas.'

   'The other's a soldier, I'd say. An Elin lass, nice sway to the hips—'

   'Hard face, though.'

   'Eyes fulla hurt. Could be one of them Grey Swords – saw her at the parley.'

   'Yeah, well, they're coming our way.'

   'So am I,' a voice spoke from a few paces to their left. The marines turned to see that Silverfox was joining them. 'This is a fell thing,' she murmured.

   'Oh, what's that?' one of the marines asked her.
'A gathering of women.'

The soldier grunted. 'We ain't gonna gossip, are we?'

Silverfox smiled at the facetious tone. 'Among the Rhivi, it's the men who do all the gossiping. The women are too busy giving them things to gossip about.'

'Huh. That's a surprise. I would've thought there'd be all kind of ancient laws against adultery and such. Banishment, stoning, it's what tribes do, ain't it?'

'Not the Rhivi. Bedding the wrong husbands is great sport. For the women, that is. The men take it all too seriously, of course.'

'They take everything too seriously, if you ask me,' the marine muttered.

'Self-importance will do that,' Silverfox replied, nodding.

Haradas and her companion arrived. In their wake, still sixty paces distant, a Barghast was approaching as well.

The trader-sorceress bowed to Silverfox, then the two Malazans. 'Dusk is a magical time, is it not?'

'What would you ask?' Silverfox drawled.

'A question born of a thought, Bonecaster, that but recently came to me, hence my coming to you.'

'You've been around Kruppe too long, Haradas.'

'Perhaps. Issues of supply continue to plague these armies, as you well know. At the parley, the White Face Barghast offered to provide a fair portion of what will be required. Despite their confidence, I believe that they too will find their resources stretched before long—'

'You would enquire of Tellann,' Silverfox said.

'Ah, indeed, I would. The warren of the T'lan Imass must surely remain ... uninfected, after all. Could our guild respectfully employ its path—'

'Uninfected. Yes, it so remains. None the less, there is within Tellann the potential for violence, for risk to your caravans.'

Haradas's brows rose. 'It is assailed?'

'In a fashion. The Throne of the Beast Hold is ... contested. There are renegades among the T'lan Imass. The Vow is weakening.'

The sorceress sighed. 'I thank you for the warning, Bonecaster. Risk, of course, is factored in when it comes to the Trygalle Trade Guild. Thus, the usurious fees we charge for our services. Will you then permit us the use of Tellann?'

Silverfox shrugged. 'I see no reason why not. Have you the means to fashion a portal into our warren? If not, I can—'

'No need, Bonecaster,' Haradas said with a faint smile. 'We have long since found such means, yet in respect to the T'lan Imass, and given the accessibility of less ... uncivilized ... warrens, such portals were never employed.'

Silverfox studied the sorceress for a long moment. 'Remarkable. I can only conclude that the Trygalle Trade Guild is run by a cabal of High Mages, of singular prowess. Do you know that not even the Malazan Empire's most powerful, most knowledgeable mages were ever successful in penetrating the secrets of Tellann? I would like to meet your guild's founders one day.'
Haradas's smile broadened. 'I am sure they would be delighted and indeed honoured by your company, Bonecaster.'

'You are perhaps too generous on their behalf, Sorceress.'

'Not in the least, I assure you. I am pleased that the matter has been concluded so effortlessly—'

'We're a fell gathering indeed,' Silverfox murmured.

Haradas blinked, then recovered and continued, 'So that I may now introduce you to the new Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords, Captain Norul.'

The soldier bowed. 'Bonecaster.' The woman hesitated, then her expression hardened with resolve. 'The Grey Swords are sworn to Togg, Wolf of Winter, and to Fanderay, She-Wolf of Winter.'

'Interesting choices,' Silverfox said. 'Lovers lost for all eternity, yet in your twice-sworn company, united in spirit. A bold and courageous gesture, Shield Anvil.'

'Bonecaster, Togg and Fanderay are no longer lost to each other. Each has finally caught the other's scent. Your manner seems to convey no knowledge of this, which confuses me, sir.'

Now it was Silverfox who frowned. 'Why should it? I've no particular interest in ancient wolf-gods ...' Her words slowly trailed to silence.

The Shield Anvil spoke again, 'Bonecaster, Summoner of the Second Gathering of the T'lan Imass, I formally ask that you yield the T'lan Ay – the children of our gods.'

Silence.

Silverfox stared at the Grey Sword commander, eyes half lidded, her full, rounded face expressionless. Then a tremor crossed her features.

'You don't understand,' she finally whispered. 'I need them.'

The Shield Anvil cocked her head. 'Why?

'F-for a . . . gift. A ... repayment. I have sworn—'

'To whom?'

'To – to myself.'

'And how, sir, are the T'lan Ay involved in the fashioning of this gift? They have run with the T'lan Imass, it is true. But they are not to be owned. Not by the T'lan Imass. Not by you.'

'Yet they were joined in the Ritual of Tellann, the First Gathering—'

'They were ... encompassed. In ignorance. Bound by loyalty and love to the flesh and blood Imass. As a result, they lost their souls. Sir, my gods are coming, and in their cries – which now visit me each night in my dreams – they demand . . . reparation.'

'I must deny you,' Silverfox said. 'Until Togg and Fanderay can come, physically and manifesting their power, to enforce their demand, I shall not yield the T'lan Ay,'

'You risk your life, Bonecaster—'

'Will the wolf-gods announce war against the T'lan Imass? Will they and the T'lan Ay come for our throats, Shield Anvil?'

'I do not know, sir. You will have to answer for the decisions you have made. But I fear for you, Bonecaster. Togg and Fanderay are ascended beasts. Their souls are unknowable to such as you and me. Who can predict what lies in the hearts of such creatures?'
'Where are they now?'

The Shield Anvil shrugged. 'South. We shall, it seems, all converge within the Pannion Domin.'

'Then I still have time.'

'The achievement of your gift, sir, could see you killed.'

'Always an even exchange,' Silverfox muttered, half to herself.

The marines exchanged a glance at those words, legendary in Onearm's Host.

The Barghast woman had arrived and was standing a few paces distant, sharp, dark eyes fixed intently on the exchange between the Shield Anvil and Silverfox. At the pause, she laughed low in her throat, drawing everyone's attention.

'Too bad there are no men worthy of this company,' she growled. 'Seeing you, I am reminded of this world's true heart of power. Malazan marines, a Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords, a witch and a sorceress. And now, to complete the tapestry, a daughter of the White Face Barghast ... bringing food and wine.'

The two marines shot to their feet, grinning.

'And I would gossip!' Hetan shouted. 'Shield Anvil! Itkovian holds to vows no longer, true? I can bed him—'

'If you can catch him,' the Grey Sword replied, one brow arching.

'If he had fifty legs I could still catch him! Silverfox! What of Kruppe, hey?'

The Bonecaster blinked. 'What of him?'

'You're a big woman. You could trap him under you! Leave him squealing!'

'What a horrifying image.'

'I'll grant you he's round and small and slimy, but clever, yes? Clever heats the blood all on its own, does it not? I have heard that, while you may look like a woman, you remain as a child in the most important way. Stir yourself with desire, lass! You've been consorting with the undead and the withered for far too long! Grasp the spear with both hands, I always say!'

Silverfox slowly shook her head. 'You said you brought wine?'

Grin broadening, Hetan approached. 'Aye, two bladders as big as your breasts and no doubt just as sweet. Gather, formidable companions, and let us feast!'

Haradas smiled. 'A wonderful idea, thank you.'

The Shield Anvil hesitated. She glanced over at the marines, then began removing her battered helm. She sighed loudly. 'Let the wolves wait,' she said. 'I cannot hold to dread comportment in the manner of my predecessor—'

'Cannot?' Hetan challenged. 'Or will not?'

'Will not,' the woman corrected, pulling her helm free. Sweat-soaked, iron-streaked hair tumbled loose. 'May the Wolves forgive me.'

'One of them will,' the Barghast asserted, crouching to lay out the foodstuffs from her pack.

Coll drew the furs closer about the Mhybe's frail, shrunken form. There was movement behind the lids of her eyes, random and frantic. Her breath was a broken wheeze. The Daru councillor looked down on her for a moment longer, then he straightened and slipped down from the edge of the wagon-bed.
Murillio stood nearby, tightening the straps of the water casks attached to the wagon's right side-rail. Old tents had been used to cover the packages of food they had purchased from a Barghast trader that morning, which had been affixed to the opposite side-rail, giving the Rhivi wagon a wide, bloated appearance.

The two men had also acquired a pair of horses, at exorbitant cost, from the Mott Irregulars, a strangely ineffectual-looking company of mercenaries attached to Caladan Brood's army that Coll had not even known were present. Mercenaries whose backwoods garb belied the martial profession, yet perfectly suited the company's name. The horses were barely broken, thick-limbed yet tall, a breed the Irregulars claimed was their own – bloodlines that included Nathi destriers, Mott carthorses and Genabarii drays, all drawn together to produce a large, sturdy, ill-tempered animal with a surprisingly wide back that made riding them a luxury.

'Provided they don't bite your hand off,' the buck-toothed Mottman had added, pulling lice from his long, stringy hair and popping them into his mouth as he talked.

Coll sighed, vaguely discomfited by the memory, and warily approached the two horses.

The two mounts could have been twins, both sorrel, their manes uncut and long, thick tails snagged with burrs and spar-grass seeds. The saddles were Malazan – old spoils of war, no doubt – the thick blankets beneath them Rhivi. The beasts eyed him.

One casually swung its hindquarters in the Daru's direction. He stopped, muttering a soft curse.

'Sweetroot,' Murillio said from beside the wagon. 'Bribe 'em. Here, we have some in the packs.'

'And reward their ill manners? No.' Coll circled at a distance. The horses had been tethered to a tent peg, allowing them to match his movement. Three steps closer and the Daru would get his head kicked in. He cursed in a slightly louder tone, then said, 'Murillio, lead the oxen up beside that peg – use the wagon to block them. And if this doesn't work, find me a mallet.'

Grinning, Murillio climbed up onto the seat and gathered the traces. Fifteen heartbeats later he halted the beasts just past the tent peg, the wagon effectively barring the horses from circling any further.

Coll hurried round until the wagon was between him and the mounts.

'So you'd rather a bite than a kick,' Murillio commented, watching his friend come up to the wagon, climb its side, then cross the bed – stepping over the Mhybe's unconscious form – and halt within an arm's reach of the horses.

They had pulled their tethers taut, backing as far as they could, tugging on the tent peg. A Rhivi wedge, the peg's design was intended to hold against even the fiercest prairie wind. Driven deep in the hard-packed earth, it did not budge.

Coll's leather-gauntleted hand snapped out, closed on one of the tethers. He tugged sharply down as he dropped from the wagon.

The animal stumbled towards him, snorting. Its comrade skittered back in alarm.

The Daru collected the reins from the saddle-horn, still gripping the tether in his other hand and holding the horse's head down, and edged to its shoulder. He planted a boot in the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle in a single motion.

The horse tried to duck out from under his weight, a sideways slew that thudded against its comrade – with Coll's leg trapped in between.

He grunted but held the reins firm.

'That'll be a nice bruise,' Murillio commented.

'Keep saying pleasant things why don't you?' Coll said through gritted teeth. 'Now come over and slip the tether. Carefully, mind. There's a lone vulture above our heads, looking hopeful.'
His companion glanced skyward, scanned for a moment, then hissed. 'All right, so I was momentarily gullible – stop gloating.' He clambered over the seat-back.

Coll watched him drop lightly to the ground and warily approach the tent peg.

'On second thoughts, maybe you should have found me that mallet.'

'Too late now, friend,' Murillio said, pulling the knot free.

The horse plunged back a half-dozen steps, then planted its hind legs and reared.

To Murillio's eyes, Coll's backward somersault displayed almost poetic grace, artfully concluded by the big Daru's landing squarely on his feet, only to lunge straight back to avoid a vicious two-hoofed kick that, had it connected, would have shattered his chest. He landed four paces away with a thud.

The horse ran off, bucking with glee.

Coll lay unmoving for a moment, blinking at the sky.

'You all right?' Murillio asked.

'Get me a lasso. And some sweetroot.'

'I'd suggest a mallet instead,' Murillio replied, 'but since you know your mind, I won't.'

Distant horns sounded.

'Hood's breath,' Coll groaned. 'The march to Capustan's begun.' He slowly sat up. 'We were supposed to be up front for this.'

'We could always ride in the wagon, friend. Return the horses to the Mott Irregulars and get our money back.'

'That wagon's overloaded as it is.' Coll painfully regained his feet. 'Besides, he said no refunds.'

Murillio squinted at his companion. 'Did he now? And not even a stir of suspicion from you at that?'

'Quiet.'

'But—'

'Murillio, you want the truth? The man was so homely I felt sorry for him, all right? Now stop babbling and let's get on with this.'

'Coll! He was asking a prince's ransom for—'

'Enough,' he growled. 'That ransom's going to pay for the privilege of killing the damned beasts, or you – which do you prefer?'

'You can't kill them—'

'Then another word from you and it's this hillside under a pile of boulders for dear old Murillio of Darujhistan. Am I understood? Good. Now hand me that lasso and the sweet-root – we'll start with the one still here.'

'Wouldn't you rather run after—'

'Murillio,' Coll warned.

'Sorry. Make the boulders small, please.'
mountains of ice, waves that spun and twisted even as they struck the battered shoreline, flinging spume skyward. The thunderous roar was shot through with grinding, cracking, and the ceaseless hiss of driving rain.

'Oh my,' Lady Envy murmured.

The three Seguleh crouched on the leeside of a large basaltic boulder, applying thick grease to their weapons. They were a sadly bedraggled trio, sodden with rain, smeared with mud, their armour in tatters. Minor wounds crisscrossed their arms, thighs and shoulders, the deeper ones roughly stitched with gut, the rows of knots black and gummed with old blood that streamed crimson in the rain.

Nearby, surmounting a jutting spar of basalt, stood Baaljagg. Matted, scabbed, her fur in tangled tufts around bare patches, a hand's length of broken spear shaft jutting from her right shoulder – three days it had been, yet the beast would not allow Envy close, nor the Seguleh – the giant wolf stared steadily northward with feverish, gleaming eyes.

Garath lay three paces behind her, shivering uncontrollably, wounds suppurating as if his body wept since he could not, massive and half mad, allowing no-one – not even the wolf – to come near.

Only Lady Envy remained, to all outward appearances, untouched by the horrendous war they had undertaken; untouched, even, by the driving rain. Her white telaba showed not a single stain. Her unbound black hair hung full and straight down to the small of her back. Her lips were painted a deep, vaguely menacing red. The kohl above her eyes contained the hues of dusk.

'Oh my,' she whispered yet again. 'How shall we follow Tool across ... this? And why was he not a T'lan Elephant, or a T'lan Whale, so that he could carry us on his back, in sumptuous howdahs? With running hot water and ingenious plumbing.'

Mok appeared at her side, rain streaming from his enamel mask. 'I will face him yet,' he said.

'Oh really. And when did duelling Tool become more important than your mission to the Seer? How will the First or the Second react to such self-importance?'

'The First is the First and the Second is the Second,' Mok replied laconically.

Lady Envy rolled her eyes. 'How astute an observation.'

'The demands of the self have primacy, mistress. Always, else there would be no champions. There would be no hierarchy at all. The Seguleh would be ruled by mewing martyrs blindly trampling the helpless in their lust for the common good. Or we would be ruled by despots who would hide behind an army to every challenge, creating of brute force a righteous claim to honour. We know of other lands, mistress. We know much more than you think.'

She turned to study him. 'Goodness. And here I have been proceeding on the assumption that entertaining conversation was denied to me.'

'We are immune to your contempt, mistress.'

'Hardly, you've been smarting ever since I reawakened you. Smarting? Indeed, seething.'

'There are matters to be discussed,' Mok said.

'Are you sure? Would you by chance be referring to this tumultuous tempest barring our advance? Or perhaps to the fleeing remnants of the army that pursued us here? They'll not return, I assure you—'

'You have sent a plague among them.'

'What an outrageous accusation! It's been a miracle that disease has not struck them long ago, what with eating each other without even the civil application of cooking. Dear me, that you would so accuse—'

'Garath succumbs to that plague, mistress.'
'What? Nonsense! He is ailed by his wounds—'

'Wounds that the power of his spirit should have long since healed. The fever within the beast, that so fills
the lungs, is the same as that which afflicts the Pannions.' He slowly turned to face her. 'Do something.'

'An outrage—'

'Mistress.'

'Oh, all right! But don't you see the delicious irony? Poleil, Queen of Disease, has allied herself with the
Crippled God. A decision that deeply affronts me, I will have you know. How cunning of me to loot her warren
and so beset her allies!

'I doubt the victims appreciate the irony, mistress. Nor, I imagine, does Garath.'

'I'd much rather you'd stayed taciturn!'

'Heal him.'

'He'll not let me close!'

'Garath is no longer capable of standing, mistress. Where he now lies, he will not rise from, unless you heal
him.'

'Oh, what a miserable man you are! If you're wrong and he tries to bite me, I will be very upset with you,
Mok. I will lay waste to your loins. I will make your eyes crossed so that everyone who looks at you and your
silly mask will not be able to help but laugh. And I will think of other things, too, I assure you.'

'Heal him.'

'Of course I will! Garath is my beloved companion, after all. Even if he once tried to pee on my robe –
though I will acknowledge that since he was asleep at the time it was probably one of K'rul's pranks. All right,
all right, stop interrupting me.'

She approached the huge hound.

His eyes were glazed, each breath a hacking contortion. Garath did not raise his head as she edged closer.

'Oh, dear, forgive my inattention, dearest pup. I'd thought only the wounds, and so had already begun to
grieve. You are felled by an unseemly vapour? Unacceptable. Easily negated, in fact.' She reached out, fingers
lightly resting on the hot, steaming hide. 'There—'

Garath swung his head, lips slowly peeling back.

Lady Envy scampered away. 'And that is how you thank me? I have healed you, dearest one!'

'You made him ill in the first place, mistress,' Mok said behind her.

'Be quiet, I'm not talking to you any more. Garath! Look at how your strength returns, even as we watch!
See, you are standing! Oh, how wonderful! And – no, stay away, please. Unless you want a pat? Do you want a
pat? If so, you must stop growling at once!'

Mok stepped between them, eyes on the bristling hound. 'Garath, we have need of her, even as we have need
of you. There is no value in continuing this enmity.'

'He can't understand you!' Lady Envy said. 'He's a dog! An angry dog, in fact.'

The hulking creature turned away, padded slowly to where Baaljagg stood facing the storm. The wolf did not
so much as glance at him.

Mok stepped forward. 'Baaljagg sees something, mistress.'
'What? Out there?'

They hurried up the pinnacle’s slope.

The bergs of ice had captured a prize. Less than a thousand paces away, at the very edge of the small inlet before them, floated a structure. High-walled on two sides with what appeared to be a latticework of wicker, and surmounted by frost-rimed houses – three in all – it looked nothing more than a broken, torn-away piece of a port town or city. A narrow, crooked alley was indeed visible between the tall, warped houses. As the ice gripping the base of the structure twisted to some unseen current, the two opposites sides came into view, revealing the broken maw of wooden framework reaching beneath the street level, crowded with enormous balsa logs and what appeared to be massive inflated bladders, three of them punctured and flaccid.

'How decidedly peculiar,' Lady Envy said.

'Meckros,' Mok said.

'Excuse me?'

'The home of the Seguleh is an island, mistress. We are, on rare occasion, visited by the Meckros, who dwell in cities that ride the oceans. They endeavour to raid our coastline, ever forgetful of the unfortunate results of the previous raids. Their fierce zeal entertains those among the Lower Schools.'

'Well,' Lady Envy sniffed, 'I see no occupants in that... misplaced neighbourhood.'

'Nor do I, mistress. However, look at the ice immediately beyond the remnant. It has found an outward current and now seeks to join it.'

'Goodness, you can't be suggesting—'

Baaljagg gave clear answer to her unfinished question. The wolf spun, flashed past them, and hastened down to the wave-hammered rocks below. Moments later, they saw the huge wolf lunging from the thrashing water onto a broad raft of ice, then scampering across to the other side. Baaljagg then leapt outward, to land skidding on another floe.

'The method seems viable,' Mok said.

Garath plunged past them, following the wolf’s route down to the shoreline.

'Oh!' Lady Envy cried, stamping a foot. 'Can't we ever discuss things?'

'I see a possible route forming, mistress, which might well permit us to avoid getting too wet—'

'Wet? Who's wet? Very well, call your brothers and lead the way.'

The journey across the pitching, heaving, often awash floes of ice proved frantic, perilous and exhausting. Upon reaching the rearing wall of wicker, they found no sign of Baaljagg or Garath, yet could follow their tracks on the snow-crusted raft, which seemed to be holding afloat most of the Meckros structure, round to the unwalled, broken side.

Within the chaotic framework of beams and struts, steeply angled, thick-planked ladders had been placed – no doubt originally built to assist in maintenance of the city’s undercarriage. The frosted steps within sight all revealed deep gouging from the wolf’s and the hound’s passage upward.

Water streamed down the jumbled, web-like framework, revealing the sundered nature of the street and houses above.

Senu in the lead, followed by Thurule then Mok, with Lady Envy last, the travellers climbed slowly, cautiously upward.

They eventually emerged through a warehouse-sized trap door that opened onto the pitched, main floor of one of the houses. The chamber was crowded along three of its four walls with burlap-wrapped supplies. Huge
barrels had tumbled, rolled, and were now gathered at one end. To its right were double doors, now shattered open, no doubt by Baaljagg and Garath, revealing a cobbled street beyond.

The air was bitter cold.

'It might be worthwhile,' Mok said to Lady Envy, 'to examine each of these houses, from level to level, to determine which is the most structurally sound and therefore inhabitable. There seem to be considerable stores remaining which we can exploit.'

'Yes, yes,' Lady Envy said distractedly. 'I leave to you and your brothers such mundane necessities. The assumption that our journey has brought us to, however, rests in the untested belief that this contraption will perforce carry us north, across the entire breadth of Coral Bay, and hence to the city that is our goal. I, and I alone, it seems, must do the fretting on this particular issue.'

'As you like, mistress.'

'Watch yourself, Mok!' she snapped.

He tilted his masked head in silent apology.

'My servants forget themselves, it seems. Think on the capacity of my fullest irritation, you three. In the meantime, I shall idle on the city's street, such as it is.' With that, she pivoted and strode languidly towards the doorway.

Baaljagg and Garath stood three paces beyond, the rain striking their broad backs hard enough to mist with spray. Both animals faced a lone figure, standing in the gloom of the opposite house's overhanging dormer.

For a moment, Lady Envy almost sighed, then the fact that she did not recognize the figure struck home. 'Oh! And here I was about to say: dear Tool, you waited for us after all! But lo, you are not him, are you?'

The T'lan Imass before them was shorter, squatter than Tool. Three black-iron broadswords of unfamiliar style impaled this undead warrior's broad, massive chest, two of them driven in from behind, the other from the T'lan Imass's left. Broken ribs jutted through black, salt-rimed skin. The leather strapping of all three sword handles hung in rotted, unravelled strips from the grips' wooden under-plates. Wispy remnants of old sorcery flowed fitfully along the pitted blades.

The warrior's features were extraordinarily heavy, the brow ridge a skinless shelf of bone, stained dark brown, the cheek bones swept out and high to frame flattened oval-shaped eye sockets. Cold-hammered copper fangs capped the undead's upper canines. The T'lan Imass did not wear a helm. Long hair, bleached white, dangled to either side of the broad, chinless face, weighted at the ends with shark teeth.

A most dreadful, appalling apparition, Lady Envy reflected. 'Have you a name, T'lan Imass?' she asked.

'I have heard the summons,' the warrior said in a voice that was distinctly feminine. 'It came from a place to match the direction I had already chosen. North. Not far, now. I shall attend the Second Gathering, and I shall address my Kin of the Ritual, and so tell them that I am Lanas Tog. Sent to bring word of the fates of the Ifayle T'lan Imass and of my own Kerluhm T'lan Imass.'

'How fascinating,' Lady Envy said. 'And their fates are?'

'I am the last of the Kerluhm. The Ifayle, who heeded our first summons, are all but destroyed. Those few that remain cannot extricate themselves from the conflict. I myself did not expect to survive the attempt. Yet I have.'

'A horrific conflict indeed,' Lady Envy quietly observed. 'Where does it occur?'

'The continent of Assail. Our losses: twenty-nine thousand eight hundred and fourteen Kerluhm. Twenty-two thousand two hundred Ifayle. Eight months of battle. We have lost this war.'

Lady Envy was silent for a long moment, then she said, 'It seems you've finally found a Jaghut Tyrant who is
more than your match, Lanas Tog.'

The T'lan Imass cocked her head. 'Not Jaghut. Human.'
BOOK FOUR

MEMORIES OF ICE
First in, last out.

Motto of the Bridgeburners
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Your friend's face might prove the mask
the daub found in subtle shift
to alter the once familiar visage.
Or the child who formed unseen
in private darkness as you whiled oblivious
to reveal cruel shock as a stone
through a temple's pane.
To these there is no armour on the soul.
And upon the mask is writ the bold word,
echoed in the child's eyes,
a sudden stranger to all you have known.
Such is betrayal.

Death Vigil of Sorulan
Minir Othal

Captain Paran reined in his horse near the smoke-blackened rubble of the East Watch redoubt. He twisted in his saddle for a last look at Capustan's battered walls. Jelarkan's Palace reared tall and dark against the bright blue sky. Streaks of black paint etched the tower like cracks, a symbol of the city's mourning for its lost prince. The next rain would see that paint washed away, leaving no sign. That structure, he had heard, never wore the mortal moment for very long.

The Bridgeburners were filing out through the East Gate.

First in, last out. They're always mindful of such gestures.

Sergeant Antsy was in the lead, with Corporal Picker a step behind. The two looked to be arguing, which was nothing new. Behind them, the soldiers of the other seven squads had lost all cohesion; the company marched in no particular order. The captain wondered at that. He'd met the other sergeants and corporals, of course. He knew the names of every surviving Bridgeburner and knew their faces as well. None the less, there was something strangely ephemeral about them. His eyes narrowed as he watched them walk the road, veiled in dust, like figures in a sun-bleached, threadbare tapestry. The march of armies, he reflected, was timeless.

Horse hooves sounded to his right and he swung to see Silverfox ride up to halt at his side.

'Better we'd stayed avoiding each other,' Paran said, returning his gaze to the soldiers on the road below.

'I'd not disagree,' she said after a moment. 'But something's happened.'

'I know.'

'No, you don't. What you no doubt refer to is not what I'm talking about, Captain. It's my mother – she's gone missing. Her and those two Daru who were caring for her. Somewhere in the city they turned their wagon, left the line. No-one seems to have seen a thing, though of course I cannot question an entire army—'

'What of your T'lan Imass? Could they not find them easily enough?'

She frowned, said nothing.

Paran glanced at her. 'They're not happy with you, are they?'

'That is not the problem. I have sent them and the T'lan Ay across the river.'
'We've reliable means of reconnoitring already, Silverfox—'

'Enough. I do not need to explain myself.'

'Yet you're asking for my help—'

'No. I am asking if you knew anything about it. Those Daru had to have had assistance.'

'Have you questioned Kruppe?'

'He's as startled and dismayed as I am, and I believe him.'

'Well,' Paran said, 'people have a habit of underestimating Coll. He's quite capable of pulling this off all on his own.'

'You do not seem to realize the severity of what they've done. In kidnapping my mother—'

'Hold on, Silverfox. You left your mother to their care. Left? No, too calm a word. Abandoned her. And I have no doubt at all that Coll and Murillio took the charge seriously, with all the compassion for the Mhybe you do not seem to possess. Consider the situation from their point of view. They're taking care of her, day in and day out, watching her wither. They see the Mhybe's daughter, but only from a distance. Ignoring her own mother. They decide that they have to find someone who is prepared to help the Mhybe. Or at the very least grant her a dignified end. Kidnapping is taking someone away from someone else. The Mhybe has been taken away, but from whom? No-one. No-one at all.'

Silverfox, her face pale, was slow to respond. When she did, it was in a rasp, 'You have no idea what lies between us, Ganoes.'

'And it seems you've no idea of how to forgive – not her, not yourself. Guilt has become a chasm—'

'That is rich indeed, coming from you.'

His smile was tight. 'I've done my climb down, Silverfox, and am now climbing up the other side. Things have changed for both of us.'

'So you have turned your back on your avowed feelings for me.'

'I love you still, but with your death I succumbed to a kind of infatuation. I convinced myself that what you and I had, so very briefly, was of far vaster and deeper import than it truly was. Of all the weapons we turn upon ourselves, guilt is the sharpest, Silverfox. It can carve one's own past into unrecognizable shapes, false memories leading to beliefs that sow all kinds of obsessions.'

'Delighted to have you clear the air so, Ganoes. Has it not occurred to you that clinical examination of oneself is yet another obsession? What you dissect has to be dead first – that's the principle of dissection, after all.'

'So my tutor explained,' Paran replied, 'all those years ago. But you miss a more subtle truth. I can examine myself, my every feeling, until the Abyss swallows the world, yet come no closer to mastery of those emotions within me. For they are not static things; nor are they immune to the outside world – to what others say, or don't say. And so they are in constant flux.'

'Extraordinary,' she murmured. 'Captain Ganoes Paran, the young master of self-control, the tyrant unto himself. You have indeed changed. So much so that I no longer recognize you.'

He studied her face, searching for a hint of the feelings behind those words. But she had closed herself to him. 'Whereas,' he said slowly, 'I find you all too recognizable.'

'Would you call that ironic? You see me as a woman you once loved, while I see you as a man I never knew.'

'Too many tangled threads for irony, Silverfox.'
'Perhaps pathos, then.'

He looked away. 'We've wandered far from the subject. I am afraid I can tell you nothing of your mother's fate. Yet I am confident, none the less, that Coll and Murillio will do all they can for her.'

'Then you're an even bigger fool than they are, Ganoes. By stealing her, they have sealed her doom.'

'I didn't know you for the melodramatic type.'

'I am not—'

'She is an old woman, an old, dying woman. Abyss take me, leave her alone—'

'You are not listening!' Silverfox hissed. 'My mother is trapped in a nightmare – within her own mind, lost, terrified. Hunted! I have stayed closer to her than any of you realized. Far closer!'

'Silverfox,' Paran said quietly, 'if she is within a nightmare, then her living has become a curse. The only true mercy is to see it ended, once and for all.'

'No! She is my mother, damn you! And I will not abandon her!'

She wheeled her horse, drove her heels into its flanks.

Paran watched her ride off. Silverfox, what machinations have you wrapped around your mother? What is it you seek for her? Would you not tell us, please, so that we are made to understand that what we all see as betrayal is in fact something else?

Is it something else?

And these machinations – whose? Not Tattersail, surely. No, this must be Nightchill. Oh, how you've closed yourself to me, now. When once you reached out, incessantly, relentlessly seeking to pry open my heart. It seems that what we shared, so long ago in Pale, is as nothing.

I begin to think, now, that it was far more important to me than it was to you. Tattersail . . . you were, after all, an older woman. You'd lived your share of loves and losses. On the other hand, I'd barely lived at all.

What was, then, is no more.

Flesh and blood Bonecaster, you've become colder than the T'lan Imass you now command.

I suppose, then, they have indeed found a worthy master.

Beru fend us all.

Of the thirty transport barges and floating bridges the Pannions had used to cross the Catlin River, only a third remained serviceable, the others having fallen prey to the overzealous White Face Barghast during the first day of battle. Companies from Caladan Brood's collection of mercenaries had begun efforts at salvaging the wrecks with the intention of cobbling together a few more; while a lone serviceable floating bridge and the ten surviving barges already rode the lines across the river's expanse, loaded with troops, mounts and supplies.

Itkovian watched them as he walked the shoreline. He'd left his horse on a nearby hillock where the grasses grew thick, and now wandered alone, with only the shift of pebbles underfoot and the soft rush of the river accompanying him. The wind was sweeping up the river's mouth, a salt-laden breath from the sea beyond, so the sounds of the barges behind him – the winches, the lowing of yoked cattle, the shouts of drivers – did not reach him.

Glancing up, he saw a figure on the beach ahead, seated cross-legged and facing the scene of the crossing. Wild-haired, wearing a stained collection of rags, the man was busy painting on wood-backed muslin. Itkovian paused, watching the artist's head bob up and down, the long-handled brush darting about in his hand, now hearing his mumbling conversation with himself.
Or, perhaps, not with himself. One of the skull-sized boulders near the artist moved suddenly, revealing itself to be a large, olive-green toad.

And it had just replied to the artist's tirade, in a low, rumbling voice.

Itkovian approached.

The toad saw him first and said something in a language Itkovian did not understand.

The artist looked up, scowled. 'Interruptions,' he snapped in Daru, 'are not welcome!'

'My apologies, sir—'

'Wait! You're the one named Itkovian! Defender of Capustan!

'Failed defen—'

'Yes, yes, everyone's heard your words from the parley. Idiocy. When I paint you in the scene, I'll be sure to include the noble failure – in your stance, perhaps, in where your eyes rest, maybe. A certain twist to the shoulders, yes, I think I see it now. Precisely. Excellent.'

'You are Malazan?'

'Of course I'm Malazan! Does Brood give one whit for history? He does not. But the old Emperor! Oh yes, he did, he did indeed! Artists with every army! On every campaign! Artists of purest talent, sharp-eyed – yes, dare I admit it, geniuses. Such as Ormulogun of Li Heng!'

'I am afraid I've not heard that name – he was a great artist of the Malazan Empire?'

'Was? Is! I am Ormulogun of Li Heng, of course. Endlessly mimicked, never surpassed! Ormulogun seraith Gumble!'

'An impressive title—'

'It's not a title, you fool. Gumble is my critic.' With that he gestured at the toad, then said to it, 'Mark him well, Gumble, so that you note the brilliance of my coming rendition. He stands straight, does he not? Yet his bones may well be iron, their burden that of a hundred thousand foundation stones ... or souls, to be more precise. And his features, yes? Look carefully, Gumble, and you will see the fullest measure of this man. And know this, though I capture all he is on the canvas recording the parley outside Capustan, know this ... in that image you will see that Itkovian is not yet done.'

The soldier started.

Ormulogun grinned. 'Oh yes, warrior, I see all too well for your comfort, yes? Now Gumble, spew forth your commentary, for I know its tide is building! Come now!'

'You are mad,' the toad observed laconically. 'Forgive him, Shield Anvil, he softens his paint in his own mouth. It has poisoned his brain—'

'Poisoned, pickled, poached, yes, yes, I've heard every variation from you until I'm sick to my stomach!

'Nausea is to be expected,' the toad said with a sleepy blink. 'Shield Anvil, I am no critic. Merely a humble observer who, when able, speaks on behalf of the tongue-tied multitudes otherwise known as the commonality, or, more precisely, the rabble. An audience, understand, wholly incapable of self-realization or cogent articulation, and thus possessors of depressingly vulgar tastes when not apprised of what they truly like, if only they knew it. My meagre gift, therefore, lies in the communication of an aesthetic framework upon which most artists hang themselves.'

'Ha, slimy one! Ha! So very slimy! Here, have a fly!' Ormulogun plunged his paint-smeared fingers into a pouch at his side. He withdrew a deerfly and tossed it at the toad.
The still living but dewinged insect landed directly in front of Gumble, who lunged forward and devoured it in a pink flash. 'As I was saying—'

'A moment, if you please,' Itkovian interrupted.

'I will allow a moment,' the toad said, 'if possessing admirable brevity.'

'Thank you, sir. Ormulogun, you say it was the practice of the Emperor of Malaz to assign artists to his armies. Presumably to record historical moments. Yet is not Onearm's Host outlawed? For whom, then, do you paint?'

'A record of the outlawry is essential! Besides, I had little choice but to accompany the army. What would you have me do, paint sunsets on cobbles in Darujhistan for a living? I found myself on the wrong continent! As for the so-called community of artisans and patrons in the so-called city of Pale and their so-called styles of expression—'

'They hated you,' Gumble said.

'And I hated them! Tell me, did you see anything worthy of mention in Pale? Did you?'

'Well, there was one mosaic—'

'What?'

'Fortunately, the attributed artist was long dead, permitting my effusiveness in its praise.'

'You call that effusive? "It shows promise . . ." Isn't that what you said? You well know it's precisely what you said, as soon as that foppish host mentioned the artist was dead!'

'Actually,' Itkovian commented, 'rather droll, to say such a thing.'

'I am never droll,' the toad said.

'Though you do drool on occasion! Ha! Slimy one, yes? Ha!'

'Suck another lump of paint, will you? There, that quicksilvered white. Looks very tasty.'

'You just want me dead,' Ormulogun muttered, reaching for the small gummy piece of paint. 'So you can get effusive.'

'If you say so.'

'You're a leech, you know that? Following me around everywhere. A vulture.'

'Dear man,' Gumble sighed, 'I am a toad. While you are an artist. And for my fortune in the distinction, I daily thank every god that is and every god that ever was.'

Itkovian left them exchanging ever more elaborate insults, and continued on down the shoreline. He forgot to look at Ormulogun's canvas.

Once the armies were across the river, they would divide. The city of Lest lay directly south, four days' march, while the road to Setta angled west-southwest. Setta was at the very feet of the Vision Mountains, rising on the banks of the river from which it took its name. That same river continued on to the sea south of Lest, and would need to be crossed by both forces, eventually.

Itkovian would accompany the army that struck for Lest, which consisted of the Grey Swords, elements of Tiste Andii, the Rhivi, Ilgres Barghast, a regiment of cavalry from Saltoan, and a handful of lesser mercenary companies from North Genabackis. Caladan Brood remained in overall command, with Kallor and Korlat as his seconds. The Grey Swords were attached in the manner of an allied force, with the Shield Anvil considered Brood's equal. This distinction did not apply to the other mercenary companies, for they were one and all contracted to the warlord. The Daru, Gruntle, and his motley followers were being viewed as wholly
independent, welcome at the briefings but free to do as they pleased.

All in all, Itkovian concluded, the organization of the command was confused, the hierarchies of rank ephemeral. *Not unlike our circumstances in Capustan, with the prince and the Mask Council ever muddying the waters. Perhaps this is a characteristic of the north and its independent city-States – before the Malazan invasion forced them into a confederacy of sorts, that is. And even then, it seemed, old rivalries and feuds perennially undermined the unification, to the invaders' advantage.*

The structure imposed by the Malazan High Fist upon those forces accompanying him was far clearer in its hierarchy. The imperial way was instantly recognizable to Itkovian, and indeed was similar to what he would have established, were he in Dujek Onearm's place. The High Fist commanded. His seconds were Whiskeyjack and Humbrall Taur – the latter displaying his wisdom by insisting upon Dujek's pre-eminence – as well as the commander of the Black Moranth, whom Itkovian had yet to meet. These three were considered equal in rank, yet distinct in their responsibilities.

Itkovian heard horse hooves and turned to see the Malazan second, Whiskeyjack, riding towards him along the strand. That he had paused to speak with the artist was evident in Ormulogun's hastily gathering up his supplies in the soldier's wake.

Whiskeyjack reined in. 'Good day to you, Itkovian.'

'And to you, sir. Is there something you wish of me?'

The bearded soldier shrugged, scanning the area. 'I am looking for Silverfox. Her, or the two marines who are supposed to be accompanying her.'

'Following her, you no doubt mean. They passed me earlier, first Silverfox, then the two soldiers. Riding east.'

'Did any of them speak with you?'

'No. They rode at some distance from me, so courtesies were not expected. Nor did I endeavour to hail them.'

The commander grimaced.

'Is something wrong, sir?'

'Quick Ben's been using his warrens to assist in the crossing. Our forces are on the other side and are ready to march, since we've the longer road.'

'Indeed. Is Silverfox not of the Rhivi, however? Or do you simply wish to make formal your goodbye?'

His frown deepened. 'She's as much Malazan as Rhivi. I would ask her to choose whom to accompany.'

'Perhaps she has, sir.'

'Maybe not,' Whiskeyjack replied, eyes now fixed on something to the east.

Itkovian turned, but since he was on foot it was a moment longer before the two riders came into his line of sight. The marines, approaching at a steady canter.

They drew up before their commander.

'Where is she?' Whiskeyjack asked.

The marine on the right shrugged. 'We followed her to the coast. Above the tide-line was a row of lumpy hills surrounded by swampy ditches. She rode into one of the hills, Whiskeyjack—'

'Rode into the side of one of 'em,' the other elaborated. 'Vanished. Not a pause nor a stumble from her horse. We rode up to the spot but there was nothing there but grass, mud and rocks. We've lost her, which is, I guess, what she wanted.'
The commander was silent.

Itkovian had expected a heartfelt curse at the very least, and was impressed at the man's self-control.

'All right. Ride back with me. We're crossing to the other side.'

'We saw Gumble's pet on the way out.'

'I've already sent him and Ormulogun back. Theirs is the last wagon, and you well know Ormulogun's instructions regarding his collection.'

The marines nodded.

Itkovian asked, 'His collection? How many scenes has he painted since Pale?'

'Since Pale?' one of the marines grinned. 'There's over eight hundred stretches in that wagon. Ten, eleven years' worth. Dujek here, Dujek there, Dujek even where he wasn't but should have been. He's already done one of the siege of Capustan, with Dujek arriving in the nick of time, tall in his saddle and coming through the gate. There's one White Face Barghast crouching in the gate's shadow, looting a dead Pannion. And in the storm clouds over the scene you'll make out Laseen's face if you look carefully enough—'

'Enough,' Whiskeyjack growled. 'Your words give offence, soldier. The man before you is Itkovian.'

The marine's grin broadened but she said nothing.

'We know that, sir,' the other one said. 'Which is why my comrade here was teasing him. Itkovian, there's no such painting. Ormulogun is the Host's historian, since we ain't got any other, and he's charged on pain of death to keep things accurate, right down to the nosehairs.'

'Ride,' Whiskeyjack told them. 'I would a private word with Itkovian.'

'Aye, sir.'

The two marines departed.

'Apologies, Itkovian—'

'No need, sir. There is welcome relief to such irreverence. In fact, it pleases me that they would display such comfort.'

'Well, they're only like that with people they respect, though it's often taken as the opposite, which can lead to all sorts of trouble.'

'So I would imagine.'

'Well,' Whiskeyjack said gruffly, then surprised Itkovian by dismounting, stepping up to him and holding out his gauntleted hand. 'Among the soldiers of the Empire,' he said, 'where the worn gauntlet is for war and nothing other than war, to remain gauntleted when grasping the hand of another, in peace, is the rarest of gestures.'

'So it, too, is often misunderstood,' Itkovian said. 'I, sir, do not miscomprehend the significance, and so am honoured.' He grasped the commander's hand. 'You accord me far too much—'

'I do not, Itkovian. I only wish you were travelling with us, so that I could come to know you better.'

'Yet we will meet at Maurik, sir.'

Whiskeyjack nodded. 'Until then, Itkovian.'

They released their grips. The commander swung himself back into the saddle and gathered the reins. He hesitated, then said, 'Are all Elin like you, Itkovian?'
He shrugged. 'I am not unique.'

'Then 'ware the Empress the day her legions assail your homeland's borders.'

His brows rose. 'And come that day, will you be commanding those legions?'

Whiskeyjack grinned. 'Go well, sir.'

Itkovian watched the man ride away, down the strand, his horse's hooves kicking up green clumps of sand. He had a sudden, inexplicable conviction that they would never see each other again. After a moment, he shook his head to dispel the dread thought.

'Well, of course Kruppe will bless this company with his presence!'

'You misunderstood,' Quick Ben sighed. 'That was only a question, not an invitation.'

'Poor wizard is weary, yes? So many paths of sorcery to take the place of mundane barges plagued with leaky lack of integrity. None the less, Kruppe is impressed with your prowess – such a dance of warrens rarely if ever before witnessed by humble self. And each one pristine! As if to say faugh! to the foolish one in chains! Such a bold challenge! Such a—'

'Oh, be quiet! Please!' Quick Ben stood on the river's north shore. Mud covered his leggings to mid-thigh, the price for minimizing as much as possible the distance of the paths he had fashioned for the columns of troops, the wagons, the livestock and the spare mounts. He only awaited the last few stragglers who'd yet to arrive, Whiskeyjack included. To make his exhaustion even more unpleasant, the spirit of Talamandas whined unceasing complaint from his invisible perch on the wizard's left shoulder.

Too much power had been unveiled here. Sufficient to draw notice. Careless, claimed the sticksnare in a whisper. Suicidal, in fact. The Crippled God cannot help but find us. Stupid bluster! And what of the Pannion Seer? A score of dread warrens all trembling to our passage! Proof of our singular efficacy against the infection! Will either of them simply sit back and do nothing in answer to what they have seen here?

'Silence,' Quick Ben muttered.

Kruppe's wiry brows rose. 'One rude command was sufficient, Kruppe haughtily assures miserable wizard!'

'Not you. Never mind. I was thinking aloud.'

'Curious habit for a mage, yes? Dangerous.'

'You think so? How about some more loudly uttered thoughts, Daru? The display is deliberate. The unveiling of power here is precisely intended to kick the hornet nests. Both of them! Clumsily massive, an appalling absence of subtlety. Thunder to those who had been expecting the almost soundless padding of a mouse's feet and its whispering tail. Now, why would I do that, do you wonder?'

'Kruppe does not wonder at all, except, perhaps, at your insisting on explaining such admirable tactics of misdirection to these squalling seagulls.'

Quick Ben scowled down at the round little man. 'Really? I had no idea I was that obvious. Maybe I should reconsider.'

'Nonsense, Wizard! Hold to your unassailable self-confidence – aye, some might well call it megalomania, but not Kruppe, for he too is in possession of unassailable self-confidence, such as only mortals are capable of and then rightfully but a mere handful the world over. You've singular company, Kruppe assures you!'

Quick Ben grinned. 'Singular? And what about these seagulls?'

Kruppe waved a plump hand. 'Pah! Lest one should land on your left shoulder, that is. Which would be another matter entirely, would it not?'
The wizard's dark eyes thinned suspiciously on the Daru at his side.

Kruppe blithely continued, 'In which case, poor ignorant bird would be witness to such potent plurality of cunning converse so as to reel confused if not mercifully constipated!'

Quick Ben blinked in startlement. 'What did you say?'

'Well sir, were we not suggesting the placement of corks? Be quiet. Shut up. Kruppe simply advised of an internal version with which seagull's ceaseless bleating complaint is silenced, indeed, stoppered up to the relief of one and all!'

Two hundred paces to their right another barge loaded with Brood's forces set out, the craft quickly drawing the lines down-current as it left the shore.

A pair of marines rode up to Quick Ben and Kruppe.

The wizard scowled at them. 'Where's Whiskeyjack?'

'On the way, Bridgeburner. Did the toad and his artist show up?'

'Just in time to take charge of their wagon, aye. They're on the other side.'

'Fancy work. We crossing the same way?'

'Well, I was thinking of dropping you halfway – when did you two last bathe?'

The women exchanged a glance, then one shrugged and said, 'Don't know. A month? Three? We've been busy.'

'And we'd rather not get wet, Wizard,' the other marine said. 'Our armour and the clothes under 'em might fall apart.'

'Kruppe asserts that would prove a sight never to be forgotten!'

'Bet your eyes'd fall out,' the soldier agreed. 'And if they didn't we'd have to help 'em along some.'

'At least our nails would be clean,' the other observed.

'Aai! Coarse women! Kruppe sought only to compliment!'

'You're the one needing a bath,' the marine said.

The Daru's expression displayed shock, then dismay. 'Outrageous notion. Sufficient layers of sweet scent applied over sufficient years, nay, decades, have resulted in a permanent and indeed impervious bouquet of gentlest fragrance.' He waved his plump, pale hands. 'A veritable aura about oneself to draw lovestruck butterflies—'

'Look like deerflies to me—'

'These are uncivil lands – yet do you see a single insect alight?'

'Well, there's a few drowned in your oily hair, now that you ask.'

'Precisely. Inimical foes one and all fall to the same fate.'

'Ah,' Quick Ben said, 'here comes Whiskeyjack. Finally. Thank the gods.'

Darkness swallowed the alley as dusk descended on the ruined city. A few oil lamps lit the major thoroughfares, and the occasional squad of Gidrath walked rounds carrying lanterns of their own.

Wrapped in a cloak hiding his full armour, Coll stood within an alcove and watched one such squad troop
past at the alley's mouth, watched as the pool of yellow light slowly dwindled, until the night once more reclaimed the street.

He stepped out and gestured.

Murillio flicked the traces, startling the oxen into motion. The wagon creaked and rocked over the cracked, heat-blasted cobbles.

Coll strode in advance, out onto the street. It had been only partially cleared of rubble. Three gutted temples were within the range of his vision, showing no indication of having been reoccupied. No different from the four others they had found earlier that afternoon.

At the moment, the prospects were grim. It seemed the only surviving priests were those in the Thrall, and that was the last place they wanted to visit. Rumour was, political rivalries had reached a volatile state, now that the Mask Council was free of the presence of powerful allies; free, as well, of a royal presence who traditionally provided a levelling influence on their excesses. The future of Capustan was not a promising one.

Coll turned to the right – northeast – waving behind him as he made his way up the street. He heard Murillio's muted cursing as he slapped the traces down onto the backs of the two oxen. The animals were tired and hungry, the wagon behind them overburdened.

_Hood take us, we might have made a terrible mistake..._

He heard the flap of a bird's wings overhead, soft and momentary, and thought nothing of it.

Deep ruts had been worn into the cobbles from the passage of countless wagons, many of them of late heavily loaded down with broken stone, but their width did not match that of the Rhivi wagon – a thick-wheeled, plains vehicle built to contest high grasses and muddy sinkholes. Nor could Murillio manage to avoid the wagon's slipping into one of the ruts, for the oxen had a grooved path of their own on this side of the street. The result was a sharply canted, awkward progress, the yokes shifted into angles that were clearly uncomfortable for the oxen.

Behind him, Coll heard one low a complaint, which ended with a strange grunt and whip of the traces. He spun in time to see Murillio's body pitching from the seat, to strike the cobbles with a bone-cracking impact.

_A huge figure, all in black, who seemed for the briefest moment to be winged, now stood atop the wagon. Murillio lay in a motionless heap beside the front wheel._

_Fear ripped through the Daru. 'What the—'_

_The figure gestured. Black sorcery bloomed from him, swept tumbling towards Coll._

_Swearing, the Daru flung himself to the right, rolled clanking, metal snapping on stone, to collide with the first half-moon step of a temple._

_But the magic flowed too wide to escape, swirling and spinning its inky power to fill the street like a flash-flood._

_Lying on his side, back jammed against the step, Coll could only throw up a forearm to cover his eyes as the sorcery loomed over him, then plunged down._

_And vanished. Blinking, Coll grunted, dropped his arm in time to see a dark, armoured figure step directly over him from behind – from the direction of the temple's entrance._

_His peripheral vision caught flanking longswords, one of them strangely bent, gliding past as the massive warrior reached the cobbles of the street._

_The attacker perched on the wagon spoke in a high voice, the tone bemused. 'You should be dead. I can feel the coldness of you. I can sense the fist of Hood, coiled there in your lifeless chest. He's kept you here. Wandering.'}_
Huh, this new arrival doesn't look very dead to me. His eyes scanned the shadows to the right of the wagon, seeking Murillio's motionless form.

'Not wandering,' the warrior rasped, still striding towards the figure. 'Hunting.'

'Us? But we've taken so few from you! Less than a score in this city. Knight of Death, has your master not fed unto bursting of late? And I but sought the unconscious hag – she lies in the bed of this wagon. Hovering at the very edge of the chasm. Surely your master—'

'Not for you,' the warrior rumbled. 'Her spirit awaits. And those of her gathered kin. And the beasts whose hearts are empty. All await. Not for you.'

The air in the alley had grown bitter cold.

'Oh, all right, then,' the attacker sighed. 'What of this driver and his guard? I could use so many pieces of them—'

'No. Korbal Broach, hear the words of my master. You are to release the undead who guard your compound. You and the one named Bauchelain are to leave the city. This night.'

'We'd planned on a morning departure, Knight of Death – for you are the Knight, yes? High House Death stirs to wakefulness, I now sense. A morning departure, yes? To follow these fascinating armies southward—'

'This night, or I shall descend upon you, and claim your souls. Do you realize the fate my master has in store for you two?'

Coll watched as the bald, pallid-faced man atop the wagon raised his arms – which then blurred, broadened into midnight wings. He giggled. 'You will have to catch us first!' The blurring became a smear, then where the man had stood there was only a bedraggled crow, cawing sharply as it rose upward, wings thrumming, and was swallowed by darkness.

The warrior walked to where Murillio lay.

Coll drew a deep breath, seeking to slow his hammering heart, then climbed painfully to his feet. 'My thanks to you, sir,' he grunted, wincing at what in the morning would be fierce bruising on his right shoulder and hip. 'Does my companion live?'

The warrior, who Coll now saw was wearing the remnants of Gidrath armour, swung to face him. 'He lives. Korbal Broach requires that they be alive ... for his work. At least at first. You are to come with me.'

'Ah, when you said hunting, that sorcerer assumed it was him you were hunting. But it wasn't, was it?'

'They are an arrogant pair.'

Coll slowly nodded. He hesitated, then said, 'Forgive me if I am being rude, but I would know what you – what your Lord – would do with us? We've an elderly woman to care for—'

'You are to have my master's protection. Come, the Temple of Hood has been prepared for your residence.'

'Not sure how I should take that. The Mhybe needs help.'

'What the Mhybe needs, Coll of Darujhistan, is not for you to give.'

'Is it for Hood to give?'

'The woman's flesh and bone must be maintained. Fed, given water, cared for. That is your responsibility.'

'You did not answer.'

'Follow me. We have not far to go.'

'At the moment,' Coll said quietly, 'I am inclined otherwise.' He reached for his sword.
The Knight of Death cocked his head. 'Tell me, Coll of Darujhistan, do you sleep?'

The Daru frowned. 'Of course. What—'

'I did once, too. I must have, yes? But now, I do not. Instead, I pace. You see, I cannot remember sleep. I cannot remember what it was like.'

'I – I am sorry for that.'

'Thus, one who does not sleep ... and, here in this wagon, one who will not awaken. I believe, Coll of Darujhistan, that we will have need of each other. Soon. This woman and I.'

'What kind of need?'

'I do not know. Come, we've not far.'

Coll slowly resheathed his sword. He could not have explained why he did so; none of his questions had been answered to his satisfaction, and the thought of entering Hood's protection chilled his skin. None the less, he nodded and said, 'A moment, if you will. I have to lift Murillio onto the bed.'

'Ah, yes. That is true. I would have done so but, alas, I find myself unable to release my swords from my own hands.' The warrior was silent a moment longer, then he said, 'Korbal Broach saw into me. His words have made my mind ... troubled. Coll of Darujhistan, I think I am dead. Am I? Am I dead?'

'I don't know,' the Daru replied, 'but... I think so.'

'The dead, it is said, do not sleep.'

Coll well knew the saying, and knew that it had originally come from Hood's own temple. He knew, as well, the wry observation that closed the quote. "While the living do not live." Not that that makes much sense.'

'It does to me,' the warrior said. 'For I now know that I have lost what I did not know I once possessed.'

Coll's mind stumbled through that statement, then he sighed. 'I'd be a fool not to take your word for it... have you a name?'

'I believe so, but I have forgotten it.'

'Well,' Coll said as he crouched down over Murillio and gathered the man into his arms, 'Knight of Death won't do, I'm afraid.' He straightened, grunting at the weight in his arms. 'You were a Gidrath, yes? And a Capan – though I admit, with that bronze hue to your skin, you've more the colouring of—'

'No, I was not Gidrath. Not Capan. I am not, I think, from this continent at all. I do not know why I appeared here. Nor how. I have not been here long. This is as my master wills. Of my past, I recall but one thing.'

Coll carried Murillio to the back of the wagon and laid the man down. 'And what's that?'

'I once stood within fire.'

After a long moment, Coll sighed roughly. 'An unfortunate memory. . .'

'There was pain. Yet I held on. Fought on. Or so I believe. I was, I think, sworn to defend a child's life. But the child was no more. It may be ... that I failed.'

'Well, we still need a name for you.'

'Perhaps one will come to you eventually, Coll of Darujhistan.'

'I promise it.'

'Or perhaps one day my memories will return in full, and with them my name.'
And if Hood has any mercy in him that day will never come, friend. For I think there was nothing easy in your life. Or in your death. And it seems he does possess mercy, for he's taken you far away from all that you once knew, for if I'm not mistaken, if only by your features and never mind that strange skin, you're Malazan.

Itkovian had crossed on the last barge, beneath a vast spread of spearpoint stars, in the company of Stonny Menackis and Gruntle and his score of barbed followers, along with a hundred or so Rhivi – mostly elders and their dogs. The animals snapped and squabbled in the confines of the flat, shallow craft, then settled down for the journey’s second half once they’d managed to fight their way to the gunnels and could look out over the river.

The dogs were the first off when the barge ground ashore on the south side, barking wildly as they splashed through the reeds, and Itkovian was glad for their departure. Only half listening to Gruntle and Stonny exchanging insults like a husband and wife who had known each other far too long, Itkovian readied his horse to await the laying down of planks, and watched with mild interest the Rhivi elders following in the wake of their dogs without heed to the shore’s churned mud and matted reeds.

The low, worn-down hills on this side of the river still held a haze of dust and dung-smoke, draped like a mourner’s veil over the army’s score thousand or more tents. Apart from a few hundred Rhivi herders and the bhederin herd they were tasked to drive across come the dawn, the entire force of the invaders was now on Pannion territory.

No-one had contested the landing. The low hills to the south seemed devoid of life, revealing naught but the worn tracks left behind by Septarch Kulpath’s besieging army.

Gruntle moved up alongside him. 'Something tells me we’ll be marching through razed land all the way down to Coral.'

'That seems likely, sir. It is as I would have done, were I the Seer.'

'I sometimes wonder if Brood and Dujek realize that the army that besieged Capustan was but one among at least three of comparable size. And while Kulpath was a particularly effective Septarch, there are six others competent enough to cause us grief.'

Itkovian pulled his gaze from the encampment ahead to study the hulking warrior at his side. 'We must assume our enemy is preparing for us. Yet, within the Domin, the last grains of the bell-glass are even now trickling down.'

Treach’s Mortal Sword grunted. 'You know something the rest of us don’t?'

'Not specifically, sir. I have but drawn conclusions based on such details as I was able to observe when viewing Kulpath’s army, and the Tenescowri.'

'Well, don’t keep them to yourself.'

Itkovian returned his gaze to the south. After a moment he sighed. 'Cities and governments are but the flowering head of a plant whose stalk is the commonalty, and it is the commonalty whose roots are within the earth, drawing the necessary sustenance that maintains the flower. The Tenescowri, sir, is the Domin’s surviving commonalty – people torn from their land, from their villages, their homes, their farms. All food production has ceased, and in its place has arisen the horror of cannibalism. The countryside before us is indeed razed, but not in answer to us. It has been a wasteland for some time, sir. Thus, while the flower still blazes its colour, it is in fact already dead.'

'Drying from a hook beneath the Crippled God’s shelf?'

Itkovian shrugged. 'Caladan Brood and the High Fist have selected cities as their destinations. Lest, Setta, Maurik and Coral. Of these, I believe only the last still lives. None of the others would be able to feed a defending army; indeed, not even its own citizenry – if any still remain. The Seer has no choice but to concentrate his forces on the one city where he now resides, and his soldiers will have no choice but to assume
the practices of the Tenescowri. I suspect that the Tenescowri were created for that eventual purpose – as food for the soldiers.'

Gruntle's expression was troubled. 'What you describe, Itkovian, is an empire that was never meant to sustain itself.'

'Unless it could continue to expand without surcease.'

'But even then, it would be alive only on its outer, ever-advancing edges, spreading out from a dead core, a core that grew with it.'

Itkovian nodded. 'Aye, sir.'

'So, if Brood and Dujek are expecting battles at Setta, Lest and Maurik, they may be in for a surprise.'

'So I believe.'

'Those Malazans will end up doing a lot of pointless marching,' Gruntle observed, 'if you're right.'

'Perhaps there are other issues sufficient to justify the division of forces, Mortal Sword.'

'Not quite as united as they would have us believe?'

'There are powerful leaders gathered within that command, sir. It is perhaps miraculous that a serious clash of wills has not yet occurred.'

Gruntle said nothing for a time.

The broad wicker platforms were being anchored in place at the front of the barge, a company of mercenaries assembling the walkway with practised efficiency.

'Let us hope, then,' he finally rumbled, 'the siege at Coral is not a long one.'

'It will not be,' Itkovian asserted. 'I predict a single attack, intended to overwhelm. A combination of soldiery and sorcery. The massive sundering of defences is the intention of the warlord and the High Fist. Both are well aware of the risks inherent in any prolonged investment.'

'Sounds messy, Itkovian.'

Stonny Menackis came up behind them, leading her horse. 'Get moving, you two – you're holding us all up and this damned barge is settling. If I get any mud on these new clothes, I will kill whoever's to blame. Barbed or otherwise.'

Itkovian smiled. 'I'd intended complimenting you on your garb—'

'The wonders of the Trygalle. Made to order by my favourite tailor in Darujhistan.'

'You seem to favour green, sir.'

'Ever seen a jaelparda?'

Itkovian nodded. 'Such snakes are known in Elingarth.'

'Deadly kissers, jaelparda. This green is a perfect match, isn't it? It'd better be. It's what I paid for and it wasn't cheap. And this pale gold – you see? Lining the cloak? Ever looked at the underbelly of a white paralt?'

'The spider?'

'The death-tickler, aye. This is the colour.'

'I could not have mistaken it for otherwise,' Itkovian replied.
'Good, I'm glad someone here understands the subtle nuances of high civilization. Now move your damned horse or what you ain't used for far too long will get introduced to the toe of my shiny new boot.'

'Yes, sir.'

Corporal Picker watched Detoran drag Hedge towards her tent. The two passed in silence along the very edge of the firepit's light. Before they vanished once more into the gloom, Picker was witness to a comic pantomime as Hedge, the skin of his face stretched taut in a wild grimace, sought to bolt in an effort to escape Detoran. She responded by reaching up to grip the man's throat and shaking his head back and forth until his struggles ceased.

After they'd disappeared, Blend grunted. 'What night thankfully hides ...'

'Not well enough, alas,' Picker muttered, poking at the fire with a splintered spear-shaft.

'Well, she'll probably be gagging him right now, then ripping off his—'

'All right all right, I take your point.'

'Poor Hedge.'

'Poor Hedge nothing, Blend. If it didn't get him going it wouldn't still be going on night after night.'

'Then again, we're soldiers one and all.'

'And what's that mean?'

'Means we know that following orders is the best way of staying alive.'

'So Hedge had better stand to attention if he wants to keep breathing? Is that what you're saying? I'd have thought terror'd leave it limp and dangling.'

'Detoran used to be a master sergeant, remember. I once saw a recruit stay at attention for a bell and a half after the poor lad's heart had burst to one of her tirades. A bell and a half, Picker, standing there dead and cold —'

'Rubbish. I was there. It was about a tenth of a bell and you know it.'

'My point still stands, and I'd bet my whole column of back pay that Hedge's is doing the same.'

Picker stabbed at the fire. 'Funny, that,' she murmured after a while.

'What is?'

'Oh, what you were saying. Not the dead recruit, but Detoran having been a master sergeant. We've all been busted about, us Bridgeburners. Almost every damned one of us, starting right up top with Whiskeyjack himself. Mallet led a healer's cadre back when we had enough healers and the Emperor was in charge. And didn't Spindle captain a company of sappers once?'

'For three days, then one of 'em stumbled onto his own cusser—'

'And then they all went up, yeah. We were a thousand paces up the road and my ears rang for days.'

'That was the end of companies made up of sappers. Dassem broke 'em up after that, meaning that Spindle had no specialist corps to captain any more. So, Picker, what about it?'

'Nothing. Just that none of us is what we once was.'

'I've never been promoted.'

'Well, surprise! You've made a profession of not getting noticed!'
'Even so. And Antsy was born a sergeant—'

'And it's stunted his growth, aye. He's never been busted down, granted, but that's because he's the worst sergeant there ever was. Keeping him one punishes all of us, starting with Antsy himself. All I was saying was, we're all of us losers.'

'Oh, that's a welcome thought, Picker.'

'And who said every thought has to be a nice one? Nobody.'

'I would, only I didn't think of it.'

'Ha. Ha.'

The slow clump of horse hooves reached them. A moment later Captain Paran came into view, leading his horse by the reins.

'Been a long day, Captain,' Picker said. 'We got some tea if you'd like.'

Paran looped the reins over the saddle horn and approached. 'Last fire left among the Bridgeburners. Don't you two ever sleep?'

'We could ask the same of you, sir,' Picker replied. 'But we all already know that sleep's for weaklings, right?'

'Depends on how peaceful it is, I'd think.'

'Captain's right on that,' Blend said to Picker.

'Well,' the corporal sniffed, 'I'm peaceful enough when I sleep.'

Blend grunted. 'That's what you think.'

'We've had word,' Paran said, accepting the cup of steaming herbal brew from Picker, 'from the Black Moranth.'

'They reconnoitred Setta.'

'Aye. There's no-one there. Not breathing, anyway. The whole city's one big necropolis.'

'So why are we still marching there?' Picker asked. 'Unless we're not...'

'We are, Corporal.'

'What for?'

'We're marching to Setta because we're not marching to Lest.'

'Well,' Blend sighed, 'I'm glad that's been cleared up.'

Paran sipped his tea, then said, 'I have elected a second.'

'A second, sir?' Picker asked. 'Why?'

'Obvious reasons. In any case, I've chosen you, Picker. You're now a lieutenant. Whiskeyjack has given his blessing. In my absence you're to command the Bridgeburners—'

'No thanks, sir.'

'It's not up for discussion, Picker. Your lieutenancy is already inscribed in the rolls. Official, with Dujek's seal on it.'

Blend nudged her. 'Congratulations – oh, I suppose I should have saluted.'
'Shut up,' Picker growled. 'But you're right on one thing – don't ever bump me again, woman.'

'That's a hard order to follow . . . sir.'

Paran drained the last of his tea and straightened. 'I've only got one order for you, Lieutenant.'

She looked up at him. 'Captain?'

'The Bridgeburners,' Paran said, and his expression was suddenly severe. 'Keep them together, no matter what happens. Together, Lieutenant.'

'Uh, yes, sir.'

They watched Paran return to his horse and lead it away.

Neither woman said much for a while thereafter, then Blend sighed. 'Let's go to bed, Picker.'

'Aye.'

They stamped out the remnants of the fire. Darkness closing around them, Blend stepped closer and hooked her arm around Picker's.

'It's all down,' she murmured, 'to what the night hides ...'

*To Hood it is. It's all down to what the captain was saying behind what he said. That's what I need to figure out. Something tells me it's the end of sleeping peacefully for Lieutenant Picker . . .*

They strode from the dying embers and were swallowed by darkness.

Moments later, no movement was visible, the stars casting their faint silver light down on the camp of the Bridgeburners. The oft-patched tents were colourless in the dull, spectral glow. A scene that was ghostly and strangely timeless. Revealing its own kind of peace.

Whiskeyjack entered Dujek's command tent. As expected, the High Fist was prepared for him. Hooded lantern on camp table, two tankards of ale and a block of Gadrobi goat cheese. Dujek himself sat in one of the chairs, head lowered in sleep.

'High Fist,' Whiskeyjack said as he removed his gauntlets, eyes on the ale and cheese.

The old commander grunted, sat straighter, blinking. 'Right.'

'We've lost her.'

'Too bad. You must be hungry, so I – oh, good. Keep filling your mouth and leave the talking to me, then.' He leaned forward and retrieved his tankard. 'Artanthos found Paran and delivered the orders. So, the captain will get the Bridgeburners ready – ready for what, they won't know and that's probably for the best. As for Paran himself, all right, Quick Ben convinced me. Too bad, that, though I'll be honest and say as far as I can see we'll miss the wizard more than we will that noble-born lad—'

Holding up one hand to stop Dujek, Whiskeyjack washed down the last of the cheese with a mouthful of ale.

The High Fist sighed, waited.

'Dujek—'

'Comb the crumbs from your beard,' the High Fist growled, 'since I expect you'll want me to take you seriously.'

'A word on Paran. With the loss of Tatter— of Silverfox, I mean, the captain's value to us can't be overestimated. No, not just us. The Empire itself. Quick Ben's been adamant on this. Paran is the Master of the Deck. Within him is the power to reshape the world, High Fist.' He paused, mulling on his own words. 'Now,
maybe there's no chance of Laseen ever regaining the man's favour, but at the very least she'd be wise to avoid making the relationship worse.'

Dujek's brows lifted. 'I'll so advise her the next time I see her.'

'All right. Sorry. No doubt the Empress is cognizant—'

'No doubt. As I was saying, however, it's the loss of Quick Ben that stings the most. From my own point of view, that is.'

'Well, sir, what the wizard has in mind ... uh, I agree with him that the less Brood and company know of it the better. So long as the division of forces proceeds as planned, they'll have no reason but to believe that Quick Ben marches in step with the rest of us.'

'The wizard's madness—'

'High Fist, the wizard's madness has saved our skins more than once. Not just mine and the Bridgeburners', but yours as well—'

'I am well aware of that, Whiskeyjack. Forgive an old man his fears, please. It was Brood and Rake and the Tiste Andii – and the damned Elder Gods, as well – who were supposed to step into the Crippled God's path. They're the ones with countless warrens and frightening levels of potency – not us, not one mortal squad wizard and a young noble-born captain who's already died once. Even if they don't mess things up, look at the enemies we'll acquire.'

'Assuming our present allies are so short-sighted as to fail to comprehend.'

'Whiskeyjack, we're the Malazans, remember? Nothing we do is ever supposed to reveal a hint of our long-term plans – mortal empires aren't supposed to think that far ahead. And we're damned good at following that principle, you and I. Hood take me, Laseen inverted the command structure for a reason, you know.'

'So the right people would be there at ground level when Shadowthrone and Cotillion made their move, aye.'

'Not just them, Whiskeyjack.'

'This should be made known to Quick Ben – to all of the Bridgeburners, in fact.'

'No. In any case, don't you think your wizard's figured things out yet?'

'If so, then why did he send Kalam after the Empress?'

'Because Kalam needs to be convinced in person, that's why. Face to face with the Empress. Quick Ben knew that.'

'Then I must be the only thick-witted one in this entire imperial game,' Whiskeyjack sighed.

'Maybe the only truly honourable one, at any rate. Look, we knew the Crippled God was getting ready to make a move. We knew the gods would make a mess of things. Granted, we didn't anticipate the Elder Gods getting involved, but that's neither here nor there, is it? The point was, we knew trouble was coming. From more than one direction – but how could we have guessed that what was going on in the Pannion Domin was in any way related to the efforts of the Crippled God?'

'Even so, I don't think it was entirely chance that it was a couple of Bridgeburners who bumped into that agent of the Chained One – that sickly artisan from Darujhistan; nor that Quick Ben was there to confirm the arrival of the House of Chains. Laseen has always understood the value of tactical placement yielding results – Hood knows, she taught that to the Emperor, not the other way round. The Crippled God's pocket-warren wanders – it always has. That it wandered to the hills between Pale and Darujhistan was an opportunity the Crippled God could not pass up – if he was going to do anything, he had to act. And we caught him. Maybe not in a way we'd anticipated, but we caught him.'

'Well enough,' Whiskeyjack muttered.
'As for Paran, there's a certain logic there, as well. Tayschrenn was grooming Tattersail to the role of Mistress of the Deck, after all. And when that went wrong, well, there was a residual effect - straight to the man closest to her at the time. Not physically, but certainly spiritually. In all this, Whiskeyjack - if we look on things in retrospect - the only truly thick-witted player was Bellurdan Skullcrusher. We'll never know what happened between him and Tattersail on that plain, but by the Abyss it ranks as one of the worst foul-ups in imperial history. That the role of Master of the Deck fell to a Malazan and not to some Gadrobi herder who'd happened to be nearby, well, Oponn's luck played into our hands there, and that's about all we can say of that, I think.'

'Now I'm the one who's worried,' Whiskeyjack said. 'We've been too clever by far, leaving me wondering who's manipulating whom. We're playing shadowgames with the Lord of Shadow, rattling the chains of the Crippled God, and now buying Brood more time without him even knowing it, whilst at the same time defying the T'lan Imass, or at least intending to ...'

'Opportunity, Whiskeyjack. Hesitation is fatal. When you find yourself in the middle of a wide, raging river, there's only one direction to swim in. It's up to us to keep Laseen's head above water - and through her, the Malazan Empire. If Brood swings his hammer in Burn's name - we drown, all of us. Law, order, peace - civilization, all gone.'

'So, to keep Brood from doing that, we sacrifice ourselves by challenging the Crippled God. Us, one damned weary army already decimated by one of Laseen's panics.'

'Best forgive her her panics, Whiskeyjack. Shows she's mortal, after all.'

'Virtually wiping out the Bridgeburners at Pale—'

'Was an accident and while you didn't know it at the time, you know it now. Tayschrenn ordered them to remain in the tunnels because he thought it was the safest place. The safest.'

'Seemed more like someone wanted us to be a collateral fatality,' Whiskeyjack said. No, not us. Me. Damn you, Dujek, you lead me to suspect you knew more of that than I'd hoped. Beru fend, I hope I'm wrong. . .' And with what happened at Darujhistan—'

'What happened at Darujhistan was a mess. Miscommunication on all sides. It was too soon after the Siege of Pale - too soon for all of us.'

'So I wasn't the only one rattled, then.'

'At Pale? No. Hood take us, we all were. That battle didn't go as planned. Tayschrenn really believed he could take down Moon's Spawn -- and force Rake into the open. And had he not been left virtually on his own in the attack, things might well have turned out differently. From what I learned later, Tayschrenn didn't know at the time who Nightchill really was, but he knew she was closing in on Rake's sword. Her and Bellurdan, who she was using to do her research for her. It looked like a play for power, a private one, and Laseen wasn't prepared to permit that. And even then, Tayschrenn only hit her when she took out A'Karonys -- the very High Mage who came to Tayschrenn with his suspicions about her. When I said Bellurdan killing Tattersail was the worst foul-up in Malazan history, that day at Pale runs a close second.'

'There have been more than a few lately ...'

Dujek slowly nodded, his eyes glittering in the lantern light. 'All starting, I'd say, with the T'lan Imass slaughtering the citizens of Aren. But, as even with that one, each disaster yields its truths. Laseen didn't give that order, but someone did. Someone returned to sit down in that First Throne -- and that someone was supposed to be dead -- and he used the T'lan Imass to wreak vengeance on Laseen, to shake her grip on the Empire. Lo, the first hint that Emperor Kellanved wasn't quite as dead as we would have liked.'

'And still insane, aye. Dujek, I think we're heading for another disaster.'

'I hope you're wrong. In any case, I was the one who needed his confidence boosted tonight, not you.'

'Well, I guess that's the price of inverted commands ...'
'For all that I've been saying, a new observation comes to me, Whiskeyjack, and it's not a pleasant one.'

'And that is?'

'I'm beginning to think we're not half as sure of what we're up to as we think we are.'

'Who's "we"?'

'The empire. Laseen. Tayschrenn. As for you and I, well, we're the least of the players and what little we know isn't even close to what we need to know. We stepped up to the assault on Moon's Spawn at Pale knowing virtually nothing of what was really going on. And if I hadn't cornered Tayschrenn after, we still wouldn't.'

Whiskeyjack studied the dregs of ale in the tankard in his hands. 'Quick Ben's smart,' he murmured. 'I can't really say how much he's worked out. He can get pretty cagey at times.'

'He's still willing, surely?'

'Oh yes. And he's made it plain that he has acquired a powerful faith in Ganoes Paran. In this new Master of the Deck.'

'Does that strike you as odd, then?'

'A little. Paran has been used by a god. He's walked within the sword, Dragnipur. He has the blood of a Hound of Shadow in his veins. And none of us know what changes such things have wrought in him, or even what they portend. He's been anything but predictable, and he's almost impossible to manage – oh, he'll follow orders I give him, but I think if Laseen believes she can use him, she might be in for a surprise.'

'You like the man, don't you?'

'I admire him, Dujek. For his resilience, for his ability to examine himself with a courage that is ruthless, and, most of all, for his inherent humanity.'

'Sufficient to warrant faith, I'd say.'

Whiskeyjack grimaced. 'Stabbed by my own sword.'

'Better than than someone else's.'

'I'm thinking of retiring, Dujek. When this war is finished.'

'I'd guessed as much, friend.'

Whiskeyjack looked up. 'You think she'll let me?'

'I don't think we should give her the choice.'

'Shall I drown like Crust and Urko did? Shall I be seen to be slain then have my body vanish like Dassem did?'

'Assuming none of those really happened—'

'Dujek—'

'All right, but some doubt still remains, you have to admit.'

'I don't share it, and one day I'll track down Duiker and force the truth from him – if anyone knows, it's that cranky historian.'

'Has Quick Ben heard from Kalam yet?'

'He's not told me so if he has.'
'Where's your wizard right now?'
'I last saw him jawing with those Trygalle traders.'
'The man should be getting some sleep, with what's coming.'
Whiskeyjack set down the tankard and rose. 'So should we, old friend,' he said, wincing as he settled too much weight on his bad leg. 'When are the Black Moranth arriving?'
'Two nights hence.'
Whiskeyjack grunted, then swung towards the tent's exit. 'Good night, Dujek.'
'And to you, Whiskeyjack. Oh, one last thing.'
'Yes?'
'Tayschrenn. He's been wanting to apologize to you. For what happened to the Bridgeburners.'
'He knows where to find me, Dujek.'
'He wants a proper moment.'
'What's proper?'
'I'm not sure, but it hasn't happened yet.'
Whiskeyjack said nothing for a half-dozen heartbeats, then he reached for the tent flap. 'See you in the morning, Dujek.'
'Aye,' the High Fist replied.

As Whiskeyjack made his way towards his own tent he saw a tall, dark-robed figure standing before it. He smiled as he approached. 'I'd missed you.'
'And I you,' Korlat responded.
'Brood's been keeping you busy. Come inside, it'll only be a moment before I get the lantern lit.'
He heard her sighing behind him as they entered the tent. 'I'd rather you didn't bother.'
'Well, you can see in the dark, but—'
She drew him round and settled against him, murmured, 'If there is to be a conversation, keep it short, please. What I desire is not answered by words.'
He closed his arms around her. 'I'd only wondered if you'd found Silverfox.'
'No. It seems she is able to travel paths I did not think still existed. Instead, two of her undead wolves arrived... to escort me home. They are... unusual.'
Whiskeyjack thought back to when he'd first seen the T'lan Ay, rising as dust from the yellow grasses, finding their bestial shapes until the hills on all sides were covered. 'I know. There's something strangely disproportionate about them—'
'Yes, you are right. They jar the eye. Too long limbs, too large shoulders, yet short-necked and wide-jawed. But there is more than just their physical appearance that I found... alarming.'
'More so than the T'lan Imass?' She nodded. 'There is, within the T'lan Imass, an emptiness, as of a smoke-blackened cavity. But not with the
t'lan ay. within these Wolves ... I see sorrow. eternal sorrow...

she shivered in his arms. whiskeyjack said nothing. you see in their eyes, dear lover, what I see in yours. and it is the reflection – the recognition – that has shaken you so.

'at the camp's edge,' korlat went on, 'they fell to dust. one moment trotting on either side, then ... gone. I don't know why, but that disturbed me more than anything else.'

Because it is what awaits all of us. Even you, korlat. 'this conversation was supposed to be short. it ends now. come to bed, lass.'

she looked into his eyes. 'and after tonight?'

he grimaced. 'it may be a while, aye.'

'crone has returned.'

'has she now?'

korlat nodded. she was about to say more, then hesitated, searching his eyes, and said nothing.

Setta, Lest, Maurik. the cities were empty. yet the armies were dividing none the less. and neither would speak of why. both sides of the alliance had things to hide, secrets to maintain, and the closer they got to Coral the more problematic it became maintaining those secrets.

most of the tiste Andii have vanished. gone with rake, probably to Moon's Spawn. but where is Moon's Spawn? and what in hood's name are they planning? will we arrive at Coral only to find the city already fallen, the Pannion Seer dead – his soul taken by Dragnipur – and that massive mountain hanging overhead?

the Black Moranth have searched for that damned floating rock . . . to no avail.

and then there are our secrets. we're sending paran and the Bridgeburners ahead; hood take us, we're doing a lot more than that.

This is an unwelcome play for power, now imminent – we all knew it was coming. Setta, Lest, Maurik. The subtle game is no longer subtle.

'my heart is yours, korlat,' whiskeyjack said to the woman in his arms. 'nothing else matters to me. nothing – no-one.'

'please – do not apologize for what has not even happened yet. don't talk about it at all.'

'I didn't think I was, lass.' Liar. You were. In your own way. You were apologizing.

she accepted the lie with a wry smile. 'very well.'

later, whiskeyjack would think back on his words, and wish that they had been cleaner – devoid of hidden intent.

Eyes grainy from lack of sleep, paran watched quick ben close his conversation with haradas then leave the company of the trygalle trader to rejoin the captain.

'The sappers will howl,' paran said as the two of them resumed their walk towards the Malazan encampment, newly established on the south shore of Catlin River.

Quick Ben shrugged. 'I'll take Hedge to one side for a word or two. After all, Fiddler's closer than a brother to him, and with the mess that Fid's got into he needs all the help he can get. The only issue is whether the Trygalle can deliver the package in time.'

'They're an extraordinary lot, those traders.'
'They're insane. Doing what they're doing. Sheer audacity is the only thing that keeps them alive.'

'I'd add a certain skill for travelling inimical warrens, Quick.'

'Let us hope it's sufficient,' the wizard responded.

'It wasn't just Moranth munitions, was it?'

'No. The situation in Seven Cities couldn't be more desperate. Anyway, I've done what I could. As to its effectiveness, we'll see.'

'You're a remarkable man, Quick Ben.'

'No, I'm not. Now, best keep all this as private an affair as possible. Hedge will keep his trap shut, and so will Whiskeyjack—'

'Gentlemen! Such a lovely evening!' Both swung at the voice booming directly behind them.

'Kruppe!' Quick Ben hissed. 'You slippery—'

'Now now, Kruppe begs your indulgence. 'Twas mere happy accident that Kruppe heard your admirable words whilst almost stumbling ever so quietly on your heels, and indeed, now desires nothing else than to partake, ever so humbly, in courageous enterprise!'

'If you speak a word of this to anyone,' Quick Ben growled, 'I will slit your throat.'

The Daru withdrew his decrepit handkerchief and mopped his forehead, three quick dabs that seemed to leave the silk cloth sodden with sweat. 'Kruppe assures deadly wizard that silence is as Kruppe's closest mistress, lover unseen and unseeable, unsuspected and unmitigable. Whilst at the same time, Kruppe proclaims that the fair citizens of Darujhistan will hark to such a noble cause -- Baruk himself so assures and would do so in person were he able. Alas, he has naught but this to offer.' With that Kruppe withdrew with a flourish a small glass ball from the handkerchief, then dropped it to the ground. It broke with a soft tinkle. Mists rose, gathered knee-high between the Daru and the two Malazans, and slowly assumed the form of a bhokaral.

'Aai,' Kruppe muttered, 'such ugly, indeed visually offensive, creatures.'

'Only because you resemble them all too closely,' Quick Ben pointed out, his eyes on the apparition.

The bhokaral twisted its neck to look up at the wizard, glittering black eyes in a black, grapefruit-sized head. The creature bared its needle teeth. 'Greet! Baruk! Master! Would! Help!'

'Sadly terse effort on dear, no doubt overworked Baruk's part,' Kruppe said. 'His best conjurations display linguistic grace, if not amiable fluidity, whilst this... thing, alas, evinces—'

'Quiet, Kruppe,' Quick Ben said. He spoke to the bhokaral. 'Uncharacteristic as it sounds, I would welcome Baruk's help, but I must wonder at the alchemist's interest. This is a rebellion in Seven Cities, after all. A Malazan matter.'

The bhokaral's head bobbed. 'Yes! Baruk! Master! Raraku! Azath! Great!' The head jumped up and down again.

'Great?' Paran echoed.

'Great! Danger! Azath! Icarium! More! Coltaine! Admire! Honour! Allies! Yes! Yes?'

'Something tells me this won't be easy,' Quick Ben muttered. 'All right, let's get down to details ...'

Paran turned at the sound of an approaching rider. The figure appeared, indistinct in the starlight. The first detail the captain noted was the horse, a powerful destrier, proud and clearly short-tempered. The woman
astride the animal was by contrast unprepossessing, her armour plain and old, the face beneath the rim of the helm apparently undistinguished, middle-aged.

Her gaze flicked to Kruppe, the bhokaral and Quick Ben. Her expression unchanged, she said to Paran, 'Captain, I would a word with you in private, sir.'

'As you wish,' he replied, and led her off fifteen paces from the others. 'Private enough?'

'This will suffice,' the woman replied, reining in and dismounting. She stepped up to him. 'Sir, I am the Destriant of the Grey Swords. Your soldiers hold a prisoner and I have come to formally request that he be taken into our care.'

Paran blinked, then nodded. 'Ah, that would be Anaster, who once commanded the Tenescowri.'

'It would, sir. We are not yet done with him.'

'I see ...' He hesitated.

'Has he recovered from his wounds?'

'The lost eye? He has been treated by our healers.'

'Perhaps,' the Destriant said, 'I should deliver my request to High Fist Dujek.'

'No, that won't be necessary. I can speak on behalf of the Malazans. In that capacity, however, it's incumbent that I ask a few questions first.'

'As you wish, sir. Proceed.'

'What do you intend to do with the prisoner?'

She frowned. 'Sir?'

'We do not countenance torture, no matter what his crime. If it is required, we would be forced to extend protection over Anaster, and so deny your request.'

She glanced away briefly, then fixed her level gaze on him once more, and Paran realized she was much younger than he had at first assumed. 'Torture, sir, is a relative term.'

'Is it?'

'Please, sir, permit me to continue.'

'Very well.'

'The man, Anaster, might well view what we seek for him as torture, but that is a fear born of ignorance. He will not be harmed. Indeed, my Shield Anvil seeks the very opposite for the unfortunate man.'

'She would take the pain from him.'

The Destriant nodded.

'That spiritual embrace – such as Itkovian did to Rath'Fener.'

'Even so, sir.'

Paran was silent a moment, then he said, 'The notion terrifies Anaster?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because he knows of nothing else within him. He has equated his entire identity with the pain of his soul.'
And so fears its end.’

Paran turned towards the Malazan camp. ‘Follow me,’ he said.

‘Sir?’ she asked behind him.

‘He is yours, Destriant. With my blessing.’

She staggered then, against her horse, which grunted and sidestepped.

Paran spun. ‘What—’

The woman righted herself, lifted a hand to her brow, then shook her head. ‘I am sorry. There was ... weight... to your use of that word.’

‘My use – oh.’

_Oh. Hood’s breath, Ganoes – that was damned careless._ ‘And?’ he reluctantly asked.

‘And ... I am not sure, sir. But I think you would be well advised to, uh, exercise caution in the future.’

‘Aye, I think you’re right. Are you recovered enough to continue?’

She nodded, collecting the reins of her horse.

_Don’t think about it, Ganoes Paran. Take it as a warning and nothing more. You did nothing to Anaster – you don’t even know the man. A warning, and you’ll damn well heed it..._.


CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Glass is sand and sand is glass!
The ant dancing blind as blind ants do
on the lip of the rim and the rim of the lip.

White in the night and grey in the day –
smiling spider she never smiles but smile she does
though the ant never sees, blind as it is –

and now was!

'These bones, yes, he cannot breathe. It hurts so to breathe.

To whom?

I'd rested my hand, once, on her furred shoulder. Near the neck. We'd not yet awakened, she and I. So close, travelling in step, yet not awakened . . . such tragic ignorance. Yet she'd gifted me her mortal visions, her only history – such as she knew it to be, whilst deep in her heart slept . . .

. . . slept my beloved.

'Holy One, your mother's embrace will kill him, should he be returned to it—'

'You dare order me?' the Seer hissed, and there was trembling in his voice.

'I do not command, Holy One. I state a fact.'

'Ullentha! Dearest Septarch, come forward! Yes, look upon this man at your Seerdomin's feet. What think you?'

'Holy One,' a new voice, softer, 'my most trusted servant speaks true. This man's bones are so mangled—'

'I can see!' the Seer screamed.
'Holy One,' the Septarch continued, 'relieve him from his horror.'

'No! I will not! He is mine! He is Mother's! She needs him – someone to hold – she needs him!'

'Her love is proving fatal,' the Seerdomin said.

'You both defy me? Shall I gather my Winged Ones? To send you to oblivion? To fight and squabble over what's left? Yes? Shall I?'

'As the Holy One wills.'

'Yes, Ultentha! Precisely! As I will!'

The Seerdomin spoke. 'Shall I return him to the Matron, then, Holy One?'

'Not yet. Leave him there. I am amused by the sight of him. Now, Ultentha, your report.'

'The trenches are completed, Holy One. The enemy will come across the flats to face the city wall. They'll not send scouts to the forested ridge on their right – I will stake my soul on that.'

'You have, Ultentha, you have. And what of those damned Great Ravens? If but one has seen

'Your Winged Ones have driven them off, Holy One. The skies have been cleared, and so the enemy's intelligence is thus thwarted. We shall permit them to establish their camps on the flats, then we shall rise from our hidden positions and descend upon their flank. This, in time with the assault of the Mage Cadres from the walls and the Winged Ones from the sky, as well as Septarch Inal's sortie from the gates – Holy One, victory will be ours.'

'I want Caladan Brood. I want his hammer, delivered into my hands. I want the Malazans annihilated. I want the Barghast gods grovelling at my feet. But most of all, I want the Grey Swords! Is that understood? I want that man, Itkovian – then I will have a replacement for my mother. Thus, hear me well, if you seek mercy for Toc the Younger, bring to me Itkovian. Alive.'

'It will be as you will, Holy One,' Septarch Ultentha said.

'It will be as he wills. He is my god. What he wills, all that he wills. The wolf cannot breathe. The wolf is dying.

He – we are dying.

'And where is the enemy now, Ultentha?'

'They have indeed divided, two days past, since they crossed the river.'

'Yet are they not aware that the cities they march towards are dead?'

'So their Great Ravens must have reported, Holy One.'

'Then what are they up to?'

'We are unsure. Your Winged Ones dare not draw too close – their presence is yet to be noted, I believe, and best we keep it that way.'

'Agreed. Well, perhaps they imagine we have set traps – hidden troops, or some such thing – and fear a surprise attack from behind should they simply ignore the cities.'

'We are granted more time by their caution, Holy One.'

'They are fools, swollen with the victory at Capustan.'

'Indeed, Holy One. For which they will dearly pay.'
Everyone pays. No-one escapes. I thought I was safe. The wolf was a power unto himself, stretching awake. He was where I fled to.

But the wolf chose the wrong man, the wrong body. When he came down to take my eye – that flash of grey, burning, that I’d thought a stone – I’d been whole, young, sound.

But the Matron has me now. Old skin sloughing from her massive arms, the smell of abandoned snakepits. The twitch of her embrace – and bones break, break and break again. There has been so much pain, its thunder endless of late. I have felt her panic, as the Seer has said. This is what has taken my mind. This is what has destroyed me.

Better I had stayed destroyed. Better my memories never returned. Knowledge is no gift.

Cursed aware. Lying here on this cold floor, the softly surging waves of pain receding – I can no longer feel my legs. I smell salt. Dust and mould. There is weight on my left hand. It is pinned beneath me, and now grows numb.

I wish I could move.

‘... salt the bodies. There’s no shortage. Scurvy’s taken so many of the Tenescowri, it’s all our troops can do to gather the corpses, Holy One.’

‘Mundane diseases will not take the soldiers, Ultentha. I have seen this in a dream. The mistress walked among the Tenescowri, and lo, their flesh swelled, their fingers and toes rotted and turned black, their teeth fell out in streams of red spit. But when she came upon my chosen warriors, I saw her smile. And she turned away.’

‘Holy One,’ the Seerdomin said, ‘why would Poleil bless our cause?’

‘I know not, nor do I care. Perhaps she has had her own vision, of the glory of our triumph, or perhaps she simply begs favour. Our soldiers will be hale. And once the invaders are destroyed, we can begin our march once more, to new cities, new lands, and there grow fat on the spoils.’

The invaders . . . among them, my kin. I was Toc the Younger, a Malazan. And the Malazans are coming.

The laugh that came from his throat began softly, a liquid sound, then grew louder as it continued.

The conversation fell silent. The sound he made was the only one in the chamber.

The Seer’s voice spoke from directly above him. ‘And what amuses you so, Toc the Younger? Can you speak? Ah, haven’t I asked that once before?’

Breath wheezing, Toc answered, ‘I speak. But you do not hear me. You never hear me.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Onearm’s Host, Seer. The deadliest army the Malazan Empire has ever produced. It’s coming for you.’

‘And I should quake?’

Toc laughed again. ‘Do as you like. But your mother knows.’

‘You think she fears your stupid soldiers? I forgive your ignorance, Toc the Younger. Dear Mother, it must be explained, has ancient ... terrors. Moon’s Spawn. But let me be more precise, so as to prevent your further misunderstanding. Moon’s Spawn is now home to the Tiste Andii and their dreaded Lord, but they are as lizards in an abandoned temple. They dwell unaware of the magnificence surrounding them. Dear Mother cannot be reached by such details, alas. She is little more than instinct these days, the poor, mindless thing.

‘The Jaghut remember Moon’s Spawn. I alone am in possession of the relevant scrolls from Gothis’s Folly that whisper of the K’Chain Nah’rhu – the Short-Tails, misbegotten children of the Matrons – who fashioned mechanisms that bound sorcery in ways long lost, who built vast, floating fortresses from which they launched devastating attacks upon their long-tailed kin.’
'Oh, they lost in the end. Were destroyed. And but one floating fortress remained, damaged, abandoned to the winds. Gothos believed it had drifted north, to collide with the ice of a Jaghut winter, and was so frozen, trapped for millennia. Until found by the Tiste Andii Lord.

'Do you comprehend, Toc the Younger? Anomander Rake knows nothing of Moon's Spawn's fullest powers – powers he has no means of accessing even were he to know of them. Dear Mother remembers, or at least some part of her does. Of course, she has nothing to fear. Moon's Spawn is not within two hundred leagues of here – my Winged Ones have searched for it, high overhead, through the warrens, everywhere. The only conclusion is that Moon's Spawn has fled, or failed at last – was it not almost destroyed over Pale? So you've told me.

'So you see, Toc the Younger, your Malazan army holds no terror for any of us, including dear Mother. Onearm's Host will be crushed in the assault on Coral. As will Brood and his Rhivi. Moreover, the White Faces will be shattered – they've not the discipline for this kind of war. I will have them all. And I will feed you bits of Dujek Onearm's flesh – you'd like some meat again, wouldn't you? Something that hasn't been ... regurgitated. Yes?'

He said nothing, even as his stomach clenched in visceral greed.

The Seer crouched lower and touched a fingertip to Toc's temple. 'It's so easy breaking you. All your faiths. One by one. Almost too easy. The only salvation you can hope for is mine, Toc the Younger. You understand that now, don't you?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'Very good. Pray, then, that there is mercy in my soul. True, I've yet to find any myself, though I admit I've little searched. But perhaps it exists. Hold to that, my friend.'

'Yes.'

The Seer straightened. 'I hear my mother's cries. Take him back, Seerdomin.'

'As you command, Holy One.'

Strong arms gathered Toc the Younger, lifted him with ease from the cold floor.

He was carried from the room. In the hallway, the Seerdomin paused.

'Toc, listen to me, please. She's chained down below, and the reach does not encompass the entire room. Listen. I will set you down beyond her grasp. I will bring food, water, blankets – the Seer will pay little heed to her cries, for she is always crying these days. Nor will he probe towards her mind – there are matters of far greater import consuming him.'

'He will have you devoured, Seerdomin.'

'I was devoured long ago, Malazan.'

'I – I am sorry for that.'

The man holding him said nothing for a long moment, and when he spoke at last, his voice cracked. 'You ... you offer compassion. Abyss take me, Toc, I am ever surpassed. Allow to me, please, my small efforts—'

'With gratitude, Seerdomin.'

'Thank you.'

He set off once more.

Toc spoke. 'Tell me, Seerdomin, does the ice still grip the sea?'

'Not for at least a league, Toc. Some unexpected twist of the currents has cleared the harbour. But the storms
still rage over the bay, and the ice out there still thunders and churns like ten thousand demons at war. Can you not hear it?'

'No.'

'Aye, I'll grant you it's faint from here. From the keep's causeway, it is a veritable assault.'

'I – I remember the wind ...'

'It no longer reaches us. Yet another wayward vagary, for which I am thankful.'

'In the Matron's cave,' Toc said, 'there is no wind.'

Wood splintered, a sickening sound that trembled through the entire Meckros fragment. Lady Envy paused in her climb towards the street's ragged, torn end. The slope had grown suddenly steeper, the frost slick on the cobbles underfoot. She hissed in frustration, then drew on a warren and floated to where Lanas Tog stood on the very edge.

The T'lan Imass did not so much as sway on her perilous perch. Wind ripped at her tattered skins and bone-white hair. The swords still impaling her glistened with rime.

Reaching her side, Lady Envy saw more clearly the source of the terrible, snapping sounds. A vast section of ice had collided with them, was grinding its way along the base in a foaming sluice of jetting water and spraying ice.

'Dear me,' Lady Envy muttered. 'It seems we are ever pushed westward.'

'Yet we drive towards land none the less,' Lanas Tog replied. 'And that is sufficient.'

'Twenty leagues from Coral by this course, and all of it wilderness, assuming my memories of the region's map are accurate. I was so weary of walking, alas. Have you seen our abode yet? Apart from the canting floor and alarming views through the windows, it is quite sumptuous. I cannot abide discomfort, you know.'

The T'lan Imass made no reply, continued staring northwestward.

'You're all alike,' Lady Envy sniffed. 'It took weeks to get Tool in a conversational mood.'

'You have mentioned the name earlier. Who is Tool?'

'Onos T'oolan, First Sword. The last time I saw him, he was even more bedraggled than you, dear, so there's hope for you yet.'

'Onos T'oolan. I saw him but once.'

'The First Gathering, no doubt.'

'Yes. He spoke against the ritual.'

'So of course you hate him.'

The T'lan Imass did not immediately reply. The structure shifted wildly beneath them, their end pitching down as the floe punched clear, then lifting upward once more. There was not even a waver to Lanas Tog's stance. She spoke. 'Hate him? No. Of course I disagreed. We all did, and so he acquiesced. It is a common belief.'

Lady Envy waited, then crossed her arms and asked, 'What is?'

'That truth is proved by weight of numbers. That what the many believe to be right, must be so. When I see Onos T'oolan once more, I will tell him: he was the one who was right.'

'I don't think he holds a grudge, Lanas Tog. I suppose, thinking on it, that makes him unique among the T'lan
Imass, doesn't it?'

'He is the First Sword.'

'I have had yet another, equally frustrating conversation with Mok. I'd been wondering, you see, why he and his brothers have not challenged you to combat yet. Both Senu and Thurule have fought Tool — and lost. Mok was next. Turns out the Seguleh will not fight women, unless attacked. So, by way of warning, do not attack them.'

'I have no reason to, Lady Envy. Should I find one, however—'

'All right, I'll be more direct. Tool was hard-pressed by both Senu and Thurule. Against Mok, well, it was probably even. Are you a match to the First Sword, Lanas Tog? If you truly seek to reach the Second Gathering in one piece, to deliver your message, then show some restraint.'

Iron grated against bone as Lanas Tog shrugged.

Lady Envy sighed. 'Now, which is more depressing? Attempting civil conversation with you and the Seguleh, or staring into the suffering eyes of a wolf? I cannot even comment on Garath's mood, for the beast still seems upset with me.'

'The ay has awakened,' Lanas Tog said.

'I know, I know, and truly, my heart weeps on her behalf, or at least on behalf of the miserable goddess residing within her. Then again, they both deserve a few tears, don't they? An eternity alone for the not-quite-mortal ay cannot have been fun, after all.'

The T'lan Imass turned her head. 'Who has granted the beast this edged gift?'

Lady Envy shrugged, smiling with delight at the opportunity to return such a gesture. 'A misguided sibling who'd thought he was being kind. All right, perhaps that was too simplistic an answer. My sibling had found the goddess, terribly damaged by the Fall, and needed a warm-blooded place to lay her spirit, so that it could heal. Serendipity. The ay's pack was dead, whilst she herself was too young to survive in normal circumstances. Worse yet, she was the last left on the entire continent.'

'Your sibling has a misplaced sense of mercy, Lady Envy.'

'I agree. We have something in common after all! How wonderful!'

A moment later, as she studied the T'lan Imass at her side, her effusiveness drained away. 'Oh,' she muttered, 'what a distressing truth that proved to be.'

Lanas Tog returned her gaze to the tumultuous panorama stretching away to the northwest. 'Most truths are,'

'Well!' Lady Envy ran her hands through her hair. 'I think I'll head down and stare into a wolf's miserable eyes for a time! Just to improve my mood, you understand. You know, at least Tool had a sense of humour.'

'He is the First Sword.'

Muttering under her breath as she made her way back down the street, slippered feet barely brushing the icy cobbles, Lady Envy only paused when she reached the entrance to the house. 'Oh! That was quite funny! In an odd way. Well! How extraordinary!' Crone hopped about in a fury. Brood stood watching the Great Raven. Off to one side was Korlat. Lingering a half-dozen paces away was Kallor. The army marched in wide ranks down the raised road to their left, whilst to their right, at a distance of two thousand paces, rumbled the herd of bhederin.

There were fewer of the beasts, Korlat noted. The crossing had claimed hundreds.
A shrill hiss from Crone recaptured her wandering attention.

The Great Raven had half spread her wings, halting directly in front of the warlord. 'You still do not grasp the gravity of this! Fool! Ox! Where is Anomander Rake? Tell me! I must speak with him – warn him—'

'Of what?' Brood asked. 'That a few hundred condors have chased you away?'

'Unknown sorcery hides within those abominable vultures! We are being deliberately kept away, you brainless thug!'

'From Coral and environs,' Kallor noted drily. 'We've just come in sight of Lest, Crone. One thing at a time.'

'Stupid! Do you think they're just sitting on their hands? They're preparing—'

'Of course they are,' Kallor drawled, sneering down at the Great Raven. 'What of it?'

'What's happened to Moon's Spawn? We know what Rake planned – has it succeeded? I cannot reach it! I cannot reach him! Where is Moon's Spawn?'

No-one spoke.

Crone's head darted down. 'You know less than I! Don't you? All this is bravado! We are lost!' The Great Raven wheeled to pin Korlat with her glittering, black eyes. 'Your Lord has failed, hasn't he? And taken three-quarters of the Tiste Andii with him! Will you be enough, Korlat? Will you—'

'Crone,' Brood rumbled. 'We'd asked for word on the Malazans, not a list of your fears.'

'The Malazans? They march! What else would they do? Endless wagons on the road, dust everywhere. Closing on Setta, which is empty but for a handful of sun-withered corpses!'

Kallor grunted. 'They're making a swift passage of it, then. As if in a hurry. Warlord, there is deceit here.'

Brood scowled, crossed his arms. 'You heard the bird, Kallor. The Malazans march. Faster than we'd expected, true, but that is all.'

'You dissemble,' Kallor grated.

Ignoring him, Brood faced the Great Raven once more. 'Have your kin keep an eye on them. As for what's happening at Coral, we'll worry about that when we reach Maurik and reunite our forces. Finally, regarding your master, Anomander Rake, have faith, Crone.'

'Upon faith you hold to success? Madness! We must prepare for the worst!'

Korlat's attention drifted once more. It had been doing that a lot of late. She'd forgotten what love could do, as it threaded its roots through her entire soul, as it tugged and pulled at her thoughts, obsession ripening like seductive fruit. She felt only its life, thickening within her, claiming all she was.

Fears for her Lord and her kin seemed almost inconsequential. If truly demanded, she could attempt her warren, reach him via the paths of Kurald Galain. But there was no urgency within her to do any such thing. This war would find its own path.

Her wants were held, one and all, in the eyes of a man. A mortal, of angled, edged nobility. A man past his youth, a soul layered in scars – yet he had surrendered it to her.

Almost impossible to believe.

She recalled her first sight of him up close. She had been standing with the Mhybe and Silverfox, the child's hand in her own. He had ridden towards the place of parley at Dujek's side. A soldier whose name she had already known – as a feared enemy, whose tactical prowess had defied Brood time and again, despite the odds against the Malazan's poorly supplied, numerically weakened forces.
Even then, he had been as a lodestone to her eye.

And not just hers alone, she realized. Her Lord had called him friend. The rarity of such a thing still threatened to steal her breath. Anomander Rake, in all the time she had known him, had acknowledged but one friend, and that was Caladan Brood. And between those two men, thousands of years of shared experiences, an alliance never broken. Countless clashes, it was true, but not once a final, irretrievable sundering.

The key to that, Korlat well understood, lay in their maintaining a respectable distance from each other, punctuated by the occasional convergence.

It was, she believed, a relationship that would never be broken. And from it, after centuries, had been born a friendship.

Yet Rake had shared but a few evenings in Whiskeyjack’s company. Conversations of an unknown nature had taken place between them. And it had been enough.

Something in each of them has made them kin in spirit. Yet even I cannot see it. Anomander Rake cannot be reached out to, cannot be so much as touched – not his true self. I have never known what lies behind my Lord’s eyes. I have but sensed its vast capacity – but not the flavour of all that it contains.

But Whiskeyjack – my dear mortal lover – while I cannot see all that is within him, I can see the cost of containment. The bleeding, but not the wound. And I can see his strength – even the last time, when he was so weary . . .

Directly south, the old walls of Lest were visible. There was no sign that repairs had been made since the Pannion conquest. The air above the city was clear of smoke, empty of birds. The Rhivi scouts had reported that there was naught but a few charred bones littering the streets. There had been raised gardens once, for which Lest had been known, but the flow of water had ceased weeks past and fire had since swept through the city – even at this distance Korlat could see the dark stain of soot on the walls.

‘Devastation!’ moaned Crone. ‘This is the tale before us! All the way to Maurik. Whilst our alliance disintegrates before our eyes.’

‘It does nothing of the sort,’ rumbled Brood, his frown deepening.

‘Oh? And where is Silverfox? What has happened to the Mhybe? Why do the Grey Swords and Trake’s Legion march so far behind us? Why were the Malazans so eager to leave our sides? And now, Anomander Rake and Moon’s Spawn have vanished! The Tiste Andii—’

‘Are alive,’ Korlat cut in, her own patience frayed at last.

Crone wheeled on her. ‘Are you certain?’

Korlat nodded. Yet . . . am I? No. Shall I then seek them out? No. We shall see what is to be seen at Coral. That is all. Her gaze slowly swung westward. And you, my dear lover, thief of all my thoughts, will you ever release me?

Please. Do not. Ever.

Riding beside Gruntle, Itkovian watched the two Grey Sword outriders canter towards the Shield Anvil and Destriant.

‘Where are they coming from?’ Gruntle asked.

‘Flanking rearguard,’ Itkovian replied.

‘With news to deliver, it seems.’

‘So it appears, sir.’
'Well? Aren't you curious? They've both asked you to ride with them – if you'd said yes you'd be hearing that report right now, instead of slouching along with us riffraff. Hey, that's a thought – I could divide my legion into two companies, call one Riff and the other—'

'Oh, spare us!' Stonny snapped behind them.

Gruntle twisted in his saddle. 'How long have you been in our shadow, woman?'

'I'm never in your shadow, Gruntle. Not you, not Itkovian. Not any man. Besides, with the sun so low on our right, I'd have to be alongside you to be in your shadow, not that I would be, of course.'

'So instead,' the Mortal Sword grinned, 'you're the woman behind me.'

'And what's that supposed to mean, pig?'

'Just stating a fact, lass.'

'Really? Well, you were wrong. I was about to make my way over to the Grey Swords, only you two oafs were in the way.'

'Stonny, this ain't a road, it's a plain. How in Hood's name could we be in your way when you could ride your horse anywhere?'

'Oafs. Lazy pigs. Someone here has to be curious. That someone needs a brain, of course, which is why you'll both just trot along, wondering what those outriders are reporting, wondering and doing not a damned thing about it. Because you're both brainless. As for me—'

'As for you,' Itkovian said drily, 'you seem to be talking to us, sir. Indeed, engaged in a conversation—'

'Which has now ended!' she snapped, neck-reining her horse to the left, then launching it past them.

They watched her ride towards the other column.

After a moment, Gruntle shrugged, then said, 'Wonder what she'll hear.'

'As do I,' Itkovian replied.

They rode on, their pace steady if a little slow. Gruntle's legion marched in their wake, a rabble, clumped like sea-raiders wandering inland in search of a farmhouse to pillage. Itkovian had suggested, some time earlier, that some training might prove beneficial, to which Gruntle had grinned and said nothing.

Trake's Mortal Sword despised armies; indeed, despised anything even remotely connected to the notion of military practices. He was indifferent to discipline, and had but one officer – a Lestari soldier, fortunately – to manage his now eight-score followers: stony-eyed misfits that he'd laughingly called Trake's Legion.

Gruntle was, in every respect, Itkovian's opposite.

'Here she comes,' the Mortal Sword growled.

'She rides,' Itkovian observed, 'with much drama.'

'Aye. A fierceness not unique to sitting a saddle, from all that I've heard.'

Itkovian glanced at Gruntle. 'My apologies. I had assumed you and she—'

'A few times,' the man replied. 'When we were both drunk, alas. Her more drunk than me, I'll admit. Neither of us talk about it, generally. We stumbled onto the subject once and it turned into an argument about which of us was the more embarrassed – ah, lass! What news?'

She reined in hard, her horse's hooves kicking up dust. 'Why in Hood's name should I tell you?'

'Then why in Hood's name did you ride back to us?'
She scowled. 'I was simply returning to my position, oaf – and you, Itkovian, that had better not be a hint of a
smile I see there. If it was, I'd have to kill you.'

'Most certainly not, sir.'

'Glad to hear it.'

'So?' Gruntle asked her.

'What?'

'The news, woman!'

'Oh, that. Wonderful news, of course, it's the only kind we hear these days, right? Pleasing revelations. Happy times—'

'Stonny.'

'Old friends, Gruntle! Trundling after us about a league back. Big, bone carriage, pulled by a train that ain't
quite what it seems. Dragging a pair of flatbed wagons behind, too, loaded with junk – did I say junk? I meant
loot, of course, including more than one sun-blackened corpse. And an old man on the driver's seat. With a
mangy cat in his lap. Well, what do you know? Old friends, yes?'

Gruntle's expression had flattened, his eyes suddenly cold. 'No Buke?'

'Not even his horse. Either he's flown, or—'

The Mortal Sword wheeled his horse round and drove his heels into the beast's flanks.

Itkovian hesitated. He glanced at Stonny and was surprised to see undisguised sympathy softening her face.
Her green eyes found him. 'Catch up with him, will you?' she asked quietly.

He nodded, lowered the visor of his Malazan helm. The faintest shift in weight and a momentary brush of the
reins against his horse's neck brought the animal about.

His mount was pleased with the opportunity to stretch its legs, and given its lighter burden was able to draw
Itkovian alongside Gruntle with two-thirds of a league remaining. The Mortal Sword's horse was already
labouring.

'Sir!' Itkovian called. 'Pace, sir! Else we'll be riding double on the return!'

Gruntle hissed a curse, made as if to urge his horse yet faster, then relented, straightening in the saddle, reins
loose, as the beast's gallop slowed, fell into a canter.

'Fast trot now, sir,' Itkovian advised. 'We'll drop to a walk in a hundred paces so she can stretch her neck and
open full her air passages.'

'Sorry, Itkovian,' Gruntle said a short while later. 'There's no heat to my temper these days, but that seems to
make it all the deadlier, I'm afraid.'

'Trake would—'

'No, don't even try, friend. I've said it before. I don't give a damn what Trake wants or expects of me, and the
rest of you had best stop seeing me that way. Mortal Sword – I hate titles. I didn't even like being called captain
when I guarded caravans. I only used it so I could charge more.'

'Do you intend to attempt harm upon these travellers, sir?'

'You well know who they are.'

'I do.'
"I had a friend . . ."

"Aye, the one named Buke. I recall him. A man broken by sorrow. I once offered to take his burdens, but he refused me."

Gruntle's head snapped round at that. "You did? He did?"

Itkovian nodded. "Perhaps I should have been more ... direct."

"You should have grabbed him by the throat and done it no matter what he wanted. That's what the new Shield Anvil's done to that one-eyed First Child of the Dead Seed, Anaster, isn't it? And now the man rides at her side—"

"Rides unknowing. He is naught but a shell, sir. There was naught else within him but pain. Its taking has stolen his knowledge of himself. Would you have had that as Buke's fate as well, sir?"

The man grimaced.

Less than a third of a league remained, assuming Stonny's claim was accurate, but the roll of the eroded beach ridges reduced the line of sight, and indeed it was the sound that the carriage made, a muted clanking riding the wind, that alerted the two men to its proximity.

They crested a ridge and had to rein in quickly to avoid colliding with the train of oxen.

Emancipor Reese was wearing a broad, smudged bandage, wrapped vertically about his head, not quite covering a swollen jaw and puffy right eye. The cat in his lap screamed at the sudden arrival of the two riders, then clawed its way up the servant's chest, over the left shoulder, and onto the roof of the ghastly carriage, where it vanished into a fold of K'Chain Che'Malle bone and skin. Reese himself jumped in his seat, almost toppling from his perch before recovering his balance.

"Bathtardth! Why you do tha? Hood'th b'eth!"

"Apologies, sir," Itkovian said, 'for startling you so. You are injured—"


Itkovian frowned, glanced at Gruntle.

The Mortal Sword shrugged. 'Olive pit, maybe?'

"Aye!" Reese nodded vigorously, then winced at the motion. 'Wha you wanth?'

Gruntle drew a deep breath, then said, 'The truth, Reese. Where's Buke?'

The servant shrugged. 'Gone.'

'Did they—'

"Tho! Gone! Thlown! Thlap thlap! Unnerthan? Yeth?"

Gruntle sighed, glanced away, then slowly nodded. 'Well enough,' he said a moment later.

The carriage door opened and Bauchelain leaned out. 'Why have we stop- ah, the caravan captain ... and the Grey Sword, I believe, but where, sir, is your uniform?'

'I see no need—'

'Never mind,' Bauchelain interrupted, climbing out, 'I wasn't really interested in your answer. Well, gentlemen, you have business to discuss, perhaps? Indulge my rudeness, if you will, I am weary and short of temper of late, alas. Indeed, before you utter another word, I advise you not to irritate me. The next unpleasant interruption is likely to see my temper snap entirely, and that would be a truly fell thing, I assure you. Now, what would you with us?"
'Nothing,' Gruntle said.

The necromancer's thin, black brows rose fractionally. 'Nothing?'

'I came to enquire of Buke.'

'Buke? Who – oh yes, him. Well, the next time you see him, tell him he is fired.'

'I'll do that.'

No-one spoke for a moment, then Itkovian cleared his throat. 'Sir,' he said to Bauchelain, 'your servant has broken a tooth and appears to be in considerable discomfort. Surely, with your arts ...'

Bauchelain turned and looked up at Reese. 'Ah, that explains the head garb. I admit I'd been wondering ... a newly acquired local fashion, perhaps? But no, as it turns out. Well, Reese, it seems I must once more ask Korbal Broach to make ready for surgery – this is the third such tooth to break, yes? More olives, no doubt. If you still persist in the belief that olive pits are deadly poison, why are you so careless when eating said fruit? Ah, never mind.'

'Tho thurgery, pleath! Tho! Pleath!'

'What are you babbling about, man? Be quiet! Wipe that drool away – it's unsightly. Do you think I cannot see your pain, servant? Tears have sprung from your eyes, and you are white – deathly white. And look at you shake so – not another moment must be wasted! Korbal Broach! Come out, if you will, with your black bag! Korbal!'

The wagon rocked slightly in answer.

Gruntle swung his horse round. Itkovian followed suit.

'Until later, then, gentlemen!' Bauchelain called out behind them. 'Rest assured I am grateful for your advising me of my servant's condition. As he is equally grateful, no doubt, and were he able to speak coherently I am sure he would tell you so.'

Gruntle lifted a hand in a brusque wave.

They set off to rejoin Trake's Legion.

Neither spoke for a time, until a soft rumbling from Gruntle drew Itkovian's attention. The Mortal Sword, he saw, was laughing.

'What amuses you so, sir?'

'You, Itkovian. I expect Reese will curse your concern for the rest of his days.'

'An odd expression of gratitude that would be. Will he not be healed?'

'Oh, yes, I am sure he will, Itkovian. But here's something for you to ponder on, if you will. Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease.'

'Can you explain that?'

'Ask Emancipor Reese, the next time you see him.'

'Very well, I will do just that, sir.'

The stench of smoke clung to the walls, and sufficient old stains blotting the rugs attested to the slaughter of acolytes down hallways and in anterooms and annexes throughout the temple.

Coll wondered if Hood had been pleased to have his own children delivered unto him, within the god's own sanctified structure.
It appeared to be no easy thing to desecrate a place made sacred to death. The Daru could feel the breath of unabated power, cool and indifferent, as he sat on the stone bench outside the chamber of the sepulchre.

Murillio paced up and down the wide main hallway to his right, stepping into his line of sight then out again, over and over.

In the holy chamber beyond, the Knight of Death was preparing a place for the Mhybe. Three bells had passed since Hood's chosen servant had walked into the chamber of the sepulchre, the doors closing of their own accord behind him.

Coll waited until Murillio reappeared once more. 'He can't let go of those swords.'

Murillio paused, glanced over. 'So?'

'Well,' Coll rumbled, 'it might well take him three bells to make a bed.'

His friend's expression filled with suspicion. 'That was supposed to be funny?'

'Not entirely. I was thinking in pragmatic terms. I was trying to imagine the physical awkwardness of attempting to do anything with swords stuck to your hands. That's all.'

Murillio made to say something, changed his mind with a muttered oath, wheeled and resumed his pacing.

They had carried the Mhybe into the temple five days past, settling her into a room that had once belonged to a ranking priest. They had unloaded the wagon and stored their food and water in the cellars amidst the shards of hundreds of shattered jugs and the floor and the walls made sticky with wine, the air thick and cloying and rank as an innkeeper's apron.

Every meal since had tasted wine-soaked, reminding Coll of the almost two years he had wasted as a drunk, drowning in misery's dark waters as only a man in love with self-pity can. He would have liked to call the man he had been a stranger now, but the world had a way of spinning unnoticed, until what he'd thought he'd turned his back on suddenly faced him again.

Even worse, introspection – for him at least – was a funnel in sand, a spider waiting at the bottom. And Coll well knew he was quite capable of devouring himself.

Murillio strode into view again.

'The ant danced blind,' Coll said.

'What?'

'The old children's tale – remember it?'

'You've lost your mind, haven't you?'

'Not yet. At least I don't think so.'

'But that's just it, Coll. You wouldn't know, would you?'

He watched Murillio spin round once more, step past the wall's edge and out of sight. The world spins about us unseen. The blind dance in circles. There's no escaping what you are, and all your dreams glittered white at night, but grey in the light of day. And both are equally deadly. Who was that damned poet? The Vindictive. An orphan, he'd claimed. Wrote a thousand stories to terrify children. Was stoned by a mob in Darujhistan, which he survived. I think – that was years ago. His tales live in the streets, now. Singsong chants to accompany the games of the young.

Damnèd sinister, if you ask me.

He shook himself, seeking to clear his mind before stumbling into yet another pitfall of memory. Before she'd stolen his estate, before she'd destroyed him, Simtal had told him she carried his child. He wondered if
that child had ever existed – Simtal fought with lies where others used knives. There’d been no announcement of any birth. Though of course the chance of his missing such an announcement was pretty much certain in those days that followed his fall. But his friends would have known. Would have told him, if not then, then now ...

Murillio stepped into view.

'A moment there,' Coll growled.

'Now what? The beetle flipped on its back? The worm circling the hole?'

'A question, Murillio.'

'All right, if you insist.'

'Did you ever hear tell of a child born to Simtal?'

He watched his friend's face slowly close, the eyes narrowing. 'That is a question not to be asked in this temple, Coll.'

'I'm asking it none the less.'

'I do not think you're ready—'

'Not for you to judge and you should know better, Murillio. Dammit, I've been sitting on the Council for months! And I'm still not ready? What absurdity is—'

'All right all right! It's just this: there's only rumours.'

'Don't lie to me.'

'I'm not. There was a span of more than a few months – just after your, uh, demise – when she made no public appearance. Explained away as mourning, of course, though everyone knew—'

'Yes, I know what everyone knew. So she hid out for a time. Go on.'

'Well, we believed she was consolidating her position. Behind the scenes. Rallick was keeping an eye on her. At least I think he was. He'd know more.'

'And you two never discussed the details of what she was up to, what she looked like? Murillio—'

'Well, what would Rallick know of mothering?'

'When they're with child, their bellies swell and their breasts get bigger. I'm sure our assassin friend has seen one or two so-afflicted women on Darujhistan's streets – did he just think they were eating melons whole?'

'No need to be sarcastic, Coll. All I'm saying is, he wasn't sure.'

'What about the estate's servants? Any women who'd just given birth?'

'Rallick never mentioned—'

'My, what an observant assassin.'

'Fine!' Murillio snapped. 'Here's what I think! She had a child. She sent it away. Somewhere. She wouldn't have abandoned it, because at some point she would have wanted to use it, as a verifiable heir, as marriage-bait, whatever. Simtal was lowborn; whatever contacts she had from her past were private ones – kept from everyone but those involved, including you, as you well know. I think she sent the child that way, somewhere no-one would think of looking.'

'Almost three, now,' Coll said, slowly leaning back to rest his head against the wall. He closed his eyes. 'Three years of age ...'
Maybe so. But at the time there wasn't any way of finding—'

'You'd have needed my blood. Then Baruk…'

'Right,' Murillio snapped, 'we'd just go and bleed you one night when you were passed-out drunk.'

'Why not?'

'Because, you ox, back then, there didn't seem much point!'

'Fair enough. But I've walked a straight line for months now, Murillio.'

'Then you do it, Coll. Go to Baruk.'

'I will. Now that I know.'

'Listen, friend, I've known a lot of drunks in my time. You look at four, five months being sober and think it's eternity. But me, I see a man still brushing the puke from his clothes. A man who could get knocked right back down. I wasn't going to push – it's too soon—'

'I hear you. I don't curse your decision, Murillio. You were right to be cautious. But what I see – what I see now, that is – is a reason. Finally, a real reason to hold myself up.'

'Coll, I hope you're not thinking you can just walk into whatever household your child's being raised in and take it away—'

'Why not? It's mine.'

'And there's a place waiting for it on your mantelpiece, right?'

'You think I can't raise a child?'

'I know you can't, Coll. But, if you do this right, you can pay to see it grow up well, with opportunities that it might not otherwise have.'

'A hidden benefactor. Huh. That would be… noble.'

'Be honest: it would be convenient, Coll. Not noble, not heroic.'

'And you call yourself a friend.'

'I do.'

Coll sighed. 'And so you should, though I don't know what I've done to deserve such friendship.'

'Since I don't want to depress you further, we'll discuss that subject some other time.'

The massive stone doors to the chamber of the sepulchre swung open.

Grunting, Coll rose from the bench.

The Knight of Death stepped into the hallway to stand directly before Murillio. 'Bring the woman,' the warrior said. 'The preparations are complete.'

Coll strode to the entrance and looked within. A large hole had been carved through the floor's solid stone in the centre of the chamber. Shattered stone rose in heaps banked against a side wall. Suddenly chilled, the Daru pushed past the Knight of Death. 'Hood's breath!' he exclaimed. 'That's a damned sarcophagus!'

'What?' Murillio cried, rushing to join Coll. He stared at the burial pit, then spun to the Knight. 'The Mhybe's not dead, you fool!'

The warrior's lifeless eyes fixed on Coll's companion. 'The preparations,' he said, 'are complete.'
Ankle-deep in dust, she stumbled across a wasteland. The tundra had disintegrated, and with it the hunters, the
demonic pursuers who had been such unwelcome company for so long. The desolation surrounding her was,
she realized, far worse. No grasses underfoot, no sweet cool wind. The hum of the blackflies was gone, those
avid companions so eager to feed on her flesh – though her scalp still crawled as if some had survived the
devastation.

And she was weakening, her youthful muscles failing in some undefinable way. Not weariness alone, but
some kind of chronic dissolution. She was losing her substantiality, and that realization was the most terrifying
of all.

The sky overhead was colourless, devoid of cloud or even sun, yet faintly illuminated by some unseen source.
It seemed impossibly distant – to look upward for too long was to risk madness, mind railing at its inability to
comprehend what the eyes were seeing.

So she held her gaze fixed directly ahead as she staggered on. There was nothing to mark the horizon in any
direction. She might well be walking in circles for all she knew, though if so it was a vast circle, for she'd yet to
cross her own path. She had no destination in mind for this journey of the spirit; nor the will to seek to fashion
one in this deathly dreamscape, had she known how.

Her lungs ached, as if they too were losing their ability to function. Before long, she believed, she herself
would begin to dissolve, this young body defeated in a way that was opposite to what she had feared for so
long. She would not be torn to pieces by wolves. The wolves were gone. No, she knew now that nothing had
been as it had seemed – it had all been something different, something secret, a riddle she'd yet to work out.
And now it was too late. Oblivion had come for her.

The Abyss she had seen in her nightmares of so long ago had been a place of chaos, of frenzied feeding on
souls, of miasmic memories detached and flung on storm winds. Perhaps those visions had been the products of
her own mind, after all. The true Abyss was what she was now seeing, on all sides, in every direction—

Something broke the horizon’s flat line, something monstrous and crouched, bestial, off to her right. It had
not been there a moment ago.

Or perhaps it had. Perhaps this world itself was shrinking, and her few frail steps had unveiled what lay
beyond the land's curvature.

He moaned in sudden terror, even as her steps shifted direction, drew her towards the apparition.

It grew visibly larger with every stride she took, swelled horribly until it claimed a third of the sky. Pink-
Streaked, raw bones, rising upward, a cage of ribs, each rib scarred, knotted with malignant growths,
calcifications, porous nodes, cracks, twists and fissures. Between each bone, skin was stretched, enclosing
whatever lay within. Blood vessels spanned the skin, pulsing like red lightning, flickering and dimming before
her eyes.

For this, the storm of life was passing. For this, and for her as well.

'Are you mine?' she asked in a rasping voice as she stumbled to within twenty paces of the ghastly cage.
'Does my heart lie inside? Slowing with each beat? Are you me?'

Emotions suddenly assailed her – feelings that were not her own, but came from whatever lay within the

She wanted to flee.

Yet it sensed her. It demanded that she stay.

That she come closer.

Close enough to reach out.
To touch.

The Mhybe screamed. She was in a cloud of dust that clawed her eyes blind, on her knees suddenly, feeling as if she was being torn apart – her spirit, her every instinct for survival rearing up one last time. To resist the summons. To flee.

But she could not move.

And then the force reached out. It began to pull.

And the land beneath her shifted, tilted. The dust slicked. The dust became as glass.

On her hands and knees, she looked up through streaming eyes, the scene dancing before her.

The ribs were ribs no longer. They were legs.
And skin was not skin. It had become a web.

And she was sliding.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Were the Black Moranth a loquacious people, the history of Achievant Twist would be known. And were it known, from what preceded first mention of him following the alliance with the Malazan Empire; his sojourn during the Genabackan Campaigns of that same empire; and of his life within the Moranth Hegemony itself – one cannot but suspect that the tale would be worthy of more than one legend.

Lost Heroes
Badark of Nathii

The vision mountains loomed dark and massive, blotting the stars to the west. Her back to the vertical root wall of a toppled tree, Corporal Picker drew her rain cloak tighter against the chill. On her left, the distant walls of Setta formed a ragged black line on the other side of the starlit river. The city had proved closer to the mountains and to the river than the maps had indicated, which had been a good thing.

Her gaze remained fixed on the path below, straining in search of the first smudge of motion. At least the rain had passed, though mist had begun to gather. She listened to the drip of water from the pine boughs on all sides.

A boot squelched in mossy mud, then grated on granite. Picker glanced over, nodded, then returned her attention to the trail.

'Expect a while yet,' Captain Paran murmured. 'They've considerable ground to cover.'

'Aye,' Picker agreed. 'Only Blend runs a fast point, sir. She has eyes like a cat.'

'Let's hope she doesn't leave the others behind, then.'

'She won't.' She'd better not.

Paran slowly crouched at her side. 'I suppose we could have flown directly over the city and saved ourselves the trouble of checking it out on foot.'

'And if there'd been watchers they'd have seen us. No need to second guess yourself, Captain. We don't know what the Pannion Seer's got for eyes in this land, but we'd be fools to think we were entirely alone. We're already risking big with thinking we can travel at night and not be detected.'

'Quick Ben says it's the condors and nothing else, Lieutenant, and they only take to the sky during the day. So long as we keep under cover when the sun's out, we should be able to pull this off.'

Picker slowly nodded in the darkness. 'Spindle agrees. So do Bluepearl and Shank and Toes. Captain, with us and just us Bridgeburners frog-hopping with the Black Moranth, I'd have little concern. But since we're flying point on—'

'Shh – there, down below. Saw something.'

Blend was her usual admirable self, moving like a shadow, vanishing entirely for one, two, three heartbeats, then reappearing ten paces closer, zigzagging her way to where Picker and Paran waited.

Though neither officer had moved nor made a sound, Blend had somehow found them. Her teeth flashed white as she squatted down in front of them.

'Very impressive,' Paran muttered. 'Are you here to report or will you leave that to the man who's supposed to be doing that? Unless, of course, you've left Antsy and the rest stumbling lost half a league in your wake.'

The smile disappeared. 'Uh, no sir, they're about thirty paces back – can't you hear 'em? There, that was
Spindle – his hairshirt snagging on a branch. And those steps out front – that's Antsy, he's bandy-legged, walks like an ape. Those clunks? Hedge. The quietest one of the lot is Detoran, oddly enough.'

'You making this up, soldier?' Paran asked. 'Because I don't hear a thing.'

'No, sir,' Blend said innocently.

Picker wanted to reach out and cuff the woman. 'Go down and find them, Blend,' she growled. If they're that loud they've lost the trail, you idiot. Not that they are. Not that they have. Paran stuck you right sharp and you don't like it. Fine. 'Now.'

'Aye, Lieutenant.' Blend sighed.

They watched her slither and slide her way back down to the path, then vanish.

Paran grunted. 'She almost had me there.'

Picker glanced over. 'She thinks she's done just that.'

'That's right, she does.'

She said nothing, then grinned. Damn, I think you're our captain now. Finally, we found a good one.

'Here they come,' Paran observed.

They were a match to Blend, or close enough to make little difference. Flowing silent, weapons bound, armour muffled. They watched Antsy raise a hand, halt those following with a gesture, then inscribe a circle in the air with his index finger. The squads dispersed to the sides, each one seeking a place of cover. The patrol was done.

The sergeant made his way up to where Paran and Picker waited.

Before he arrived, Quick Ben slipped down to join the two officers. 'Captain,' he said under his breath, 'I've been talking with Twist's second.'

'And?'

'And the Moranth is worried, sir. About his commander – that killer infection's moved up past the shoulder. Twist only has a few weeks left, and he's living with a lot of pain right now – Hood knows how he stays in control.'

'All right,' Paran sighed. 'We'll resume conversation on that subject later. Let's hear Antsy now.'

'Right.'

The sergeant arrived, settled down in front of them. Picker handed him a flask and he took it, swallowed a half-dozen mouthfuls of wine, handed it back. Antsy cleared both nostrils with explosive snorts, then wiped his moustache and spent another few moments grooming and patting it down.

'If you start washing your armpits next,' Paran warned, 'I'll kill you. Once I get over the nausea, that is. So you've visited Setta – what did you see, Sergeant?'

'Uh, yes, sir, Captain. Setta. A ghost city, damned eerie. All those empty streets, empty buildings, feast-piles —'

'Feast what?'

'Feast-piles. In the squares. Big mounds of burnt bone and ash. Human. Feast-piles. Oh, and huge birds' nests on the city's four towers – Blend climbed close to one.'

'She did?'
'Well, closer, anyway. We'd noticed the guano on the tower sides when the sun's light was still clinging up high. Anyway, there's those mountain vultures bedded down in them.'

Quick Ben cursed. 'And Blend's sure she wasn't seen?'

'Absolutely, Wizard. You know Blend. We kept to blocking lines of sight just in case, which wasn't easy – those towers were well placed. But those birds had bedded down for real.'

'See any Great Ravens?' Quick Ben enquired.

The sergeant blinked. 'No. Why?'

'Nothing. But the rule holds – trust nothing in the sky, Antsy. Be sure everyone knows and remembers that, right?'

'Aye, as you say, Wizard.'

'Anything else?' Paran asked.

Antsy shrugged. 'No, not a thing. Setta's dead as dead gets. Maurik's probably the same.'

'Never mind Maurik,' Paran said. 'We're bypassing Maurik.'

He had Picker's fullest attention with that. 'Just us, Captain?'

'We're flying point all the way,' Quick Ben answered.

Antsy growled something under his breath.

'Speak clearly, Sergeant,' Paran ordered.

'Nothing, sir.'

'Let's have it, Antsy.'

'Well, just Hedge and Spindle and the other sappers, Captain. Been complaining about that missing crate of munitions – they were expecting to get resupplied, at Maurik. They'll squeal, sir.'

Picker saw Paran glance at Quick Ben.

The wizard scowled. 'I forgot to have a word with Hedge. Sorry. I'll get right on it.'

'The thing is,' Antsy said, 'we're undersupplied and that's the truth of it. If we run into trouble ...'

'Really, Sergeant,' Picker muttered. 'When you've burned the bridges behind you, don't go starting a fire on the one in front of you. Tell those sappers to stiffen their spines. If we get into a situation where the fifteen or so available cussers and thirty or forty sharpers aren't enough, we're just one more feast-pile anyway.'

'Chat's over,' Paran announced. 'Quick, get the Moranth ready – we're making one more jump tonight. I want us within sight of the River Eryn come the dawn. Picker, check the cairns one more time, please. I don't want them obvious – we give ourselves away now and things'll get hot.'

'Aye, sir.'

'All right, let's move.'

He watched as his soldiers scrambled. A few moments later he sensed a presence and turned. The Black Moranth commander, Twist, had come to stand beside him.

'Captain Paran.'

'Yes?'
'I would know if you blessed the Barghast gods. In Capustan, or perhaps thereafter.'

Paran frowned. 'I was warned that they might ask, but no, I've not been approached.'

The black-armoured warrior was silent for a moment, then he said, 'Yet you acknowledge their place in the pantheon.'

'I don't see why not.'

'Is that a yes, Captain?'

'All right. Yes. Why? What's wrong?'

'Nothing is wrong. I will die soon, and I wish to know what will await my soul.'

'Have the Barghast shouldermen finally acknowledged that the Moranth share the same blood?'

'Their pronouncements one way or the other are without relevance.'

'Yet mine are?'

'You are the Master of the Deck.'

'What caused the schism, Twist? Between the Moranth and the Barghast?'

The achievant slowly raised his withered arm. 'Perhaps, in another realm, this arm is hale, whilst the rest of me is shrunken and lifeless. Perhaps,' he went on, 'it already feels the clasp, firm and strong, of a spirit. Who now but waits for my complete passage into that world.'

'An interesting way of viewing it.'

'Perspective, Captain. The Barghast would see us withered and lifeless. To be cut away.'

'While you see it the other way round?'

Twist shrugged. 'We do not fear change. We do not resist it. The Barghast must accept that growth is necessary, even if painful. They must learn what the Moranth learned long ago, when we did not draw our swords and instead spoke with the Tiste Edur – the grey-skinned wanderers of the seas. Spoke, to discover they were as lost as we were, as weary of war, as ready for peace.'

'Tiste Edur?'

'Children of the Shattered Warren. A fragment had been discovered, in the vast forest of Moranth that would become our new homeland. Kurald Emurlahn, the true face of Shadow. There were so few Tiste Edur left, we chose to welcome them. The last of them are gone now, from Moranth Wood, long gone, but their legacy is what has made us as we are.'

'Achievant, it may take me a while to make sense of what you've just described. I have questions—'

Twist shrugged again. 'We did not slay the Tiste Edur. In Barghast eyes, that is our greatest crime. I wonder, however, if the Elder Spirits – now gods – see it in similar light.'

'They've had a long time to think,' Paran murmured. 'Sometimes, that's all that's needed. The heart of wisdom is tolerance. I think.'

'If so, Captain, then you must be proud.'

'Proud?'

The achievant slowly turned away as soft calls announced the troop was ready. 'I now return to Dujek Onearm.' He paused, then added, 'The Malazan Empire is a wise empire. I think that rare, and precious. And so I wish it – and you – well.'
Paran watched Twist stride away.

It was time to go.

*Tolerant, Maybe. Keep that word in mind, Ganoes – there’s a whisper that it will prove the fulcrum in what’s to come...*

Kruppe’s mule carried him swiftly up the embankment, through a press of marching marines on the road – who scattered from its path – then down the other side and out onto the plain. Shouts and helpful advice followed him.

‘Brainless beast! Blind, stubborn, braying creature of the Abyss! Stop, Kruppe cries! Stop! No, not that way—’

The mule charged a tilting path back round, fast-trotted smartly for the nearest clan of White Face Barghast.

A dozen savagely painted children raced out to meet them.

The mule baulked in sudden alarm, pitching Kruppe forward onto its neck. The animal then wheeled, and slowed to a placid walk, tail switching its rump.

The Daru managed to right himself with a succession of grunts. ‘Exercise is madness!’ he exclaimed to the children who jogged up alongside. ‘Witness these frightening urchins, already so musclebound as to laugh with stupid delight at Kruppe’s woeful fate! The curse of vigour and strain has addled them. Dear Kruppe, forgive them as befits your admirable nature, your amiable equanimity, your effortlessly estimable ease among the company of those sadly lacking in years. Ah, you poor creatures, so short of leg yet self-deluded into expressions witlessly wise. You strut in step with this confounded mule, and so lay bare the tragic truth – your tribe is doomed, Kruppe pronounces! Doomed!’

‘They understand not a word, Man of Lard!’

Kruppe twisted round to see Hetan and Cafal riding to join him. The woman was grinning.

‘Not a word, Daru, and a good thing, too. Else they tear your heart from your chest at such damnations!’

‘Damnations? Dear woman, Kruppe’s deadly temper is to blame. His white hot rage that so endangers all around him! It is this beast, you see—’

‘Not even worth eating,’ Hetan noted. ‘What think you, brother?’

‘Too scrawny,’ Cafal agreed.

‘None the less, Kruppe pleads for forgiveness on behalf of his worthy self and the conversely worthless beast he rides. Forgive us, somewhat longer-legged spawn of Humbrall Taur, we beg you!’

‘We’ve a question for you, Man of Lard.’

‘You need only ask, and Kruppe shall answer. Shining with truth, his words smooth as oil to scent your unblemished skin – there, just above the left breast, perhaps? Kruppe has in his possession—’

‘No doubt,’ Hetan interrupted. ‘And were you to carry on this war would be over before I’d the chance to ask you the question. Now shut up, Daru, and listen. Look, if you will, upon the Malazan ranks on yonder road. The tent-covered wagons, the few foot-dragging companies who walk alongside them and between them, raising skyward clouds of dust—’

‘Dear lass, you are one after Kruppe’s own heart! Pray, resume this non-interrogative question, at length, wax your words into the thickest candle so that I may light an unquenchable flame of love in its honour.’

‘I said look, Daru. Observe! Do you find nothing odd about our allies at present?’
'At present. Past and no doubt future, too, Kruppe asserts. Malazan mysteries, yes! Peculiar people, Kruppe proclaims. Discipline in said march approaching dishevelled dissolution, dust rising to be seen for leagues yet what is seen – well, naught but dust!'

'Just my point,' Hetan growled.

'And a sharp one it is.'

'So you'd noticed, then.'

'Noticed what, my dear? The sumptuous curves of yourself? How could Kruppe not notice such wondrous, if slightly barbaric, beauty? As a prairie flower—'

'—about to kill you,' Hetan said, grinning.

'A prairie flower, Kruppe observes, such as blooms on prickly cactus …'

'Ware the misstep, Man of Lard.'

'Kruppe's wares are without misstep, for he wears wariness well – uh …'

'This morning,' Hetan resumed after a moment, 'I watched one company of marines strike the tents of three companies, all through the Malazan camp. One for three, again and again.'

'Aye, one can count on the Malazans!' Hetan rode closer, reached out and closed a hand on Kruppe's cloak collar. She half dragged him from his saddle, her smile broadening. 'Man of Lard,' she hissed, 'when I bed you – soon – this mule will need a travois to carry what's left of you. Dragging everyone along in your dance of words is a fine talent, but come tonight, I will pump the breath from your lungs. I will leave you speechless for days to come. And I will do all this to prove who is the master between us. Now, another utterance from you and I won't wait until tonight – I will give these children and everyone else a show that you, Daru, will never live down. Ah, I see by your bulging eyes that you understand. Good. Now, stop clenching that mule with your knees – the beast hates it. Settle in that saddle as if it was a horse, for it believes itself to be so. It notes how everyone else rides, notes how the horses carry their charges. Its eyes never rest – have you not noticed? This is the most alert beast this world has ever seen, and don't ask me why. There, my words are done. Until tonight, Man of Lard, when I will see you melt.' She released him.

Gasping, Kruppe dropped back onto the saddle. He opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut.

Cafal grunted. 'He learns fast, sister.'

She snorted. 'You all do, brother.'

The two rode away.

Staring after them, Kruppe removed his handkerchief from a sleeve and patted the sweat from his brow. 'Dear me. Dear, dearest me. You heard, mule? It is Kruppe who is doomed. Doomed!'

Whiskeyjack studied the two women standing before him, then said, 'Permission denied.'

'She ain't here, sir,' one of the marines reiterated. 'We got no-one to watch, right?'

'You will not rejoin your company, soldiers. You stay with me. Any other issues you wanted to discuss? No? Dismissed.'

The two marines exchanged a glance, then saluted and marched off.

'Sometimes,' Artanthos said from a half-dozen paces away, 'it comes back and sinks its teeth into you, doesn't it?'
Whiskeyjack eyed the man. 'What does?'

'Dassem Ultor's style of command. Soldiers given permission to think, to question, to argue ...'

'Making us the best army this world has ever seen, Standard-Bearer.'

'None the less ...'

'There is no “none the less”. It is the reason why we're the best. And when time comes for the hard orders, you'll see the discipline – you may not have seen it here and now, but it's there, under the surface, and it's solid.'

'As you say,' Artanthos replied with a shrug.

Whiskeyjack resumed leading his horse to the kraal. The sun was already pulling the last of its lurid light below the horizon. On all sides, soldiers hurried to pitch tents and prepare cook fires. They were, he could see, a weary lot. Too many doubletime shifts through the day, then the added bell's worth of marching through dusk. He realized he'd need to tail that off over at least three days then add two more bells of stationary rest before reaching Coral, to give his infantry sufficient recovery time. An exhausted army was a defeated army.

A stabler collected Whiskeyjack's horse, and the commander set off towards Dujek's tent.

A squad of marines sat on their packs in front of the entrance, helms and armour on, still wearing the scarves that had covered their faces against the day's dust. None rose at Whiskeyjack's arrival.

'Carry on,' he growled sarcastically as he strode between the soldiers and entered the tent.

Within, Dujek was on his knees. He'd thrown a map down on the carpeted floor and was studying it by lantern-light, muttering under his breath.

'So,' Whiskeyjack said as he pulled a camp chair close and settled, 'the divided army ... divides yet again.'

Dujek glanced up, his bushy brows knitting into a momentary frown before he resumed his perusal of the map. 'My bodyguard outside?'

'Aye.'

'They're a miserable lot at the best of times, and this isn't exactly best.'

Whiskeyjack stretched out his legs, wincing as old pain awoke once more in the left one. 'They're all Untan, aren't they? Haven't seen them around much of late.'

'You haven't seen them around because I told them to get scarce. Calling 'em miserable was being kind. They're not of the Host and as far as they're concerned they'll never be and, damn, I agree with 'em. Anyway, they wouldn't have saluted you even if we wasn't splitting into two commands. It's a struggle them saluting even me, and I'm the one they're sworn to protect.'

'We've got a tired army out there.'

'I know. With Oponn's luck the pace will return to sanity once we're the other side of Maurik. That's three days of loose reins and stretched necks to Coral – we've managed with less.'

'Managed to get mauled, you mean. That run to Mott damn near finished us, Dujek. We can't afford a repetition – there's a lot more to lose this time.'

The High Fist leaned back and began rolling up the map. 'Have faith, friend.'

Whiskeyjack glanced around, noted the cross-slung backpack resting against the centre pole, the old shortsword in its equally ancient scabbard draped over it. 'So soon?'

'You ain't been paying attention,' Dujek said. 'We've been peeling off without a hitch every night since the divide. Do the roll call, Whiskeyjack, you're six thousand short. Come the morning, you've got your command
back—well, slightly under half of it, anyway. You should be dancing round the pole.'

'No, I should be the one flying out tonight, not you, Dujek. The risk—'

'Precisely,' the High Fist growled. 'The risk. You never seem to realize, but you're more important to this
army than I am. You always have been. To the soldiers, I'm just a one-armed ogre in a fancy uniform— they
dammed well see me as a pet.'

Whiskeyjack studied Dujek's battered, unadorned armour and grinned sourly.

'A figure of speech,' the High Fist said. 'Besides, it's as the Empress has commanded.'

'So you keep saying.'

'Whiskeyjack, Seven Cities is devouring itself. The Whirlwind has risen over blood-soaked sands. The
Adjunct has a new army and it's on its way, but too late for the Malazan forces already there. I know you were
talking retirement, but look at it from Laseen's point of view. She has two commanders left who know Seven
Cities. And, before long, only one seasoned army—stuck here on Genabackis. If she has to risk one of us in the
Pannion War, it has to be me.'

'She plans on sending the Host to Seven Cities? Hood take us, Dujek—'

'If the new Adjunct falls to Sha'ik, what choice does she have? More important, she wants you in command.'

Whiskeyjack slowly blinked. 'What about you?'

Dujek grimaced. 'I don't think she expects me to survive what's about to come. And if by some miracle I do, well, the campaign in Korel is a shambles...'

'You don't want Korel.'

'What I want doesn't matter, Whiskeyjack.'

'And Laseen would say the same of me, I gather. Dujek, as I said before, I intend to retire, to disappear if
need be. I'm done. With all of this. Some log cabin in some frontier kingdom, a long way away from the
Empire—'

'And a wife swinging a pot at your head. Marital, domestic bliss—you think Korlat will settle for that?'

Whiskeyjack smiled at High Fist's gentle mockery. 'It's her idea—not the pot-swinging—that's your
particular nightmare, Dujek. But all the rest...all right, not a log cabin. More like a remote, wind-battered keep
in some mountain fastness. A place with a forbidding view—'

'Well,' Dujek drawled, 'you can still plant a small vegetable garden in the courtyard. Wage war against
weeds. All right, that's our secret, then. Too bad for Laseen. Should I survive Coral, I'll be the one taking the
Host back to Seven Cities. And should I not survive, well, I won't be in a position to care one whit about the
Malazan Empire.'

'You'll scrape through, Dujek. You always do.'

'A weak effort, but I'll take it. So, share one last meal with me? The Moranth won't be here till after the
midnight bell.'

It was an odd choice of words, and they hung heavy between the two old friends for a long moment.

'One last meal before I leave, I meant,' Dujek said with a faint smile. 'Until Coral.'

'I'd be delighted,' Whiskeyjack replied.

The wastes southwest of River Eryn stretched out beneath the stars, the sands rippled by inland winds born on
the Dwelling Plain in the heart of the continent. Ahead, on the horizon's very edge, the Godswalk Mountains were visible, young and jagged, forming a barrier to the south that stretched sixty leagues. Its easternmost edge was swallowed by forests that continued unbroken all the way to Ortnal's Cut and Coral Bay, resuming on the other side of the water to surround the city of Coral itself.

The River Eryn became Ortnal's Cut twenty or more leagues from Coral Bay, the river's red water plunging into a deep chasm and reputedly turning oddly black and impenetrable. Coral Bay seemed to be but a continuation of that chasm.

The Cut was not yet visible to Paran, even from this height, yet he knew it was there. Scouts from the flight of Black Moranth now winging him and his Bridgeburners down the river's path had confirmed its nearness – sometimes the maps were wrong, after all. Fortunately, most of the Black Moranth had been positioned in the Vision Mountains for months, making nightly sorties to study the lie of the land, to formulate the best approach to Coral in anticipation of this moment.

They would likely reach Eryn's mouth before dawn, assuming the stiff, steady winds rushing towards the Godswalk Mountains continued unabated, and the following night would see them skimming over the Cut's black waters, towards Coral itself.

And once there, we work out what the Seer's planned for us. Work it out and, if possible, dismantle it. And once that's done, it'll be time for me and Quick Ben—

Some unseen signal had the quorls plunging earthward, angling towards the river's western bank. Paran gripped hard the bony projections on the Black Moranth rider's armour, the wind whistling through his helm's visor to shriek in his ears. Gritting his teeth, Paran ducked his head low behind the warrior as the dark ground swiftly rose to meet them.

A snap of wings less than a man's height above the boulder-strewn shore slowed them abruptly, and then they were slipping silently along the strand. Paran twisted round to see the others in single file behind them. He tapped a finger against his rider's armour, leaned forward.

'What's happening?'

'There is carrion ahead,' the Black Moranth replied, the words strangely clicking – a sound the captain knew he would never get used to.

'You're hungry?'

The chitin-armoured warrior did not reply.

All right, so that was a little low.

The stench of whatever lay on the shore ahead reached Paran. 'Do we have to do this? Is it the quorls who need to feed? Have we time, Moranth?'

'Our scouts saw nothing the night last, Captain. Never before has this river yielded such a creature. Perhaps, that it has done so now is important. We shall investigate.'

Paran relented. 'Very well.'

The quorl beneath them angled to the right, up and over the grassy embankment, then settled on the level ground beyond it. The others followed suit.

Joints aching, Paran released the saddle-strap and cautiously dismounted.

Quick Ben limped to his side. 'Abyss take me,' he grumbled, 'much more of this and my legs will fall off.'

'Any idea what they've found?' the captain asked him.

'Only that it stinks.'
'Some dead beast, apparently.'

A half-dozen Black Moranth had gathered around the lead rider. Clicks and buzzes were exchanged among them in a rapid discussion, then the officer – whose quorl Paran had been riding – gestured for the captain and the wizard to approach.

'The creature,' the officer said, 'lies directly ahead. We would have you examine it as we shall. Speak freely, so that we might finally circle the truth and so know its hue. Come.'

Paran glanced at Quick Ben, who simply shrugged. 'Lead the way, then,' the captain said.

The corpse lay among boulders high on the strand, fifteen paces from the southward-rushing water. Limbs twisted, revealing broken bones – some of them jutting through torn flesh – the figure was naked, bloated with decomposition. The ground around it seethed with crayfish, clicking and scraping and, here and there, locked in titanic battle over possession of the feast – a detail Paran found amusing at first, then ineffably disturbing. His attention only momentarily drawn away from the body by the scavengers, he fixed his gaze once more on the figure.

Quick Ben spoke a soft question to the Moranth officer, who nodded. The wizard gestured and a muted glow rose from the boulders on all sides, illuminating the corpse.

_Hood's breath._ 'Is that a Tiste Andii?'

Quick Ben stepped closer, squatted, and was silent for a long moment, then he said, 'If he is, he's not one of Anomander Rake's people ... no, in fact, I don't think he's Tiste Andii at all.'

Paran frowned. 'He's damned tall, Wizard. And those facial features – such as we can see—'

'His skin's too pale, Captain.'

'Bleached by water and sun.'

'No. I've seen a few Tiste Andii bodies. In Blackdog Forest, and in the swamplands surrounding it. I've seen 'em in all sorts of conditions. Nothing like this. He's heat-swelled from the day, aye, and we have to assume he came from the river, but he's not water-logged. Captain, have you ever seen a victim of Serc sorcery?'

'The Path of the Sky? Not that I recall.'

'There's one spell, that bursts the victim from the inside out. Has to do with pressure, with violently altering it, even taking it away entirely. Or, as this looks like, increasing it outside the body a hundredfold. This man was killed by implosive pressure, as if he'd been hit by a mage using High Serc.'

'All right.'

'Not all right, Captain. All wrong, in fact.' Quick Ben looked up at the Moranth officer. 'Circle the truth, you said. OK. Talk.'

'Tiste Edur.'

The name – _oh, yes. Twist spoke of them. Some old war . . . a shattered warren_—

'Agreed. Though I've never seen one before.'

'He did not die here.'

'You're right, he didn't. And he didn't drown, either.'

The Moranth nodded. 'He did not drown. Nor was he killed by sorcery – for the smell is wrong.'

'Aye, no taint of magic. Keep circling.'

'The Blue Moranth, who ply the seas and sink nets into the deep trenches – their catch arrives upon the deck
already dead. This effect concerns the nature of pressure.'

'I imagine it does.'

'This man was killed by the reverse. By appearing, suddenly, in a place of great pressure.'

'Aye.' Quick Ben sighed. He glanced out over the river. 'There's a trench, a crevasse, out there – you can see it by the current's upstream pull out in the middle. Ortnal's Cut reaches this far, unseen, cracking the river bed. That trench is deep.'

'Hold it,' Paran said. 'You're suggesting that this Tiste Edur appeared, suddenly, somewhere down in that underwater trench. The only way that could be true is if he'd opened a warren in order to get there – that's a seriously complicated means of suicide.'

'Only if he'd intended to do as he did,' Quick Ben replied. 'Only if he was the one who opened the warren in the first place. If you want to kill someone – nastily – you throw them, push them, trip them – whatever – into an inimical portal. I think this poor bastard was murdered.'

'By a High Mage of Sere?'

'More like a High Mage of Ruse – the Path of the Sea. Captain, the Malazan Empire is a seafaring empire, or at least its roots are seafaring. You won't find a true High Mage of Ruse in all the empire. It's the hardest warren to master.' Quick Ben turned to the Moranth. 'And among your Blue Moranth? Your Silver or Gold? Any High Mages of Ruse?'

The warrior shook his helmed head. 'Nor do our annals reveal any in our past.'

'And how far back do those annals go?' Quick Ben asked casually, returning his attention to the corpse.

'Seven tens.'

'Decades?'

'Centuries.'

'So,' the wizard said, straightening. 'A singular killer.'

'Then why,' Paran murmured, 'do I now believe that this man was killed by another Tiste Edur?'

The Moranth and Quick Ben turned to him, were silent.

Paran sighed. 'A hunch, I suppose. A gut whisper.'

'Captain,' the wizard said, 'don't forget what you've become.' He fixed his attention once more on the corpse.

'Another Tiste Edur. All right, let's circle this one, too.'

'There is no objection,' the Moranth officer said, 'to the possibility.'

'The Tiste Edur are of Elder Shadow,' Quick Ben noted.

'Within the seas, shadows swim. Kurald Emurlahn. The Warren of the Tiste Edur, Elder Shadow, is broken, and has been lost to mortals.'

'Lost?' Quick Ben's brows rose. 'Never found, you mean. Meanas – where Shadowthrone and Cotillion and the Hounds dwell—'

'Is naught but a gateway,' the Moranth officer finished.

Paran grunted. 'If a shadow could cast a shadow, that shadow would be Meanas – is that what you two are saying? Shadowthrone rules the guardhouse?'

Quick Ben grinned. 'What a delicious image, Captain.'
‘A disturbing one,’ he muttered in reply. *The Hounds of Shadow – they are the guardians of the gate. Damn, that makes too much sense to be in error. But the warren is also shattered. Meaning, that gate might not lead anywhere. Or maybe it belongs to the largest fragment. Does Shadowthrone know the truth? That his mighty Throne of Shadows is ... is what? A castellan’s chair? A gatekeeper’s perch? My oh my, as Kruppe would say.*

‘Ah,’ Quick Ben sighed, his grin fading, ‘I think I see your point. The Tiste Edur are active once more, by what we’ve seen here. They’re returning to the mortal world – perhaps they’ve re-awakened the true Throne of Shadow, and maybe they’re about to pay their new gatekeeper a visit.’

‘Another war in the pantheon – the Crippled God’s chains are no doubt rattling with his laughter.’ Paran rubbed at the bristle on his jaw. ‘Excuse me – I need some privacy. Carry on here, if you like – I won’t be long. *I hope.*

He strode inland twenty paces, stood facing northwest, eyes on the distant stars. *All right, I’ve done this before, let’s see if it works a second time . . .*

The transition was so swift, so effortless, that it left him reeling, stumbling across uneven flagstones in swirling, mote-filled darkness. Cursing, he righted himself. The carved images beneath his feet glowed faintly, cool and vaguely remote.

*So, I’m here. As simple as that. Now, how do I find the image I’m looking for? Raest? You busy at the moment? What a question. If you were busy we’d all be in trouble, wouldn’t we? Never mind. Stay where you are, wherever that is. This is for me to work out, after all.*

*Not in the Deck of Dragons – I don’t want the gateway, after all, do I. Thus, the Elder Deck, the Deck of Holds. . .*

The flagstone directly before him twisted into a new image, one he had not seen before, yet he instinctively recognized it as the one he sought. The carving was rough, worn, the deep grooves forming a chaotic web of shadows.

Paran felt himself being pulled forward, down, into the scene.

He appeared in a wide, low chamber. Unadorned, dressed stone formed the walls, water-stained and covered in lichen, mould and moss. High to his right and left were wide windows – horizontal slits – both crowded with a riot of creepers and vines that snaked down into the room, onto the floor and through a carpet of dead leaves.

The air smelled of the sea, and somewhere outside the chamber seagulls bickered above a crashing surf.

Paran’s heart thudded loud in his chest. He had not expected this. *I’m not in another realm. This is mine.*

Seven paces ahead, on a raised dais, stood a throne. Carved from a single trunk of crimson wood, unplaned, broad strips of bark on its flanks, many of them split, had pulled away from the wood beneath. Shadows flowed in that bark, swam the deep grooves, spilling out to dart through the surrounding air before vanishing in the chamber’s gloom.

*The Throne of Shadow. Not in some hidden, long-forgotten realm. It’s here, on – or rather in – my world ... A small, tattered fragment of Kurald Galain.*

. . . and the Tiste Edur have come to find it. They’re searching, crossing the seas, seeking this place. *How do I know this?*

He stepped forward. The shadows raced over the throne in a frenzy. Another step. *You want to tell me something, Throne, don’t you?* He strode to the dais, reached out-

The shadows poured over him.

*Hound – not Hound! Blood and not blood! Master and mortal!*

‘Oh, be quiet! Tell me of this place.’
The wandering isle! Wanders not! Flees! Yes! The Children are corrupted, the souls of the Edur are poisoned! Storm of madness – we elude! Protect us, Hound not Hound! Save us – they come!

'The wandering isle. This is Drift Avalii, isn't it? West of Quon Tali. I thought there were supposed to be Tiste Andii on this island—'

Sworn to defend! Spawn of Anomander Rake – gone! Leaving a blood trail, leading the Edur away with the spilling out of their own lives – oh, where is Anomander Rake? They call for him, they call and call! They beg for his help!

'He's busy, I'm afraid.'

Anomander Rake, Son of Darkness! The Edur have sworn to destroy Mother Dark. You must warn him! Poisoned souls, led by the one who has been slain a hundred times, oh, 'ware this new Emperor of the Edur, this Tyrant of Pain, this Deliverer of Midnight Tides!

Paran pulled himself back with a mental wrench, staggered a step further away, then another. He was sheathed in sweat, trembling with the aftermath of such visceral terror.

Barely conscious of his own intent, he whirled – the chamber around him blurring, swallowed by darkness, then, with a grinding shift, something deeper than darkness.

'Oh, Abyss ...'

A rubble-strewn plain beneath a dead sky. In the distance to his right, the groan of massive, wooden wheels, the slither and snap of chains, countless plodding hooffalls. In the air, a pall of suffering that threatened to suffocate Paran where he stood.

Gritting his teeth, he swung towards the dreadful sounds, pushed himself forward.

Grainy shapes appeared ahead, coming directly for Paran. Leaning figures, stretched chains. Beyond them, a hundred or more paces distant, loomed the terrible wagon, massed with writhing bodies, clunking and shifting over stones, swallowed in a haze of mist.

Paran stumbled forward. 'Draconus!' he shouted. 'Where in Hood's name are you? Draconus!'

Faces lifted, then all but one-hooded and indistinct – lowered once more.

The captain slipped between victims of Dragnipur, closing on the one shadowed face still regarding him, stepping within reach of the mad, the numbed, the failing – not one of whom sought to impede him, or even acknowledged his presence. He moved as a ghost through the press.

'Greetings, mortal,' Draconus said. 'Walk with me, then.'

'I wanted Rake.'

'You found his sword, instead. For which I am not sorry.'

'Yes, I've spoken with Nightchill, Draconus – but don't press me on that subject. When I reach a decision, you'll be the first to know. I need to speak with Rake.'

'Aye,' the ancient warrior rumbled, 'you do. Explain to him this truth, mortal. He is too merciful, too merciful to wield Dragnipur. The situation is growing desperate.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Dragnipur needs to feed. Look around us, mortal. There are those who, at long last, fail in pulling this burden. They are carried to the wagon, then, and tossed onto it – you think this preferable? Too weak to move, they are soon buried by those like them. Buried, trapped for eternity. And the more the wagon bears, the greater its weight – the more difficult the burden for those of us still able to heave, on these chains. Do you understand? Dragnipur needs to feed. We require ... fresh legs. Tell Rake – he must draw the sword. He must
take souls. Powerful ones, preferably. And he must do so soon—'

'What will happen if the wagon stops, Draconus?'

The man who forged his own prison was silent for a long time. 'Project your vision, mortal, onto our trail. See for yourself, what pursues us.'

Pursues! He closed his eyes, yet the scene did not vanish – the wagon lumbered on, there in his mind, the multitudes passing by him like ghosts. Then the massive contrivance was past, its groans fading behind him. The ruts of its wheels flanked him, each one as wide as an imperial road. The earth was sodden with blood, bile and sweat, a foul mud that drew his boots down, swallowed them up to his ankles.

His gaze followed those tracks, back, to the horizon.

Where chaos raged. Filling the sky, a storm such as he had never seen before. Rapacious hunger poured from it. Frenzied anticipation.

Lost memories.

Power born from rendered souls.

Malice and desire, a presence almost self-aware, with hundreds of thousands of eyes all fixed on the wagon behind Paran.

So ... so eager to feed ...

He recoiled.

With a gasp, Paran found himself stumbling once more alongside Draconus. The residue of what he had witnessed clung to him, making his heart drum savagely in his chest. Another thirty steps passed before he was able to raise his head, to speak. 'Draconus,' he grated, 'you have made a very unpleasant sword.'

'Darkness has ever warred against Chaos, mortal. Ever retreated. And each time that Mother Dark relented – to the Coming of Light, to the Birth of Shadow – her power has diminished, the imbalance growing more profound. Such was the state of the realms around me in those early times. A growing imbalance. Until Chaos approached the very Gate to Kurald Galain itself. A defence needed to be fashioned. Souls were ... required ...'

'Wait, please. I need to think—'

'Chaos hungers for the power in those souls – for what Dragnipur has claimed. To feed on such power will make it stronger – tenfold. A hundredfold. Sufficient to breach the Gate. Look to your mortal realm, Ganoes Paran. Devastating, civilization-destroying wars, civil wars, pogroms, wounded and dying gods – you and your kind progress at a perilous pace on the path forged by Chaos. Blinded by rage, lusting for vengeance, those darkest of desires—'

'Wait—'

'Where history means nothing. Lessons are forgotten. Memories – of humanity, of all that is humane – are lost. Without balance, Ganoes Paran—'

'But you want me to shatter Dragnipur!'

'Ah, now I understand your resistance to all that I say. Mortal, I have had time to think. To recognize the grave error I have made. I had believed, Ganoes Paran, in those early times, that only in Darkness could the power that is order be manifested. I sought to help Mother Dark – for it seemed she was incapable of helping herself. She would not answer, she would not even acknowledge her children. She had withdrawn, deep into her own realm, far from all of us, so far that we could not find her.'

'Draconus—'

'Hear me, please. Before the Houses, there were Holds. Before Holds, there was wandering. Your own
words, yes? But you were both right and wrong. Not wandering, but migration. A seasonal round – predictable, cyclical. What seemed aimless, random, was in truth fixed, bound to its own laws. A truth – a power – I failed to recognize.

'So the shattering of Dragnipur will release the Gate once more – to its migration.'

'To what gave it its own strength to resist Chaos, yes. Dragnipur has bound the Gate of Darkness to flight, for eternity – but should the souls chained to it diminish—'

'The flight slows down—'

'Fatally.'

'So, either Rake begins killing – taking souls – or Dragnipur must be destroyed.'

'The former is necessary – to buy us time – until the latter occurs. The sword must be shattered. The purpose of its very existence was misguided. Besides which, there is another truth I have but stumbled on – far too late for it to make any difference. At least to me.'

'And that is?'

'Just as Chaos possesses the capacity to act in its own defence, to indeed alter its own nature to its own advantage in its eternal war, so too can Order. It is not solely bound to Darkness. It understands, if you will, the value of balance.'

Paran felt an intuitive flash. 'The Houses of the Azath. The Deck of Dragons.'

The hooded head shifted slightly and Paran felt cold, unhuman eyes fixing upon him. 'Aye, Ganoes Paran.'

'The Houses take souls …'

'And bind them in place. Beyond the grasp of Chaos.'

'So it shouldn't matter, then, if Darkness succumbs.'

'Don't be a fool. Losses and gains accumulate, shift the tide, but not always in ways that redress the balance. We are in an imbalance, Ganoes Paran, that approaches a threshold. This war, which has seemed eternal to us trapped within it, may come to an end. What awaits us all, should that happen . . . well, mortal, you have felt its breath, there in our wake.'

'I need to speak with Rake.'

'Then find him. Assuming, of course, he still carries the sword.'

*Easier said than done, it seems*— 'Hold on – what do you mean by that? About still carrying the sword?'

'Just that, Ganoes Paran.'

*But why wouldn't he be? What in Hood's name are you hinting at, Draconus? This is Anomander Rake we're talking about, damn it! If we were living in one of those bad fables with some dimwitted farmboy stumbling on a magical sword, well, then losing the weapon might be possible. But . . . Anomander Rake? Son of Darkness? Lord of Moon's Spawn?*

A grunt from Draconus drew his attention. Directly in their path, tangled in chains gone slack, lay a huge, demonic figure. 'Byrys. I myself killed him, so long ago. I did not think...' He came up to the black-skinned creature, reached down and – to Paran's astonishment – heaved it over a shoulder. 'To the wagon,' Draconus said, 'my old nemesis ...'

'Who summoned me,' the demon rumbled, 'to do battle with you?'

'Ever the same question, Byrys. I do not know. I have never known.'
'Who summoned me, Draconus, to die by the sword?'
'Someone long dead, no doubt.'
'Who summoned ...'

As Draconus and the demon draped across his shoulders continued their pointless conversation, Paran felt himself drawing away, the words growing indistinct, the image dimming ... until he stood once more on flagstones, far beneath the Finnest House.

'Anomander Rake. Knight of Dark, High House Dark ...' His eyes strained to see the rise of the image he had summoned, out among the endless sprawl of etched flagstones.

But nothing came.

Feeling a sudden chill in the pit of his stomach, Paran mentally reached out, questing into High House Dark, seeking the place, the figure with his black sword trailing ethereal chains—

He had no comprehension of what rushed up to meet him, blinding, hammering into his skull – a flash—

—then oblivion.

He opened his eyes to dappled sunlight. Water traced cool rivulets down his temples. A shadow slipped over him, then a familiar, round face with small, sharp eyes.

'Mallet,' Paran croaked.

'We were wondering if you'd ever return, Captain.' He held up a dripping cloth. 'You'd run a fever for a while there, sir, but I think it's broke—'

'Where?'

'Mouth of River Eryn. Orntal's Cut. It's midday – Quick Ben had to go find you last night, Captain – the risk of getting caught out in the open before dawn – we just strapped you to your quorl and rode hard those winds.'

'Quick Ben,' Paran muttered. 'Get him here. Fast.'

'Easily done, sir.' Mallet leaned back, gestured to one side.

The wizard appeared. 'Captain. We've had four of those condors pass nearby since sunrise – if they're looking for us—'

Paran shook his head. 'Not us. Moon's Spawn.'

'You might be right – but that would mean they haven't sighted it yet, and that seems damned unlikely. How do you hide a floating mountain? More likely—'

'Anomander Rake.'

'What?'

Paran closed his eyes. 'I sought him out – through the Deck, the Knight of Dark. Wizard, I think we've lost him. And Moon's Spawn. We've lost the Tiste Andii, Quick Ben. Anomander Rake is gone.'

'Gruesome city! Ghastly! Ghoulish! Grimy! Kruppe regrets said witnessing of said settlement—'

'So you've said,' Whiskeyjack murmured.

'It bodes ill, those ill abodes. Cause for dread, such ghostly streets and such enormous vultures roosting and winging about ever so freely in yon sky over Kruppe's noble head. When, oh when will darkness come? When
will merciful darkness fall, Kruppe reiterates, so that blessed blindness enwreathes proper selves, thus permitting inspiration to flash and thus reveal the deceit of deceits, the sleightest of sleight of hands, the non-illusion of illusions, the—’

'Two days,' Hetan growled from Whiskeyjack's other side. 'I stole his voice ... for two days – I had been expecting longer, since the man's heart damn near gave out.'

'Shut him up again,' Cafal said.

'Tonight, and with luck, he'll be in no shape to say a word until Maurik at the very least.'

'Dear lass has misunderstood Kruppe's uncharacteristic silence! He swears! Nay, he veritably begs, that you spare him pending thrash and oof, on the night to come, and every night to follow! He is too tender of spirit, too easily bruised, scratched, and bodily thrown about. Kruppe has never known the horror of cartwheels before, nor does he wish to ever experience said discombobulation of sorted self again. Thus, to explain extraordinary terseness, these two days of muted apparel so unstylishly clothing honourable Kruppe, worse indeed than a shroud of despond. To explain! Kruppe has, dear friends, been thinking.

'Thinking, aye! Such as he never thought to have before! Ever, nor never. Thoughts to shine with glory, so bright as to blind mortal ken, so palling as to pillage appalling fears to leave naught but purest courage, upon which one sails as on a raft into the mouth of paradise!'

Hetan sniffed. 'Those tumbles weren't cartwheels. They were flops. Very well, I will give you cartwheels in plenty tonight, slippery one!'

'Kruppe prays, oh how he prays, that darkness never falls! That from the depths the flash is but muted in a world vast with light and wonder! Hold back, merciful darkness! We must march on, brave Whiskeyjack! And on! Without pause, without surcease, without delay! Wear our feet to mere nubs, Kruppe pleads! Night, oh night! Beckoning fatal lures to weak self – the mule was there, after all, and look upon poor beast – exhausted by what its eyes could not help but witness! Exhausted unto near death by simple empathy!'

'Oh, hear naught of Kruppe and his secret desires for self-destruction at hands of delicious woman! Hear naught! Hear naught until meaning itself disperses . . .'

Picker stared out on the black waters of Ortnal's Cut. Chunks of ice brunted the current, grinding and pushing their way upstream. To the southeast, Coral Bay was white as a winter field under the stars. The journey from Eryn Mouth had taken but half the night. From this point on, the Bridgeburners would travel on foot, staying under cover as they edged round the dark, forest-clad mountains, skirting the relatively level region between the Cut and the range.

She glanced down the slight slope to where Captain Paran sat with Quick Ben, Spindle, Shank, Toes and Bluepearl. A gathering of mages always made her nervous, especially when Spindle counted among them. Beneath the skin beneath the hairshirt, there scrabbled the soul of a sapper, half mad – as were the souls of all sappers. Spindle's magery was notoriously unpredictable, and more than once she had seen him unveiling his warren with one hand while throwing a Moranth munition with the other.

The three other Bridgeburner wizards weren't much to crow over. Bluepearl was a pigeon-toed Napan who shaved his head and pretended to airs of vast knowledge concerning the Warren of Ruse.

Shank had Seti blood, the importance of which he exaggerated by wearing countless charms and trinkets from the north Quon Tali tribe – even though the Seti themselves had long since ceased to exist except in name, so thoroughly had they been assimilated into Quon culture. Shank, however, wore as part of his uniform a strangely romanticized version of Seti plains garb, all of which had been made by a seamstress in the employ of a theatre company in Unta. Picker was unsure which warren Shank specialized in, since his rituals calling upon power usually took longer than the average battle.

Toes had earned his name by his habit of collecting toes among the enemy's dead – whether he'd been personally responsible for killing them or not. He had concocted some kind of drying powder with which he
treated his trophies before sewing them onto his vest – the man smelled like a crypt in dry weather, like a pauper's pit before the lime when it rained. He claimed to be a necromancer, and that some disastrously botched ritual in the past had left him over-sensitive to ghosts – they followed him, he would assert, adding that by cutting off their mortal toes he took from the ghosts all sense of balance so that they fell down so often that he was able to leave them far behind.

Indeed, he looked a haunted man, but, as Blend had pointed out, who wouldn't be haunted with all those dead toes hanging from him?

The journey had been an exhausting one. Being strapped to the rear saddle of a quorl and shivering in the fiercely cold winds, as league after league passed beneath, had a way of leaving one enervated, stiff-limbed and leaden. The sodden nature of this mountainside forest didn't help. She was frozen down to her bones. There'd be rain and mist all morning – the warmth of the sun would not arrive until the afternoon.

Mallet moved to her side. 'Lieutenant,' he said.

She scowled at him. 'Any idea what they're talking about, Healer?'

Mallet glanced down at the mages. 'They're just worried, sir. About those condors. They've had close enough looks at them of late and there doesn't seem much doubt that those birds are anything but birds.'

'Well, we'd all guessed that.'

'Aye.' Mallet shrugged, added, 'And, I expect, Paran's news about Anomander Rake and Moon's Spawn hasn't left their minds at ease. If they've been lost, as the captain believes, taking Coral – and taking down the Pannion Seer – will be a lot uglier.'

'We might get slaughtered, you mean.'

'Well...'

Picker's attention slowly fixed on the healer. 'Out with it,' she growled.

'Just a hunch, Lieutenant.'

'Which is?'

'Quick Ben and the captain, sir. They've got something else planned, stewed up between them, that is. Or so I suspect. I've known Quick a long time, you see, up close. I've picked up a sense of how he works. We're here covertly, right? The lead elements for Dujek. But for those two it's a double-blind – there's another mission hiding under this one, and I don't think Onearm knows anything about it.'

Picker slowly blinked. 'And Whiskeyjack?'

Mallet grinned sourly. 'As to that, I can't say, sir.'

'Is it just you with these suspicions, Healer?'

'No. Whiskeyjack's squad. Hedge. Trotts – the damned Barghast is showing his sharp teeth a lot and when he does that it usually means he knows something's going on but doesn't know exactly what, only he won't let on with that last bit. If you gather my meaning.'

Picker nodded. She'd seen Trotts grinning almost every time she'd set eyes on the warrior the past few days. Unnerving, despite Mallet's explanation.

Blend appeared in front of them.

Picker's scowl deepened.

'Sorry, Lieutenant,' she said. 'Captain sniffed me out – not sure how, but he did. I didn't get much chance to listen in, I'm afraid. Anyway, I'm to tell you to get the squads ready.'
'Finally,' Picker muttered. 'I was about to freeze in place.'

'Even so,' Mallet said, 'but I'm already missing the Moranth – these woods are damned dark.'

'But empty, right?'

The healer shrugged. 'Seems so. It's the skies we've got to worry about, come the day.'

Picker straightened. 'Follow me, you two. Time to rouse the others ...'

Brood's march to Maurik had become something of a race, the various elements of his army straggling out depending on whatever speed they could maintain – or, in the case of the Grey Swords and Gruntle's legion, what they chose to maintain. As a consequence, the forces were now stretched over almost a league of scorched farmland along the battered trader road leading south, with the Grey Swords, Trake's Legion and another ragtag force in effect forming a rearguard, by virtue of their leisurely pace.

Itkovian had chosen to remain in Gruntle's company. The big Daru and Stonny Menackis wove a succession of tales from their shared past that kept Itkovian entertained, as much from the clash of their disparate recollections as from the often outrageous events the two described.

It had been a long time since Itkovian had last allowed himself such pleasure. He had come to value highly their company, in particular their appalling irreverence.

On rare occasions, he rode up to the Grey Swords, spoke with the Shield Anvil and the Destriant, but the awkwardness soon forced him to leave – his old company had begun to heal, drawing into its weave the Tenescowri recruits, training conducted on the march and when the company halted at dusk. And, as the soldiers grew tighter, the more Itkovian felt himself to be an outsider – the more he missed the family he had known all his adult life.

At the same time, they were his legacy, and he allowed himself a measure of pride when looking upon them. The new Shield Anvil had assumed the title and all it demanded – and for the first time Itkovian understood how others must have seen him, when he'd held the Reve's title. Remote, uncompromising, entirely self-contained. A hard figure, promising brutal justice. Granted, he'd had both Brukhalian and Karnadas from whom he could draw support. But, for the new Shield Anvil, there was naught but the Destriant – a young Capan woman of few words who had herself been a recruit not too long ago. Itkovian well understood how alone the Shield Anvil must be feeling, yet he could think of no way to ease that burden. Every word of advice he gave came, after all, from a man who had – in his own mind at least – failed his god.

His return to Gruntle and Stonny, each time, held the bitter flavour of flight.

'You chew on things like no other man I've known,' Gruntle said.

Blinking, Itkovian glanced over at the Daru. 'Sir?'

'Well, not quite true, come to think of it. Buke ...'

On Itkovian's other side, Stonny sniffed. 'Buke? Buke was a drunk.'

'More than that, you miserable woman,' Gruntle replied. 'He carried on his shoulders—'

'None of that,' Stonny warned.

To Itkovian's surprise, Gruntle fell abruptly silent. *Buke ... ah, I recall. On his shoulders, the deaths of loved ones.* There is no need, Stonny Menackis, for such uncharacteristic sensitivity. I see how I appear, to you both, similar to Buke. I am curious: did your sad friend seek redemption in his life? While he may have refused me when I was Shield Anvil, he might well have drawn strength from some inner resolve.'

'Not a chance, Itkovian,' Stonny said. 'Buke drank to keep his torment at bay. He wasn't looking for redemption. He wanted death, plain and simple.'
'Not simple,' Gruntle objected. 'He wanted an honourable death, such as his family was denied – by that honour he would redeem them in exchange. I know, a twisted notion, but what went on in his mind is less a mystery to me than to most, I suspect.'

'Because you've thought the same,' Stonny snapped. 'Even though you didn't lose a family to some tenement fire. Even though the worst thing you've lost is maybe that harlot who married that merchant—'

'Stonny,' the Daru growled, 'I lost Harllo. I nearly lost you.'

The admission clearly left her speechless.

Ah, these two . . . 'The distinction,' Itkovian said, 'between myself and Buke lies in the notion of redemption. I accept torment, such as it is for me, and so acknowledge responsibility for all that I have and have not done. As Shield Anvil, my faith demanded that I relieve others of their pain. In the name of Fener, I was to bring peace to souls, and to do so without judgement. This I have done.'

'But your god's gone,' Stonny said. 'So who, in Hood's name, did you deliver those souls to?'

'Why, no-one, Stonny Menackis. I carry them still.'

Stonny was glaring across at Gruntle, who answered her with a despondent shrug. 'As I told you, lass,' he muttered.

She rounded on Itkovian. 'You damned fool! That new Shield Anvil – what about her? Won't she embrace your burden or whatever it is you do? Won't she take those souls – she has a god, damn her!' Stonny gathered her reins. 'If she thinks she can—'

'Itkovian stayed her with a hand. 'No, sir. She has offered, as she must. But she is not ready for such a burden – it would kill her, destroy her soul – and that would wound her god, perhaps fatally so.'

Stonny pulled her arm away, but remained beside him. Her eyes were wide. 'And what, precisely, do you plan on doing with – with – all of those souls?'

'I must find a means, Stonny Menackis, of redeeming them. As my god would have done.'

'Madness! You're not a god! You're a damned mortal! You can't—'

'But I must. So, you see, I am like yet unlike your friend Buke. Forgive me, sirs, for "chewing" on such things. I know my answer awaits me – soon, I believe – and you are right, I would do better to simply exercise calm patience. I have held on this long, after all.'

'Be as you are, Itkovian,' Gruntle said. 'We talk too much, Stonny and I. That's all. Forgive us.'

'There is nothing to forgive, sir.'

'Why can't I have normal friends?' Stonny demanded. ' Ones without tiger stripes and cat eyes? Ones without a hundred thousand souls riding their backs? Here comes a rider from that other lagging company – maybe he's normal! Hood knows, he's dressed like a farmer and looks inbred enough to manage only simple sentences. A perfect man! Hey! You! No, what are you hesitating for? Come to us, then! Please!'

The lanky figure riding what seemed to be an odd breed of dray horse cautiously walked his mount forward. In terribly accented Daru, he called out, 'Hello, friends! Is this a bad time? It seems you argue—'

'Argue?' Stonny snorted. 'You've been living in the woods too long if you think that was an argument! Come closer, and how by the Abyss did you come by such a huge nose?'

The man wilted, hesitated.

'Stonny!' Gruntle admonished. He addressed the rider, 'This woman is rude and miserable to everyone, soldier.'
'I wasn't being rude!' she exclaimed. 'Big noses are like big hands, that's all...'

No-one spoke.

Slowly, the stranger's long, narrow face deepened to crimson.

'Welcome, sir,' Itkovian said. 'Regrets that we have not met before – especially since we all seem to have been left behind by Brood's vanguard, and the Rhivi and all the other companies.'

The man managed a nod. 'Yeah. We'd noticed. I am High Marshal Straw, of the Mott Irregulars.' His pale, watery eyes flicked to Gruntle. 'Nice tattoos. I've got one, too.' He rolled up a grimy sleeve, revealing a muddled, misshapen image on his dirt-smeared shoulder. 'Not sure what happened to it, but it was supposed to be a treefrog on a stump. Of course, treefrogs are hard to see, so it might be pretty good at that – that smudge – here – I think that's the treefrog. Could be a mushroom, though.' His smile revealing enormous teeth, he rolled down his sleeve once more and settled back in his saddle. He suddenly frowned. 'Do you know where we're marching to? And why is everyone in such a hurry?'

'Uh ...'

It seemed all Gruntle could manage, so Itkovian spoke up, 'Excellent questions, sir. We march to a city called Maurik, there to rejoin the Malazan army. From Maurik, we will proceed further south, to the city of Coral.'

Straw frowned. 'Will there be a battle at Maurik?'

'No, the city is abandoned. It is simply a convenient locale for the reunification.'

'And Coral?'

'There will likely be a battle there, yes.'

'Cities don't run away. So why are they all rushing?'

Itkovian sighed. 'A perspicacious enquiry, sir, one that leads to certain challenges to previously held assumptions for all concerned.'

'What?'

'Good question, he said,' Stonny drawled.

The Marshal nodded. 'That's why I asked it. I'm known for asking good questions.'

'We see that,' she replied levelly.

'Brood's in a hurry,' Gruntle said, 'because he wants to get to Maurik before the Malazans – who seem to be marching at a faster pace than we'd thought possible.'

'So?'

'Well, uh, the alliance has become rather ... uncertain, of late.'

'They're Malazans – what did you expect?'

'To be honest,' Gruntle said, 'I don't think Brood knew what to expect. Are you saying you're not surprised by the recent schism?'

'Schism? Oh, right. No. Anyway, it's obvious why the Malazans are moving so fast.'

Itkovian leaned forward in his saddle. 'It is?'

Straw shrugged. 'We've some of our people there—'

'You have spies among the Malazans?' Gruntle demanded.
'Sure. We always do. It pays to know what they're up to, especially when we was fighting them. Just because we allied with them there was no reason not to keep watching.'

'So why are they marching so fast, Marshal Straw?'

'The Black Moranth, of course. Coming each night, taking whole companies away. There's only about four thousand Malazans left on the road, and half of them support. Dujek's gone, too. Whiskeyjack leads the march – they've come to Maurik River and are making barges.'

'Barges?'

'Sure. To float down the river, I guess. Not to cross, since there was a ford there anyway, and the barges are downriver of it besides.'

'And the river, of course,' Gruntle muttered, 'will take them straight to Maurik. In only a few days.'

Itkovian addressed the Marshal. 'Sir, have you made Caladan Brood aware of this information?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

Straw shrugged again. 'Well, me and the Bole brothers, we talked about that, some.'

'And?'

'We decided that Brood's kind of forgotten.'

'Forgotten, sir? Forgotten what?'

'About us. The Mott Irregulars. We think maybe he'd planned on leaving us behind. Up north. Blackdog Forest. There might have been some kind of order, back then, something about us staying while he went south. We're not sure. We can't remember.'

Gruntle cleared his throat. 'Have you considered informing the warlord of your presence?'

'Well, we don't want to make him mad. I think there was some kind of order, you see. Something like "go away", maybe.'

'Go away? Why would Brood say that to you?'

'Uh, that's just it. Not the warlord. Kallor. That's what had us confused. We don't like Kallor. We usually ignore his orders. So, anyway, here we are. Who are you people?'

'I think, sir,' Itkovian said, 'you should send a rider to Brood – with your report on the Malazans.'

'Oh, we have people there, too, up in the vanguard. They'd been trying to reach the warlord, but Kallor kept turning them back.'

'Now, that's curious,' Gruntle murmured.

'Kallor says we shouldn't even be here. Says the warlord will be furious. So, we're not going close any more. We're thinking of turning round, in fact. We miss Mott Wood – there's no trees here. We like wood. All kinds – we've just reacquired this amazing table ... no legs, though, they seemed to have snapped off.'

'For what it is worth,' Gruntle said, 'we'd rather you didn't leave the army, Marshal.'

The man's long face grew glum.

'There's trees!' Stonny suddenly exclaimed. 'South! A forest, around Coral!' The High Marshal brightened. 'Really?'
'Indeed,' Itkovian said. 'Purportedly a forest of cedars, firs and spruce.'

'Oh, that's OK, then. I'll tell the others. They'll be happy again, and it's better when they're all happy. They've been blunting their weapons of late -- a bad sign when they do that.'

'Blunting, sir?'

Straw nodded. 'Dull the edges, make nicks. That way, the damage they do is a lot messier. It's a bad sign when they get into that kind of mood. Very bad. Pretty soon they start dancing around the fire at night. Then that stops and when it stops you know it couldn't get worse, because that means the lads are ready to make war parties, head out in the night looking for something to kill. They been eyeing that big wagon on our trail...'

'Oh,' Gruntle said, 'don't do that -- tell them not to do that, Marshal. Those people—'

'Necromancers, yeah. Dour. Very dour. We don't like necromancers, especially the Bole brothers don't like necromancers. They had one squatting on their land, you know, holed up in some old ruined tower in the swamp. Wraiths and spectres every night. So finally the Boles had to do something about it, and they went and rousted the squatter. It was messy, believe me -- anyway, they strung up what was left of him at the Low Crossroads, just as a warning to others, you see.'

'These Bole brothers,' Itkovian said, 'sound to be a formidable pair.'

'Pair?' Straw's tangled brows rose. 'There's twenty-three of 'em. Not one of 'em shorter than me. And smart -- some of 'em, anyway. Can't read, of course, but can count past ten and that's something, isn't it? Anyway, I got to go. Tell everyone about the trees down south. Goodbye.'

They watched the man ride off.

'He never did get an answer to his question,' Gruntle said after a while.

Itkovian glanced at him. 'Which was?'

'Who we are.'

'Don't be an idiot,' Stonny said, 'he knows precisely who we are.'

'You think that was an act?'

'High Marshal Straw! Abyss take me, of course it was! And he had you both, didn't he? Well, not me. I saw right through it. Instantly.'

'Do you think Brood should be informed, sir?' Itkovian asked her.

'About what?'

'Well, the Malazans, for one.'

'Does it make any difference? Brood will still reach Maurik first. So we wait two days instead of two weeks, what of it? Just means we get this whole mess over with that much sooner -- Hood knows, maybe Dujek's already conquered Coral -- and he can have it, as far as I'm concerned.'

'You've got a point,' Gruntle muttered.

'Itkovian glanced away. Perhaps she has. To what am I riding? What do I still seek from this world? I do not know. I care nothing for this Pannion Seer -- he'll accept no embrace from me, after all, assuming the Malazans leave him breathing, which is itself unlikely.

Is this why I lag so far behind those who will reshape the world? Indifferent, empty of concern? I seem to be done -- why can I not accept that truth? My god is gone -- my burden is my own. Perhaps there is no answer for me -- is that what the new Shield Anvil sees when she looks upon me with such pity in her eyes?
Is the entirety of my life now behind me, save for the daily, senseless trudge of this body?

Perhaps I am done. Finally done . . .

'Cheer up, Itkovian,' Gruntle said, 'the war might be over before we get even close – wouldn't that be a wild whimper to close this tale, eh?'

'Rivers are for drinking from and drowning in,' Hetan grumbled, one arm wrapped about a barrel.

Whiskeyjack smiled. 'I thought your ancestors were seafarers,' he said.

'Who finally came to their senses and buried their damn canoes once and for all.'

'You are sounding uncharacteristically irreverent, Hetan.'

'I'm about to puke on your boots, old man, how else should I sound?'

'Ignore my daughter,' Humbrall Taur said, hide-wrapped feet thumping as he approached. 'She's been bested by a Daru.'

'Do not mention that slug!' Hetan hissed.

'You'll be pleased to know he's been on another barge these last three days whilst you suffered,' Whiskeyjack told her. 'Recovering.'

'He only left this one because I swore I'd kill him,' Hetan muttered. 'He wasn't supposed to get besotted, the slimy worm! Spirits below, such an appetite!'

Humbrall Taur's laugh rumbled. 'I had never thought to witness such delicious—'

'Oh, be quiet, Father!'

The huge Barghast warchief winked at Whiskeyjack. 'I now look forward to actually meeting this man from Darujhistan.'

'Then I should forewarn you that appearances deceive,' Whiskeyjack said, 'particularly in the person of Kruppe.'

'Oh, I have seen him from afar, being dragged hither and thither by my daughter, at least in the beginning. And then of late I noted that the role of the master had reversed. Remarkable. Hetan is very much my wife's child, you see.'

'And where is your wife?'

'Almost far enough away back in the White Face Range to leave me breathing easily. Almost. Perhaps, by Coral. . .'

Whiskeyjack smiled, feeling once more his wonder at the gifts of friendship he had received of late.

The once-tamed shore of River Maurik swept past opposite him. Reeds surrounded fishing docks and mooring poles; old boats lay rott ing and half buried in silts on the bank. Grasses grew high around fisher shacks further up the strand. The abandonment and all it signified darkened his mood momentarily.

'Even for me,' Humbrall Taur growled beside him, 'it is an unwelcome sight.'

Whiskeyjack sighed.

'We approach the city, yes?'

The Malazan nodded. 'Perhaps another day.'
Behind them, Hetan groaned in answer to that.

'Do you imagine that Brood knows?'

'I think so, at least in some part. We've got Mott Irregulars among the stablers and handlers...'

'Mott Irregulars – who or what is that, Commander?'

'Something vaguely resembling a mercenary company, Warchief. Woodcutters and farmers, for the most part. Created by accident – by us Malazans, in fact. We'd just taken the city of Oraz and were marching west to Mott – which promptly surrendered with the exception of the outlanders in Mott Wood. Dujek didn't want a company of renegades preying on our supply lines with us pushing ever inland, so he sent the Bridgeburners into Mott Wood with the aim of hunting them down. A year and a half later and we were still there. The Irregulars were running circles around us. And the times they'd decided to stand and fight, it was as if some dark swamp god possessed them – they bloodied our noses more than once. Did the same to the Gold Moranth. Eventually, Dujek pulled us out, but by then the Mott Irregulars had been contacted by Brood. He drew them into his army. In any case,' he shrugged, 'they're a deceptive bunch, keep coming back like a bad infestation of gut-worms – which we've learned to live with. '

'So you know what your enemy knows of you,' Humbrall nodded.

'More or less.'

'You Malazans,' the Barghast said, shaking his head, 'play a complicated game.'

'Sometimes,' Whiskeyjack conceded. 'At other times, we're plain simple.'

'One day, your armies will march to the White Face Range.'

'I doubt it.'

'Why not?' Humbrall Taur demanded. 'Are we not worthy enough foes, Commander?'

'Too worthy, Warchief. No, the truth is this. We have treated with you, and the Malazan Empire takes such precedents seriously. You will be met with respect and offers to establish trade, borders and the like – if you so desire. If not, the envoys will depart and that will be the last you ever see of the Malazans, until such time as you decide otherwise.'

'Strange conquerors, you foreigners.'

'Aye, we are at that.'

'Why are you on Genabackis, Commander?'

'The Malazan Empire? We're here to unify, and through unification, grow rich. We're not selfish about getting rich, either.'

Humbrall Taur thumped his coin-threaded hauberk. 'And silver is all that interests you?'

'Well, there's more than one kind of wealth, Warchief.'

'Indeed?' The huge warrior's eyes had narrowed.

Whiskeyjack smiled. 'Meeting the White Face clans of the Barghast is one such reward. Diversity is worth celebrating, Humbrall Taur, for it is the birthplace of wisdom.'

'Your words?'

'No, the Imperial Historian, Duiker.'

'And he speaks for the Malazan Empire?'
'In the best of times.'

'And are these the best of times?'

Whiskeyjack met the warrior's dark eyes. 'Perhaps they are.'

'Will you two be quiet!' Hetan growled behind them. 'I am about to die.'

Humbrall Taur swung about to study his daughter where she crouched against the barrels of grain. 'A thought,' he rumbled.

'What?'

'Only that you might not be seasick, daughter.'

'Really! Then what—' Hetan's eyes went wide. 'Spirits below!'

Moments later, Whiskeyjack was forced to lean unceremoniously, feet first, over the barge's gunnel, the current tugging at his boots, the flowing water giving them a thorough cleansing.

A seastorm had struck Maurik some time since its desertion, toppling ornamental trees and heaping seaweed-tangled dunes of sand against building walls. The streets were buried beneath an unmarred, evenly rippled white carpet of sand, leaving no bodies or other detritus visible.

Korlat rode alone down the port city's main thoroughfare. Squat, sprawling warehouses were on her left, civic buildings, taverns, inns and trader shops on her right. Overhead, hauling ropes linked the upper floors of the warehouses to the flat rooftops of the trader shops, festooned now with seagrasses as if decorated for a maritime festival.

Apart from what came with the warm wind's steady sigh, there was no movement down the length of the street, nor in the alleys intersecting it. Windows and doorways gaped black and forlorn. The warehouses had been stripped bare, their wide sliding doors facing onto the street left open.

She approached the westernmost reaches of the city, the smell of the sea behind her giving way to a sweeter taint of freshwater decay from the river beyond the warehouses on her left.

Caladan Brood, Kallor and the others had elected to ride round Maurik, inland, on their way to the flats, Crone flying overhead for a time, before once more winging away. Korlat had never known the Matron Great Raven to be so rattled. If indeed the loss of contact meant that Anomander Rake and Moon's Spawn had been destroyed, then Crone had lost both her master and her murder's roost. Unpleasant notions, both. More than enough to crook the Great Raven's wings with despair as she continued on, south once more.

Korlat had decided to ride alone, taking a route longer than the others – through the city. There was no need for haste, after all, and anticipation had a way of drawing out any stationary wait – better, then, to lengthen the approach at a controlled pace. There was much to think about, after all. If her Lord was well, then she would have to stand before him and formally sever her service – ending a relationship that had existed for fourteen thousand years, or, rather, suspending it for a time. For the remaining years of a mortal man's life. And if some calamity had befallen Anomander Rake, then Korlat would find herself the ranking commander to the dozen Tiste Andii who, like her, had remained with Brood's army. She would make that responsibility shortlived, for she had no wish to rule her kin. She would free them to decide their own fates.

Anomander Rake had unified these Tiste Andii by strength of personality – a quality Korlat well knew she did not share. The disparate causes in which he chose to engage himself and his people were, she had always assumed, each a reflection upon a single theme – but that theme and its nature had ever eluded Korlat. There were wars, there were struggles, enemies, allies, victories and losses. A procession through centuries that seemed random not just to her, but to her kin as well.

A sudden thought came to her, twisting like a dull knife in her chest. Perhaps Anomander Rake was equally lost. Perhaps this endless succession of causes reflects his own search. I had all along assumed a simple goal –
to give us a reason to exist, to take upon ourselves the nobility of others . . . others for whom the struggle meant something. Was that not the theme underlying all we have done? Why do I now doubt? Why do I now believe that, if a theme does indeed exist, it is something other?

Something far less noble . . .

She attempted to shake off such thoughts, before they dragged her towards despair. *For despair is the nemesis of the Tiste Andii. How often have I seen my kin fall on the field of battle, and have known – deep in my soul – that my brothers and sisters did not die through an inability to defend themselves? They died, because they had chosen to die. Shin by their own despair.*

*Our gravest threat.*

*Does Anomander Rake lead us away from despair – is that his only purpose, his only goal? Is his a theme of denial? If so, then, dear Mother Dark, he was right in seeking to confound our understanding, in seeking to keep us from ever realizing his singular, pathetic goal. And I – I should never have pursued these thoughts, should never have clawed my way to this conclusion.*

*Discovering my Lord’s secret holds no reward. Curse of the Light, he has spent centuries evading my questions, discouraging my desire to come to know him, to pierce through his veil of mystery. And I have been hurt by it, I have lashed out at him more than once, and he has stood before my anger and frustration. Silent.*

*To choose not to share . . . what I had seen as arrogance, as patronizing behaviour of the worst sort – enough to leave me incensed . . . ah, Lord, you held to the hardest mercy.*

*And if despair assails us, it assails you a hundredfold . . .*

She knew now she would not release her kin. Like Rake, she could not abandon them, and like Rake, she could voice no truth when they begged – or demanded – justification.

*And so, should that moment come soon, I must needs find strength – the strength to lead – the strength to hide the truth from my kin.*

*Oh, Whiskeyjack, how will I be able to tell you this? Our desires were . . . simplistic. Foolishly romantic. The world holds no paradise for you and me, dear lover. Thus, all I can offer is that you join me, that you stay at my side. And I pray to Mother Dark, how I pray, that it will, for you, be enough . . .*

The city's outskirts persisted along the river's edge in a straggly, ramshackle ribbon of fisher huts, smokeshacks and drying nets, storm-battered and rubbish-strewn. The settlement reached upriver to the very edge of the flats, and indeed a half-score shacks on stilts connected by raised causeways encroached upon the reedy sweep of mud itself.

Twin lines of poles on this side of the river marked out the wide underwater trench that had been excavated, leading to the edge of the flats, where broad, solid platforms had been built. River Maurik's mouth to the east was impassable to all but the most shallow-draughted craft, for its bed constantly shifted beneath the clash of tide and current, raising hidden bars of sand in the span of a few bells, then sweeping them away to create others elsewhere. Supplies brought downriver off-loaded west of the mouth – here at the flats.

The warlord, Kallor, Outrider Hurlochel and Korlat's second, Orfantal, stood on the platform, their horses tethered on the road at the platform's inland edge.

*All four men faced upriver.*

Korlat guided her horse onto the causeway linking the city and the platform. As she reached the slightly higher elevation of the raised road, she saw the first of the Malazan barges.

*Sorcery had aided in their construction, she concluded. They were solid, sound craft, flat-bottomed and broad. Massive, untrimmed logs framed the hulls. Tarpaulins roofed at least half of each deck. She saw no fewer than twenty of them from her vantage point. Even with sorcery, building these must have been a huge undertaking. Then again, to have completed them so quickly . . .*
Ah, is this what the Black Moranth were up to all this time? If so, then Dujek and Whiskeyjack had planned for this from the very beginning.

Great Ravens circled the flotilla, their shrieks audibly derisive.

Soldiers, Barghast and horses were visible on the lead barge. At the inland edge of the platform, Korlat reined in beside the greeting party's horses, dismounted. A Rhivi collected the reins. She nodded her thanks and strode the length of the platform to come alongside Caladan Brood.

The warlord's face revealed no expression, whilst Kallor's was twisted into an ugly sneer.

Orfantal moved to join Korlat, bowing his greeting. 'Sister,' he said in their native tongue, 'was the ride through Maurik pleasing?'

'How long have you been standing here, brother?'

'Perhaps a bell and a half.'

'Then I have no regrets.'

He smiled. 'A silent bell and a half at that. Almost long enough to drive a Tiste Andii to distraction.'

'Liar. We can stand around in silence for weeks, as you well know, brother.'

'Ah, but that is without emotion, is it not? I know for myself, I simply listen to the wind, and so am not troubled.'

She glanced at him. Without emotion? Now your lying is no jest.

'And, I dare say,' Orfantal continued, 'the tension still rises.'

'You two,' Kallor growled, 'speak a language we can understand, if you must speak at all. There's been enough dissembling here to last a lifetime.'

Orfantal faced him and said in Daru, 'Not your lifetime, surely, Kallor?'

The ancient warrior bared his teeth in a silent snarl.

'That will do,' Brood rumbled. 'I'd rather the Malazans not see us bickering.'

Korlat could see Whiskeyjack now, standing near the broad, blunt bow of the lead barge. He was helmed, in full armour. Humbrall Taur stood beside him, his coin hauberk glittering. The Barghast was clearly enjoying the moment, standing tall and imperious, both hands resting on the heads of the throwing axes belted to his hips. The standard-bearer, Artanthos, hovered in the background, arms crossed, a half-smile on his lean face.

Soldiers were manning the sweeps, shouting to one another as they guided the craft between the poles. The manoeuvre was deftly done, as the huge barge slipped from the stronger currents and glided gently down the approach.

Korlat watched, her eyes on Whiskeyjack – who had in turn seen her – as the craft drew closer to the platform.

The crunch and grind as the barge came alongside the landing was muted. Soldiers with lines poured from the side onto the platform and made fast. Out on the river, the other barges were each pulling towards the shore to make their own landing along the muddy strand.

Hetan appeared between her father and Whiskeyjack and pushed forward to leap onto the platform. There was no colour in her face and her legs almost buckled beneath her. Orfantal rushed forward to offer a supporting arm – which she batted away with a snarl before stumbling past them all towards the far end of the platform.
'Well thought,' Humbrall Taur boomed with a laugh. 'But if you value your life, Tiste Andii, leave the lass to her gravid misery. Warlord! Thank you for the formal greeting! We've hastened the day to Coral, yes?' The Barghast warchief stepped onto the platform, Whiskeyjack following.

'Unless there's another hundred barges upstream,' Brood growled, 'you've lost two-thirds of your forces. Now, how did that come to be?'

'Three clans came for the float, Warlord,' Humbrall Taur replied, grinning. 'The rest elected to walk. Our spirit gods were amused, yes? Though, I grant you, sourly so!'

'Well met, Warlord,' Whiskeyjack said. 'We'd not the watercraft to carry the entire force, alas. Thus, Dujek Onearm decided to split the army—'

'And where in Hood's name is he?' Kallor demanded. 'As if I need to ask,' he added.

Whiskeyjack shrugged. 'The Black Moranth are taking them—'

'To Coral, yes,' Kallor snapped. 'To what end, Malazan? To conquer the city in the name of your empire?'

'I doubt that is possible,' Whiskeyjack replied. 'But if it were, would you so dearly resent arriving at a pacified Coral, Kallor? If your bloodlust needs appeasing—'

'I never thirst for long, Malazan,' Kallor said, one gauntleted hand lifting towards the bastard sword strapped to his back.

'It seems,' Brood said, ignoring Kallor, 'that there have been considerable changes to what we had agreed was a sound plan. Indeed,' he continued, eyes shifting to the barge, 'that plan was clearly created with deceit in your mind, from the very start.'

'I disagree,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Just as you had Moon's Spawn and whatever Rake intended to do with it as your own private plan, we concluded that we'd best fashion something similar. The precedent is yours, Warlord—so I do not think you are in a position to voice complaint.'

'Commander,' Brood grated, 'we had never intended Moon's Spawn to launch a pre-emptive strike on Coral in order to gain advantage over our presumed allies. The timing we have held to has been towards a combined effort.'

'And Dujek still agrees with you, Warlord. As do I. Tell me, has Crone managed to get close to Coral?'

'She attempts to do so yet again.'

'And she will likely be driven back once more. Meaning, we've no intelligence as to the preparations being made against us. If the Pannion Seer or his advisers have even a modicum of military acuity, they will have set up a trap for us—something we cannot help but march into by virtue of drawing within sight of Coral's walls. Warlord, our Black Moranth have delivered Captain Paran and the Bridgeburners to within ten leagues of the city, to make a covert approach and so discover what the Pannions have devised. But the Bridgeburners alone are not sufficient to counter those efforts, whatever they may be. Thus, Dujek leads six thousand of the Host, delivered by the Black Moranth, with the intention of destroying whatever the Pannions have planned.'

'And why in Hood's name should we believe you?' Kallor demanded. 'You've done nothing but lie—since the very beginning.'

Whiskeyjack shrugged once more. 'If six thousand Malazan soldiers are sufficient to take Coral and destroy the Pannion Domin, then we have seriously overestimated our enemy. I don't think we have. I think we're in for a fight, and whatever advantage we can achieve beforehand, we will likely need.'

'Commander,' Brood said, 'the Pannion forces are augmented by Mage Cadres, as well as these unnatural condors. How does Dujek hope to defend against them? Your army has no sorcerers to speak of.'

'Quick Ben's there, and he's found a means to access his warrens without interference. Secondly, they have
the Black Moranth to challenge for control of the skies, and a respectable supply of munitions. But I will grant you, it might not be enough.'

'You might see more than half your army slaughtered, Commander.'

'It's possible, Warlord. Thus, if it is agreeable to you, we should now make all haste to Coral.'

'Indeed,' Kallor snarled. 'Perhaps we'd be better off to leave the Pannions to exhaust themselves destroying Dujek and his six thousand, and then we arrive. Warlord, hear me. The Malazans have fashioned their own potentially fatal situation, and now come begging that we relieve them of the cost. I say, let the bastards rot.'

Korlat sensed that Kallor's judgement reached through to Brood. She saw the warlord hesitate. 'A rather petty response,' she sniffed. 'Stained by emotion. Therefore, probably tactically suicidal on all our parts.'

Kallor wheeled. 'You, woman, cannot pretend to objectivity! Of course you'd side with your lover!'

'If his position was untenable, I most certainly would not, Kallor. And there lies the difference between you and me.' She faced Caladan Brood. 'I now speak for the Tiste Andii accompanying your army, Warlord. I urge you to hasten our march to Coral, with the aim of relieving Dujek. Commander Whiskeyjack has arrived with sufficient barges to effect a swift crossing to the south shore. Five days of quickmarch will bring us within sight of Coral.'

'Or eight days at a normal pace,' Kallor said, 'ensuring that we arrive well rested. Is Onearm's Host so overrated that they cannot hold out an extra three days?'

'Trying a new tack?' Orfantal asked Kallor.

The grey warrior shrugged.

Brood's breath hissed between his teeth. 'He now speaks with reasoned consideration, Tiste Andii. Five days, or eight. Exhausted, or rested and thus capable of engaging the enemy at once. Which of the two is more tactically sound?'

'It could mean the difference between joining a sound, efficacious force and finding naught but chopped up corpses,' Whiskeyjack said. He shook himself. 'Decide what you will, then. We will leave you the barges, of course, but my forces will cross first – we'll risk the exhaustion.' He swung about and gestured towards Aranthos who had remained on the barge. The standard-bearer nodded, reached down and collected a half-dozen signal flags, then set off towards the stern.

'You anticipated this,' Kallor hissed, 'didn't you?'

_That you would win the day, yes, I think he did._

Whiskeyjack said nothing.

'And so, your forces reach Coral first, after all. Very clever, bastard. Very clever indeed.'

Korlat stepped up to Brood. 'Warlord, do you hold to your faith in the Tiste Andii?'

The huge man frowned. 'To you and your kin? Aye, of course I do.'

'Very well, then we will accompany Commander Whiskeyjack, Humbrall Taur and their forces. And so represent your interests. Orfantal and I are Soletaken – one of us can if need be bring swift word back to you, either of peril, or of betrayal. Further, our presence might well prove decisive should it be necessary to effect Dujek's withdrawal from an unwinnable engagement.'

Kallor laughed. 'The lovers rejoined, and we are asked to bow before false objectivity—'

Orfantal took a step towards Kallor. 'That was the last insult you will deliver to the Tiste Andii,' he said quietly.
'Stop!' bellowed Caladan Brood. 'Kallor, know this: I hold to my trust in the Tiste Andii. Nothing you can say will shake that faith, for it was earned centuries ago, a hundredfold, and not once betrayed. Your loyalty, on the other hand, I begin to doubt more and more...'

'Beware your fears, Warlord,' Kallor growled, 'lest you make them true.'

Brood's response was so low Korlat barely heard it. 'You now taunt me, Kallor?'

The warrior slowly paled. 'What would be the value of that?' he asked quietly, tonelessly.

'Indeed.'

Korlat turned to her brother. 'Call our kin, Orfantal. We shall accompany the commander and warchief.'

'As you say, sister.' The Tiste Andii pivoted, then paused and studied Kallor for a long moment, before saying, 'I think, old man, when all this is done...'

Kallor bared his teeth. 'You think what?'

'That I will come for you.'

Kallor held his smile in answer, but the strain of the effort was betrayed by a twitch along one lined cheek.

Orfantal set off towards the waiting horses.

Humbrall Taur's deep laugh broke the tense silence. 'And here we'd thought you'd be bickering when we arrived.'

Korlat faced the barge – and met Whiskeyjack's gaze. He managed a drawn smile, revealing to her the pressure he had been feeling. But it was what she saw in his eyes that quickened her heart. Love and relief, tenderness... and raw anticipation.

_Mother Dark, but these mortals live!

Riding side by side at a gentle canter, Gruntle and Itkovian reached the causeway and approached the platform. The sky was paling to the east, the air cool and clear. A score of Rhivi herders were guiding the last of the first three hundred bhederin onto the railed ramp.

A few hundred paces behind the two men, the second three hundred were being driven towards the causeway. There were at least two thousand bhederin to follow, and it was clear to Gruntle and Itkovian that, if they wished to lead their companies across the river any time soon, they would have to cut in.

The Malazans had built well, each barge carrying broad, solid ramps that neatly joined bow to bow, while the sterns had been designed to fit flush once the backwash guards had been removed. The bridge they formed when linked was both flexible where required, and secure everywhere else, and it was surprisingly wide – capable of allowing two wagons to travel side by side.

Commander Whiskeyjack and his companies of the Host had crossed the river more than fifteen bells ago, followed by Humbrall Taur's three clans of Barghast. Gruntle knew that Itkovian had hoped to see and meet with both men once again, in particular Whiskeyjack, but by the time they'd come within sight of the river, Malazan and Barghast were both long gone.

Caladan Brood had encamped his forces for the night on this side of River Maurik, rousing his troops three bells before dawn. They had just completed their crossing. Gruntle wondered at the disparity of pace between the two allied armies.

They reined in among the Rhivi herders. A tall, awkward-looking man who was not Rhivi stood off to one side, watching the bhederin thump their way across the first barge to hoots and whistles from the drivers.

Gruntle dismounted and approached the lone man. 'Mott Irregulars?' he asked.
'High Marshal Sty,' the man replied with a lopsided, toothy grin. 'I'm glad you're here – I can't understand these little guys at all. I've been trying real hard, too. I guess they're speaking a different language.'

Gruntle glanced back at Itkovian, expressionless, then faced the High Marshal once more. 'So they are. Have you been standing here long?'

'Since last night. Lots of people have crossed. Lots. I watched them put the barges together. They were fast. The Malazans know wood, all right. Did you know Whiskeyjack was apprenticed as a mason, before he became a soldier?'

'No, I didn't. What has that got to do with carpentry, High Marshal?'

'Nothing. I was just saying.'

'Are you waiting for the rest of your company?' Gruntle asked.

'Not really, though I suppose they'll show up sooner or later. They'll come after the bhederin, of course, so they can collect the dung. These little guys do that, too. We've had a few fights over that, you know. Tussles. Good-natured, usually. Look at them, what they're doing – kicking all that dung into a pile and guarding it. If I get any closer, they'll pull knives.'

'Well, then I'd suggest you not get any closer, High Marshal.'

Sty grinned again. 'There'd be no fun, then. I ain't waiting here for nothing, you know.'

Itkovian dismounted and joined them.

Gruntle swung to the herders, spoke in passable Rhivi, 'Which of you is in charge here?'

A wiry old man looked up, stepped forward. 'Tell him to go away!' he snapped, stabbing a finger at High Marshal Sty.

'Sorry,' Gruntle replied with a shrug, 'I can't order him to do anything, I'm afraid. I'm here for my legion and the Grey Swords. We'd like to cross ... before the rest of your herd—'

'No. Can't do that. No. You have to wait. Wait. The bhederin don't like to be split up. They get nervous. Unhappy. We need them calm on the crossing. You see that, don't you? No, you have to wait.'

'Well, how long do you think that will take?'

The Rhivi shrugged. 'It will be done when it is done.'

The second three hundred bhederin rumbled their way up the causeway. The herders moved to meet them.

Gruntle heard a meaty thud, then the Rhivi were all shouting, racing back. The Daru turned in time to see High Marshal Sty, the front of his long shirt pulled up around a hefty pile of dung, run full tilt past, onto the ramp, then thump down the length of the barge.

A single Rhivi herder, who had clearly been left to guard the dung, lay sprawled beside the looted heap, unconscious, the red imprint of a large, bony fist on his jaw.

Gruntle grinned over at the old herder, who was jumping about, spitting with fury.

Itkovian moved up alongside him. 'Sir, did you see that?'

'No, alas, just the tail end.'

'That punch came out of nowhere – I did not even see him step close. The poor Rhivi dropped like a sack of ... of—'

'Dung?'
After a long moment – so long that Gruntle thought it would never come – Itkovian smiled.

Rain clouds had rolled in from the sea, the rain driven on fierce winds, each drop striking iron helms, shields and leather rain-cloaks with enough force to shatter into mist. The abandoned farmland on all sides vanished behind a grey wall, the trader road churned to clinging mud beneath hooves, wagon wheels and boots.

Water sluicing down through his visor – which he had lowered in an only partially successful attempt to keep the rain from his eyes – Whiskeyjack struggled to make sense of the scene. A messenger had called him back from the vanguard, shouting barely heard words concerning a broken axle, the train halted in disarray, injured animals. At the moment, all he could make out was a mass of mud-covered soldiers scrambling, slipping, knotting ropes and shouting inaudibly to each other, and at least three wagons buried to their axles on what had once been the road but had since turned into a river of mud. Oxen were being pulled clear on the far side, the beasts bellowing.

He sat on his horse, watching. There was no point in cursing the fickle vagaries of nature, nor the failure of over-burdened wagons, nor even the pace which they all laboured under. His marines were doing what needed to be done, despite the apparent chaos. The squall was likely to be shortlived, given the season, and the sun's thirst was fierce. None the less, he wondered which gods had conspired against him, for since the crossing not a single day of this frantic march had passed without incident – and not one of those incidents had yielded mercy to their desires.

It would be two more days, at the very least, before they reached Coral. Whiskeyjack had received no communication from Quick Ben since before Maurik, and the wizard, Paran and the Bridgeburners had been still half a night's travel from Coral's environs at that time. He was sure they had reached the city by now, was equally certain that Dujek and his companies were even now closing in for the rendezvous. If a battle was to come, it would be very soon.

Whiskeyjack swung his horse round, nudged the weary beast along the track's edge to return to the vanguard. Night was fast approaching, and they would have to stop, at least for a few bells. He would then have some precious time alone with Korlat – the rigours of this march had kept them apart far too often, and while he and Korlat held to the belief that her Lord, Anomander Rake, could not yet be counted out, she had assumed the role of commander among her Tiste Andii kin in all respects – cold, remote, focused exclusively on the disposition of her brothers and sisters.

They were, under her direction, exploring Kurald Galain, their Warren of Darkness, drawing upon its power in an effort to purge it of the Crippled God's infection. Whiskeyjack had seen, upon their short-lived, infrequent reappearances, the cost borne by Orfantal and the other Tiste Andii. But Korlat wanted Kurald Galain's power within reach – without fear of corruption – by the time battle was joined at Coral.

A change had come to her, he sensed. Some bleak resolve had hardened all that was within her. Perhaps it was the possible death of Anomander Rake that had forced such induration upon her spirit. Or, perhaps, it was their future paths they had so naively entwined without regard for the harsh demands of the real world. The past was ever restless, for them both.

Whiskeyjack, in his heart, was certain that Anomander Rake was not dead. Nor even lost. In the half-dozen late-night conversations he had shared with the Lord of Moon's Spawn, the Malazan had acquired a sense of the Tiste Andii: despite the alliances, including the long-term partnership with Caladan Brood, Anomander Rake was a man of solitude – an almost pathological independence. He was indifferent to the needs of others, for whatever reassurance or confirmation they might expect or demand. He said he would be there for the assault on Coral, and so he will.

Through the grey murk ahead he could make out the vanguard, a knotted clump of mounted officers surrounding the fivesome of Humbrall Taur, Hetan, Cafal, Kruppe and Korlat on the road. Beyond them, he saw as he approached, the sky was lighter. They were about to fight their way clear of the squall, with Oponn's luck in time to halt and prepare a warm meal by sunset's warm glow before continuing on.

He was pushing his four thousand soldiers too hard. They were the finest he had ever commanded, yet he
was demanding the impossible from them. Though the Malazan understood it, Caladan Brood's sudden loss of faith had shaken Whiskeyjack, more than he would admit to anyone, even Korlat. A fast march by the combined forces might well have given the Seer pause – seeing the arrival of legion upon legion would give any enemy commander incentive to withdraw from an ongoing engagement with Dujek. Exhausted or not, sometimes numbers alone proved sufficient intimidation. The Pannion resources were limited: the Seer would not risk persisting in battle beyond the city's walls if it endangered his main army.

The appearance of four thousand mud-coated, stumbling soldiers was more likely to bring a smile to the Seer's lips. Whiskeyjack would have to make his few numbers count – the twelve Tiste Andii, the Ilgres Clan and Humbrall Taur's elite clans of the White Face would most likely prove crucial, though the combined Barghast support was less than two thousand.

*We threw ourselves into the sprint too soon, too far from our prey. In our senseless haste, we've left fifty thousand White Face Barghast far behind. This decision may be a fatal one ...*

Feeling old beyond his years, burdened by flaws born of a spirit mired deep in exhaustion, Whiskeyjack rejoined the vanguard.

Water streamed down the full-length chain surcoat, left long grey hair plastered against it down the back and across the wide but gaunt shoulders. Dull grey helmet gleamed, reflecting the pewter sky with milky indistinction. He stood motionless, head lowered, at the base of a shallow basin, his horse waiting a dozen paces behind him.

Flat, lifeless eyes studied the saturated prairie ground through his great-helm's fixed, slitted visor. Unblinking, narrowed eyes. Watching the flow of muddy water slashed by the frenzied rain, tiny rivulets, broader sweeps, a ceaseless flow through minute channels, over exposed stone, between the knotted roots of tufted grasses.

The water wended southward.

And here, in this basin, carrying oddly-coloured silts in racing streams, it flowed uphill.

*From dust... to mud. So you march with us after all. No, understand, I am pleased.*

Kallor swung round, strode back to his horse.

He rode along his own trail, and, with dusk gathering quickly beneath the leaden clouds and driving rain, came at last to the encampment. There were no fires outside the rows of tents, and the glow of lanterns was dull through patchy canvas. The muddy aisles were crowded with Great Ravens, hunched and motionless under the deluge.

Reining in before Caladan Brood's command tent, Kallor dismounted and strode within.

The outrider, Hurlochel, stood just within the flap, present as Brood's messenger should such need arise. The young man was wan, half asleep at his station. Ignoring him, Kallor raised his visor and stepped past.

The warlord was uncharacteristically slumped in a camp chair, his hammer resting across his thighs. He had not bothered to clean the mud from his armour or boots. His strangely bestial eyes lifted, took in Kallor, then dropped once more. 'I have made a mistake,' he rumbled.

'I agree, Warlord.'

That earned Brood's sharpened attention. 'You must have misunderstood...' 

'I have not. We should have joined Whiskeyjack. The annihilation of Onearm's Host – no matter how much that might please me personally – will be a tactical disaster for this campaign.'

'All very well, Kallor,' Brood rumbled, 'but there is little we can do about it, now.'
'This storm will pass, Warlord. You can increase our pace come the morning – we can perhaps shave off a day. I am here for another reason, however. One that is, conveniently, related to our change of heart.'

'Spit it out short and sweet, Kallor, or not at all.'

'I would ride to join Whiskeyjack and Korlat.'

'To what end? An apology?'

Kallor shrugged. 'If that would help. More directly, however, you seem to forget my ... experience. For all that I seem to grate upon all of you, I have walked this land when the T'lan Imass were but children. I have commanded armies a hundred thousand strong. I have spread the fire of my wrath across entire continents, and sat alone upon tall thrones. Do you grasp the meaning of this?'

'Yes. You never learn, Kallor.'

'Clearly,' he snapped, 'you do not grasp the meaning. I know a field of battle better than any man alive, including you.'

'The Malazans seem to have done very well on this continent without your help. Besides, what makes you think Whiskeyjack or Dujek will heed your suggestions?'

'They are rational men, Warlord. You forget something else about me, as well, it seems. With my blade drawn, I have not faced defeat in a hundred thousand years.'

'Kallor, you choose your enemies well. Have you ever crossed weapons with Anomander Rake? Dassem Ultor? Graymane? The Seguleh First?'

He did not need to add: with me? 'I will face none of them in Coral,' Kallor growled. 'Just Seerdomin, Urdomen, Septarchs—'

'And perhaps a K'Chain Che'Malle or three?'

'I did not think any remained, Warlord.'

'Maybe. Maybe not. I am somewhat surprised, Kallor, by your sudden ... zeal.'

The tall warrior shrugged. 'I would answer my own ill advice, that is all. Do you give me leave to join Whiskeyjack and Korlat?'

Brood studied him for a time, then he sighed and waved one mud-spattered, gauntleted hand. 'Go.'

Kallor spun and strode from the tent. Outside, he approached his horse.

A few miserable Great Ravens, huddled beneath a wagon, were the only witnesses to his sudden smile.

The floes abutting the rocky shoreline were all awash in darkly stained water. Lady Envy watched Baaljagg and Garath splash through it towards the forest-crowded strand. Sighing, she parted the veil on her warren, enough to permit her to cross without getting wet.

She had had more than enough of wild seas, black water, submerged mountains of ice and freezing rain, and was contemplating fashioning a suitably efficacious curse upon Nerruse and Beru both, the Lady for her failure to maintain reasonable order upon her waters, the Lord for his evidently senseless outrage at being so thoroughly exploited. Of course, such a curse might well weaken the pantheon yet further, and that would not be appreciated.

She sighed. 'So, I must forgo such pleasure ... or at least suspend it for a time. Oh well.' Turning, she saw Senu, Thurule and Mok clambering down the near-vertical ice sheet that led down to the floe. Moments later, the Seguleh were sloshing their way to the shore.
Lanas Tog had vanished a short while past, to reappear beneath the trees directly opposite them.

Lady Envy stepped off the jagged, frost-rimed edge of the Meckros street, settled slowly towards the bridge of ice. She approached the strand’s tumbled line of rocks where the others had gathered.

‘Finally!’ she said upon arriving, stepping gingerly onto sodden moss close to where Lanas Tog stood. Huge cedars marched into the gloom of the slope that climbed steep and rough up the mountainside behind the T’lan Imass. Brushing flecks of snow from her telaba, Lady Envy studied the unwelcoming forest for a moment, then fixed her attention on Lanas Tog.

Ice was slipping in long, narrow slivers from the swords impaling the T’lan Imass. White frost died in spreading patches on the undead creature’s withered face.

‘Oh dear, you're thawing.’

‘I will scout ahead,’ Lanas Tog said. ‘People have passed along this shoreline recently. More than twenty, less than fifty, some heavily laden.’

‘Indeed?’ Lady Envy glanced around, saw no sign that anyone had walked where they now stood. ‘Are you certain? Oh, never mind. I didn’t ask that question. Well! In which direction were they walking?’

The T’lan Imass faced east. ‘The same as us.’

‘How curious! We will by chance catch up with them?’

‘Unlikely, mistress. They are perhaps fours days ahead—’

‘Four days! They have reached Coral, then!’

‘Yes. Do you wish to rest, or shall we proceed?’

Lady Envy turned to examine the others. Baaljagg still carried a spearhead in her shoulder, though it seemed to be slowly making its way out, and the flow of blood had slowed considerably. She would have liked to have healed the ay’s wound, but the beast would not let her come close enough. Garath looked hale, though a solid mass of old scars etched the hound’s mottled hide. The three Seguleh had effected what repairs they could to their armour and weapons, and stood waiting, their masks freshly painted. ‘Hmm, it seems there is to be no delay, no delay at all! Such eagerness, oh pity poor Coral!’ She swung round suddenly. ‘Lanas Tog, tell me, has Onos T’oolan passed this way as well?’

‘I do not know, mistress. Those mortals who preceded us, however, were tracked by a predator. No doubt curious. I sense no lingering violence in this area, so the beast probably abandoned them once it fully gauged their strength.’

‘A beast? What kind of beast, darling?’

The T’lan Imass shrugged. ‘A large cat. A tiger, perhaps – forests such as these suit them, I believe.’

‘Now, isn’t that titillating? By all means, Lanas Tog, strike out on this fated trail – we shall follow upon your very heels!’

The trenches and tunnel entrances had been well disguised, beneath cedar branches and piles of moss, and without the preternatural skills of the mages the Bridgeburners might not have found them.

Paran made his way down what he had mentally labelled the command tunnel, passing racks of weapons – pikes, halberds, lances, longbows and bundles of arrows – and alcoves packed solid with food, water and other supplies, until he came to the large, fortified chamber which the Septarch had clearly intended to be his headquarters.

Quick Ben and his motley cadre of mages sat, squatted or sprawled in a rough half-circle near the far end, beyond the map table, looking like a pack of water-rats who’d just taken over a beaver’s lodge.
The captain glanced down at the large painted hide pinned to the tabletop as he strode past, on which the Pannions had conveniently mapped out the entire maze of tunnels and entrenchments, the location of supplies and what kind, the approaches and retreats.

'All right,' Paran said as he joined the mages, 'what do you have?'

'Someone's got wise in Coral,' Quick Ben said, 'and realized that this place should have a company holed up here, as a guard – Trotts was keeping an eye on the city and watched them file out. They'll reach us in a bell.'

'A company,' Paran scowled. 'What's that in Pannion terms?'

'Four hundred Beklites, twenty Urdomen, four Seerdomin, one of them ranking and likely a sorcerer.'

'And which approaches do you think they'll use?'

'The three stepped ones,' Spindle replied, reaching to scratch under his hairshirt. 'They go under trees all the way, lots of switchbacks, meaning the poor bastards will have a hard time rushing our positions once we let loose.'

Paran turned back to study the map. 'Assuming they're flexible, what will they choose as an alternative?'

'The main ramp,' Quick Ben said, rising to join the captain. He tapped a finger on the map. 'The one they'd planned on using for the downward march to launch the ambush. No cover for them, but if they can lock shields out front and turtle ... well, there's only forty of us ...'

'Munitions?'

The wizard looked back at Spindle, who made a sour face and said, 'We're short. Maybe if we use 'em right, we'll squash this company -- but then the Seer will know what's up, and he'll send twenty thousand up this mountainside. If Dujek doesn't show soon, we'll have to pull out, Captain.'

'I know, Spindle, which is why I want you to set aside the cussers and burners -- I want these tunnels rigged. If we have to scramble, we leave this strongpoint nothing but mud and ashes.'

The sapper gaped. 'Captain, without them cussers and burners, the Seer won't need to send anybody after this company -- it'll take us clean out!'

'Assuming there's enough of them left to regroup and come up the main ramp. In other words, Spindle, pull the sappers together and cook up the messiest stew you can for those three hidden trails. If we can make it seem like the whole Malazan army's up here ... better yet, if we can make sure not one soldier in this company gets out alive, we'll have purchased the time we need. The less certain we leave the Seer the safer we'll be. So, close that mouth and find Hedge and the rest. Your moment of glory's arrived, Spindle -- go.'

Muttering, the man scrambled out of the chamber.

Paran faced the others. 'A Seerdomin sorcerer, you said. All right, he needs to drop fast once the fun starts. What do you have in mind, gentlemen?'

Shank grinned. 'My idea, Captain. It's classic, deadly -- especially because it's so unexpected. I've already completed the ritual, left it primed -- all Quick Ben needs to do is tell me when he's spotted the bastard.'

'What kind of ritual, Shank?'

'The ingenious kind, Captain -- Bluepearl loaned me the spell, but I can't describe it, can't write it down and show you, neither. Words and meanings hang around in the air, you know, seep into suspicious minds and trigger gut instinct. There's nothing to blocking it if you know it's coming -- it only works when you don't.'

Scowling, Paran turned to Quick Ben.

The wizard shrugged, 'Shank wouldn't cough himself to the front of the line if he wasn't sure of this, Captain. I'll sniff the Seerdomin out as he's asked. And I'll have a few back-ups in case it goes sour.'
Bluepearl added, ‘Spindle will hold back on a sharper, Captain, with the mage's name on it.’

‘Literally,’ Toes threw in, ‘and that makes all the difference, Spin being a wizard and all.’

‘Yes? And how often has it made the difference in the past, Toes?’

‘Well, uh, there's been a bad string of, uh, mitigating circumstances—’

‘Abyss below,’ Paran breathed. ‘Quick Ben, if we don't knock that sorcerer out we'll be feeding roots a drop at a time.’

‘We know, Captain. Don't worry. We'll stamp him out before he sparks.’

Paran sighed. ‘Toes, find me Picker – I want all these longbows trundled out and issued to everyone without a munition or spell in hand, twenty arrows each, and I want them to have pikes as well.’

‘Aye, sir.’ Toes climbed to his feet. He reached for one large, mummified toe strung around his neck and kissed it. Then he headed out.

Bluepearl spat onto the ground. ‘I feel sick every time he does that.’

A bell and a half later, the captain lay alongside Quick Ben, looking down on the middle stepped trail, where the glint of helms and weapons appeared in the late afternoon's dull light.

The Pannions had not bothered to send scouts ahead, nor was their column preceded by a point. A degree of overconfidence that Paran hoped would prove fatal.

In the soft earth before Quick Ben, the wizard had set a half-dozen twigs, upright, in a rough line. Faint sorcery whispered between them that the captain's eyes could only register peripherally. Twenty paces behind the two men, Shank sat hunched over his modest, pebble-ringed circle of ritual; six twigs from the same branch that Quick Ben had used, jabbed into the moss before the squad mage, surrounding a bladder filled with water. Beads of condensation glistened from these twigs.

Paran heard Quick Ben's soft sigh. The wizard reached out, hovered an index finger over the third twig, then tapped it.

Shank saw one of his twigs twitch. He grinned, whispered the last word of his ritual, releasing its power. The bladder shrivelled, suddenly empty.

Down on the trail, the Seerdomin sorcerer, third in the line, buckled, water spraying from his mouth, lungs filled, clawing at his own chest.

Shank's eyes closed, his face runnelled in sweat as he swiftly added binding spells to the water that filled the Seerdomin's lungs, holding it down against their desperate, spasming efforts to expel the deadly fluid.

Soldiers shouted, gathered around the writhing mage.

Four sharpers sailed into their midst.

Multiple, snapping explosions, at least one of them triggering the row of sharpers buried along the length of the trail, these ones in turn triggering the crackers at the base of the flanking trees, which began toppling inward onto the milling soldiers.

Smoke, the screams of the wounded and dying, figures sprawled, pinned beneath trees and trapped by branches.

Paran saw Hedge and four other sappers, Spindle included, plunging down the slope to one side of the trail. Munitions flew from their hands.

The fallen trees – wood and branches liberally drenched in lantern oil – lit up in a conflagration as the first of
the burners exploded. Within the span of a heartbeat, the trail and the entire company trapped upon it were in flames.

_Abyss below, we're not a friendly bunch, are we!_

Down at the bottom, well behind the last of the Pannions, Picker and her squads had emerged from cover, bows in hand, and were – Paran hoped – taking down those of the enemy who had managed to avoid the ambush and were attempting to flee.

At the moment, all the captain could hear were screams and the thunderous roar of the fire. The gloom of approaching night had been banished from the trail, and Paran could feel the heat gusting against his face. He glanced over at Quick Ben.

The wizard's eyes were closed.

Faint movement on the man's shoulder caught the captain's attention – a tiny figure of sticks and twine – Paran blinked. It was gone, and he began to wonder if he'd seen anything at all... the wild flaring and ebb of firelight, the writhing shadows ... _ah, I must be imagining things. Not enough sleep, the horror that is this dance of light, heightened senses – those damned screams . . ._

Were fading now, and the fire itself was losing its raging hunger, unable to reach very far into the rain-soaked forest beyond. Smoke wreathed the trail, drifted through the surrounding boles. Blackened bodies filled the path, plates of armour rainbow-burnished, leather curled and peeling, boots blistered and cracking open with terrible sizzling sounds.

—if Hood has reserved a pit for his foulest servants, then the Moranth who made these munitions belong in it. And us, since we've used them. This was not battle. This was slaughter._

Mallet slid down to Paran's side. 'Captain! Moranth are dropping out of the sky on the entrenchments – Dujek's arrived, the first wave with him. Sir, our reinforcements are here.'

Quick Ben scraped a hand across his little row of twigs. 'Good. We'll need them.'

_Aye, the Seer won't yield these entrenchments without a fight. 'Thank you, Healer. Return to the High Fist and inform him I will join him shortly.'_

'Yes, sir.'
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Some tides move unseen. Priests and priestesses of the twin cults of Togg and Fanderay had for so long presided over but a handful of adherents in their respective temples, and those temples were few and far between. A short-lived expansion of the cults swept through the Malazan armies early in Laseen's reign, but then seemed to wither of its own accord. In retrospect, that flurry might be interpreted as being only marginally premature, anticipating by less than a decade the reawakening that would bring the ancient cults to the fore. The first evidence of that reawakening occurred on the very edges of the Empire's borders [strictly speaking, not even close, tr.], in the recently liberated city of Capustan, where the tide revealed its power for all to see ...

Cults of Resurrection
Korum T'bal (translated by Illys of Darujhistan)

The two masked figures, ancient and shrunken, slowly hobbled towards the low, wide entrance of Hood's temple. Coll had been seeing to the Mott horses in the courtyard and now stood silent in the shadows of the wall, watching as the figure closest to him – a woman – raised a cane and rapped it sharply against the door.

Distant drums still sounded, indicating that the coronation of Prince Arard was dragging on. Given that the ceremony was under the guidance of the Mask Council, Coll was more than a little curious to see these two council members here, clearly intent on paying an unofficial, private visit. He was also suspicious, since he'd assumed that no-one had known of the reoccupancy of Hood's temple.

He started at a low voice close beside him: 'What good will come of this, do you think?'

Another masked priest was standing in the shadows beside the Daru, strangely indistinct, hooded, gloved hands folded over the bulge of a pot-belly – though the rest of the man appeared to be stick-thin.

'Where did you come from?' Coll hissed, his heart thudding in his chest.

'I? I was here before you! This is my shadow, you fool! Look at that torchlight – where we stand should be bathed in it. Are all the nobles of Darujhistan as stupid as you?'

Coll grimaced. 'All right, shadow-priest, you've been spying – on what? What state secrets have you learned watching me groom these horses?'

'Only that they hate you, Daru. Every time your back was turned, they got ready to nip you – only you always seemed to step away at precisely the right moment—'

'Yes, I did, since I knew what they were intending. Each time.'

'Is this pride I hear? That you outwitted two horses?'

'Another remark like that, priest, and I will toss you over this wall.'

'You wouldn't dare – oh, all right, you would. Come no closer. I will be civil. I promise.'

Both turned at the sound of the temple doors squealing open.

'Aai!' Rath'Shadowthrone whispered. 'Who is that?'

'My friend, Murillio.'

'No, you idiot – the other one!'

'The one with the swords, you mean? Ah, well, he works for Hood.'
'And is Rath'Hood aware of this?'
'You're asking me?'
'Well, has he paid a visit?'
'No.'
'The brainless idiot!'
Coll grunted. 'Is that a quality all your acquaintances share?'
'So far,' Rath'Shadowthrone muttered.
'Those two,' Coll said, 'what kind of masks are they wearing under those cowls?'
'You mean, do I recognize them? Of course I do. The old man's Rath'Togg. The older woman's Rath'Fanderay. On the Council we use them as bookends – in all my years in the Thrall, I don't think I've heard either one say a word. Even more amusing, they're lovers who've never touched each other.'
'How does that work?'
'Use your imagination, Daru. Ho, they're being invited inside! What bubbles in this cauldron?'
'Cauldron? What cauldron?'
'Shit up.'
Coll smiled. 'Well, I'm having too much fun. Time to go inside.'
'I'm going with you.'
'No, you're not. I don't like spies.' With that, Coll's fist connected with the priest's jaw. The man dropped in a heap.

The shadows slowly dissolved to flickering torchlight.

Coll rubbed at his knuckles, then set off for the temple.

He closed the door behind him. Murillio, the warrior and the guests were nowhere to be seen. He strode to the entrance to the chamber of the sepulchre. One of the doors had been left slightly ajar. Coll nudged it open and stepped through.

Murillio sat close to where they had laid out a cot for the Mhybe – the burial pit remained empty, despite the undead warrior's constant instructions to place the old woman within it. The sword-wielding servant of Hood stood facing the two masked councillors, the pit between them. No-one was speaking.

Coll approached Murillio. 'What's happened?' he whispered.
'Nothing. Not a word, unless they're jabbering in their heads, but I doubt it.'
'So . . . they're all waiting, then.'
'So it seems. Abyss take us, they're worse than vultures...'

Coll studied his friend for a long moment, then said, 'Murillio, were you aware you're sitting on a corner of Hood's altar?'

The land beyond Coral’s north wall was forested parkland, glades divided by stands of coppiced trees that had not been trimmed for at least three seasons. The trader road wound like a serpent through the parkland, straightening as it reached a two-hundred-pace-wide killing field, then rising in a narrow stone bridge over a
steep, dry moat just before the wall. The gate was a massive construction, the track through barely the width of a wagon and overhung with abutments. The doors were sheeted bronze.

Lieutenant Picker blinked sweat from her eyes. She had brought Antsy and his squad as close as possible, lying flat along the edge of an overgrown woodcutter’s path thirty or forty paces up the mountainside’s east-facing flank. Coral’s high walls were to their right, southeasterly; the killing field directly opposite and the parkland to their left. Packed ranks of Pannion Beklites had assembled in the killing field, were arranged to face the mountain – and the entrenchments now held by Dujek and six thousand of Onearm’s Host.

The sergeant lying beside her grunted. ‘There, coming through the gate. That’s some kind of standard, and that clump of riders... sitting too tall...’

‘A Septarch and his officers,’ Picker agreed. ‘So, Antsy, does your count match mine?’

‘Twenty-five, thirty thousand,’ the man muttered, tugging on his moustache.

‘But we’ve the high ground—’

‘Aye, only those trenches and tunnels weren’t meant to be defended – they were hiding places. Too many straight lines, no cul-de-sacs, no funnels, no chance for an enfilade – and too many Hood-damned trees!’

‘The sappers are—’

‘They ain’t got the time!’

‘So it seems,’ Picker agreed. ‘Mind you, do you see any of those condors gathering to join in the assault?’

‘No, but that don’t mean—’

‘What it means, Sergeant, is the Seer is holding them back. He knows we’re not the main punch. We messed up his ambush and knocked out a company, and no doubt that’s irritated him enough to send out, what, a third of his army? Maybe a cadre of mages to guard the Septarch? And if they find out we’re a bear in a den, I doubt they’ll push—’

‘Unless the Seer decides that killing six thousand of the Host is worth a third of his army, Picker. If I was him —’

The lieutenant grimaced. ‘Aye, me too. I’d annihilate us, stamp us out before the rest arrive. ‘Still, I don’t think the Seer’s that sharp – after all, what does he know of the Malazans? Distant tales of wars far to the north ... an invasion that’s bogged down. He’d have no reason to know what we’re capable of.’

‘Picker, you’re fishing with a bare hook. The Seer knows we’ve somehow jumped onto his entrenchments. Knows we slipped past those condors without tickling a single beak. Knows we knocked flat an entire company using Moranth munitions. Knows we’re sitting here, watching this army assemble, and we ain’t running. Knows, too, we ain’t got any support – not yet – and maybe, just maybe, we jumped in the slough before the shit’s settled.’

Picker said nothing for a time. The Pannion legions had settled, officers dispersing to take positions at the head of each one. Drums rattled. Pikes lifted skyward. Then before each arrayed legion, sorcery began to play.

Oh... ‘Where’s Blend?’

‘Here.’

‘Hightail it back to Dujek—’

‘Aye, Lieutenant. We’re in it, now.’

Squatting on the lead embankment above the slope, Quick Ben slowly straightened. ‘Spindle, Bluepearl, Toes, Shank, to me, if you will.’
The four mages scrambled to his side and all were babbling. 'A dozen sorcerers!' 'Drawing from the same warren!' 'And it's clean and ugly!' 'They're weaving, Quick!' 'Working togeth—'

'Be quiet, all of you!'

'We're all going to die!'

'Dammit, Toes, shut up!'

He glared until the four men settled, surveyed the bleak expressions for a moment, then grinned. 'Twelve of the bastards, right? And who is this, standing here before you? Quick Ben. Right? Ben Adaephon Delat. Now, if any of you has already filled his breeches, go change, then rejoin the companies you've been attached to – whatever gets through me is for you to handle. Any way you can.' Glancing over, he saw Dujek, Paran and Blend approaching, the latter looking winded and somewhat wild-eyed. 'All right, Cadre, dismissed.'

The mages scurried away.

Dujek was wearing his full armour – the first time Quick Ben had seen that in years. The wizard nodded in greeting.

Paran spoke, 'Quick Ben, Blend here's delivered some bad—'

'I know, Captain. I've split up my cadre, so we won't get taken out in a clump. I'll draw their attention to me, right here—'

'Hold on,' Dujek growled. 'That cadre ain't a cadre, and worse: they know it. Secondly, you're not a combat mage. If we lose you early ...'

The wizard shrugged. 'High Fist, I'm all you've got. I'll keep 'em busy for a while.'

Paran said, 'I'll assign the Bridgeburners to guard you – we've resupplied on munitions—'

'He's being generous,' Dujek cut in. 'Half a crate, and most of it close-in stuff. If the enemy gets near enough for them to have to use it, you're way too close to one stray arrow headed your way, Wizard. I'm not happy with this, not happy at all.'

'Can't say I am, either,' Quick Ben replied. He waited. He could hear the High Fist's molars grinding.

'Captain?' Dujek grunted.

'Aye, sir?'

'Are the cussers and crackers in place? Can we collapse this damned hillside?'

'Hedge says it's all rigged, High Fist. We can bury every tunnel and flatten every entrenchment.'

'So, we could just pull out and leave the Pannions to retake ... a steaming mess of nothing.'

'We could, sir.'

'Meaning, we'll have travelled half the continent, only to retreat before our first engagement.'

'A temporary retreat, sir,' Paran pointed out.

'Or we can bloody their noses ... maybe take out ten thousand Beklites, ten, twelve mages and a Septarch. At the possible cost of this army, including Quick Ben here. Gentlemen, is that a fair exchange?'

'That is for you to decide—' Paran began, but Dujek cut him off.

'No, Captain. It isn't. Not this time.'

Quick Ben met the High Fist's eyes. I made a promise to Burn. The captain and I had . . . plans. To keep all
of that, I say no right now. And we blow the entrenchments and scamper. But then again, I'm a soldier. A
Bridgeburner. And the brutal truth is, tactically, it's more than a fair exchange. We make it for Whiskeyjack.
For the siege to come. We save lives. He glanced at Paran, saw the same knowledge in the captain's eyes. The
wizard turned back to Dujek. 'High Fist, it is a fair exchange.'

Dujek reached up and lowered his helm's visor. 'All right, let's get to work.'
Quick Ben watched the two men leave, then he sighed. 'What do you want, Blend?'

'Sir?'

'Don't you "sir" me, woman. Are you planning on rejoining your squad any time soon, or do you want a close
look at my impending demise?'

'I thought I might ... uh, give you a hand.'
He faced her, eyes narrowing. 'How?'

'Well...' She drew out a small stone from round her neck. 'I picked up this charm, a few years back.'
The wizard's brows rose. 'And what is it supposed to do, Blend?'

'Uh, makes me harder to focus on – seems to work pretty good.'

'And where did you come by it?'

'An old desert merchant, in Pan'potsun.'
Quick Ben smiled, 'Keep it, lass.'

'But—'

'If you weren't wearing it, you wouldn't be Blend any more, would you?'

'I suppose not. Only—'

'Return to your squad. And tell Picker to keep her lads and lasses tight and out of the scrap – you're to remain
on that far flank, watching the city. If the condors suddenly show, get back to me as fast as possible.'

'Aye, sir.'

'Go on, then.'
She hurried off.

Well, damn me. The lass buys a worthless piece of stone from a Gral swindler and suddenly she's invisible.
Raw but pure talent, right in her bones, and she doesn't even know it.

Hidden beneath fronds and brush, Picker and her squad had a clear view of the Pannion legions, the front lines
reaching the base of the treeless ramp that led to the entrenchments. Grey sorcery spun a wall of tangled
webbing before the chanting Beklites. The Seerdomin commanders were wreathed in the magic, advancing
now on foot ahead of their companies, marching upslope with an air of inexorability.

On a bank high above the Pannions, Quick Ben looked down, exposed and alone. Or so Blend had told her –
the trees on her left blocked the view.

Suicide. The wizard was good, she knew, but good only because he kept his head low and did whatever he
did behind backs, in the shadows, unseen. He wasn't Tattersail, wasn't Hairlock or Calot. In all the years she
had known him, she had not once seen him openly unveil a warren and let loose. Not only wasn't it his style, it
also wasn't, she suspected, within his capacity.
You unsheathed the wrong weapon for this fight, High Fist. . .


The Seerdomin mages wheeled.

'Damn,' Blend whispered at her side. 'They've swallowed it.'

Picker snapped a glare at the woman. 'What are you talking about?'

'They're illusions, Lieutenant. Can't you tell?'

No.

'It's all that uncertainty – they don't know what they're facing. Quick Ben's playing on their fears.'

'Blend! Wait! How in Hood's name can you tell?'

'Not sure, but I can.'

The Seerdomin unleashed waves of grey sorcery that broke up over the legion, sent snaking roots down towards the eight demons.

'That will have to knock them out,' Blend said. 'If Quick Ben ignored the attack, the Pannions will get suspicious – let's see how – oh!'

The magic darted like plummeting nests of adders, enwreathed the roaring demons. Their death-throes were frenzied, lashing, killing and maiming yet more soldiers on all sides. But die they did, one by one.

The first legion's formation was a shambles, torn bodies lying everywhere. Its onward climb had been shattered, and the reassertion of order was going to take a while.

'Amazing what happens when you believe.' Blend said after a time.

Picker shook her head. 'If wizards can do that, why don't we have illusionists in every damned squad?'

'It only works, Lieutenant, because of its rarity. Besides, it takes serious mastery to manage faking even a lone demon – how Quick Ben pulled off eight of 'em is—'

The Seerdomin mages counterattacked. A crackling, spinning wave rolled up the slope, chewing up the ground, exploding tree stumps.

'That's headed straight for him!' Blend hissed, one hand clutching Picker's shoulder, fingers digging in.

'Ow! Let go!'

A thunderous concussion shook the ground and air.

'Gods! He's been killed! Blasted! Annihilated – Beru fend us all!'

Picker stared at the wailing soldier at her side, then forced her eyes once more to the scene on the ramp.

Another Seerdomin wizard appeared from the legion's ranks, mounted on a huge dun charger. Sorcery danced over his armour, pale, dull, flickering on the double-bladed axe in his right hand.

'Oh,' Blend whispered. 'That's a sharp illusion.'

He rode to join one of his fellow mages.

Who turned.
The axe flew from the rider's hand, its wake sparkling with suspended ice. Changed shape, blackening, twisting, reaching out clawed, midnight limbs.

The victim screamed as the wraith struck him. Death-magic punched through the protective weave of chaotic sorcery like a spearpoint through chain armour, plunged into the man's chest.

The wraith reappeared even as the Seerdomin toppled – up through his helmed head in an explosion of iron, bone, blood and brains – clutching in its black, taloned hands the Seerdomin's soul – a thing that flared, radiating terror. The wraith, hunched over its prize, flew a zigzag path towards the forest. Vanished into the gloom.

The rider, after throwing the ghastly weapon, had driven his heels into his horse's flanks. The huge beast had veered, hooves pounding, to ride down a second Seerdomin in a flurry of stamping that, within moments, flung blood-soaked clumps of mud into the air.

Sorcery tumbled towards the rider.

Who drove his horse forward. A ragged tear parted before them, into which horse and rider vanished. The rent closed a moment before the chaotic magic arrived. The spinning sorcery thunderclapped, gouging a crater in the hillside.

Antsy thumped Picker's other shoulder. 'Look! Further down! The legions at the back!'

She twisted. To see soldiers breaking formation, spreading out to disappear in the wooded hillside on either side of the ramp. 'Damn, someone got smart.'

'Smart ain't all – they're going to stumble right onto us!'

Paran saw Quick Ben reappear on the bank, stumbling from a warren, smoke streaming from his scorched leather armour. Moments earlier, the captain had thought the man annihilated, as a crackling wave of chaotic magic had hammered into the ridge of mounded earth that the wizard had chosen as his position. Grey-tongued fires still burned in the chewed-up soil around Quick Ben.

'Captain!'

Paran turned to see a marine scurrying up the entrenchment's incline towards him.

'Sir, we've had reports – the legions are coming up through the trees!'

'Does the High Fist know?'

'Yes sir! He's sending you another company to hold this line.'

'Very well, soldier. Go back to him and ask him to get the word passed through the ranks. I've got a squad down there somewhere – they'll be coming up ahead of the enemy, likely at a run.'

'Aye, sir.'

Paran watched the man hurry off. He then scanned his dug-in troops. They were hard to see – shadows played wildly over their positions, filled the pits and the trenches linking them. The captain's head snapped round to Quick Ben. The wizard was hunched down, almost invisible beneath swirling shadows.

The ground below the embankment writhed and churned. Rocks and boulders were pushing up through the mulch, grinding and snapping against each other, the water on their surfaces sizzling into steam that cloaked the building mass of stone.

*Two warrens unveiled – no, must be three – those boulders are red hot.*

Shadows slipped down the bank, flowed between and beneath the gathering boulders.
He’s building a scree – one that the enemy won’t notice . . . until it’s too late.

Down among the trees Paran could now see movement, ragged lines of Pannions climbing towards them. No shield-lines, no turtles – the toll among the Beklites, once they closed to attack, would be fearful.

Damn, where in the Abyss is Picker and the squad, then?

On the ramp, the first legion had reformed and were doggedly marching upward once more, three Seerdomin mages in the lead. Webs of sorcery wove protective cloaks about them.

In rapid succession, three waves of magic roared up the ramp. The first clambered towards Quick Ben, building as it drew near. The other two rolled straight at the lead trench – in front of which stood Captain Paran.

Paran wheeled. ‘Everyone down!’ he bellowed, then threw himself flat. There was little point, he well knew. Neither his shouted warning nor his lying low would make any difference. Twisting round through the damp mulch, he was able to watch the tumbling wave approach.

The first one, aimed at Quick Ben, should have struck by now, but there was no sound, no dreadful explosion —

—except far down the slope, shaking the ground, shivering through the trees. Distant screams.

He could not pull his gaze from the magic rushing up towards him.

In its path – only moments before it reached the captain and his soldiers – a flare of darkness, a rip through the air itself, slashing across the entire width of the ramp.

The sorcery plunged into the warren with a hissing whisper.

Another detonation, far below among the massed legions.

The second wave followed the first.

A moment later, as a third explosion echoed, the warren narrowed, then vanished.

Disbelieving, Paran twisted further until he could see Quick Ben.

The wizard had built a wall of heaving stone before him, and it began to move amidst the flowing shadows, leaning, shifting, pushing humus before it. Suddenly the shadows raced downslope, between the trees, in a confusing, overwhelming wave. A moment later, the boulders followed – an avalanche that thundered, took trees with it, pouring like liquid towards the ragged lines of soldiers climbing the slope.

If they saw what struck them, there was no time to so much as scream. The slide continued to grow, burying every sign of the Beklites on that flank, until it seemed to the Paran that the whole hillside was on the move, hundreds of trees slashing the air as they toppled.

Sharpers exploded on the opposite flank, drawing Paran’s attention. The Beklites on that side had reached the entrenchment’s bank. Following the deadly hail of sharpers, pikes rose above the trench’s line, and the Malazans poured up the side to form a bristling line atop the bank. Among them, heavy-armoured marines with assault crossbows.

The Beklites struggled upward, died by the score.

Then, at almost point-blank range, sorcery lashed the Malazan line. Bodies exploded within the grey fire.

As the miasmic magic dwindled, Paran could see naught but mangled corpses on the bank. The Beklites swarmed upward. Overhead, a condor trailing grey flames climbed laboriously back into the sky.

A flight of thirty Black Moranth darted to meet it. A score loosed crossbow quarrels towards the huge bird. Grey lightning lashed out from the condor, incinerating the missiles. A writhing wave blighted the sky, swept through the Black Moranth. Armour and flesh exploded.
Quick Ben stumbled to Paran's side, frantically cleared the mulch away in front of the captain, until a patch of bare earth was revealed.

'What are you—'

'Draw that damned bird, Captain! With your finger — draw a card!'

'But I can't—'

'Draw!' Paran dragged his gloved index finger through the damp earth, beginning with a rectangular outline. His hand shook as he attempted to sketch the basic lines of the condor. 'This is madness — it won't work — gods, I can't even draw!'

'Are you done? Is that it?'

'What in Hood's name do you want?'

'Fine!' the wizard snapped. He made a fist and thumped the image.

Overhead, the demonic condor had begun another dive.

Suddenly, its wings flapped wildly, as if it could find no air beneath them. The creature plummeted straight down.

Quick Ben leapt to his feet, dragging Paran upright with him. 'Come on! Pull out your damned sword, Captain!'

They sprinted along the bank, the wizard leading them to where the condor had landed just beyond the overrun trench.

Moments later, they were running through steaming shards of armour and smouldering flesh — all that was left of the company of Malazans. The first wave of Beklites had fought their way to the second trench and were locked in fierce battle with Dujek's heavy infantry. To Paran and Quick Ben's right, downslope, the second wave was less than thirty paces away.

'Another Seerdomin!' Quick Ben screamed, dragging Paran to the ground.

Sorcery leapt from the second line of Beklites, ripped straight for the two men.

Quick Ben twisted onto his side, cursing. 'Hold on, Captain!'

A warren opened around them.

And they were suddenly under water, armour pulling them down into darkness.

Grey light streaked wild and savage directly above, a thundering concussion visibly descending towards the two men.

Water exploded on all sides, hard roots cracking against Paran's ribs. Coughing, gasping, he clawed at mud.

A hand closed round a strap of his harness, began dragging him across the sodden forest floor. 'Where's your damned sword?'

Paran managed to pull his legs under him, stumbled upright. 'Sword? You bastard! I was drowning!'

'Damn!' the wizard swore. 'You'd better hope that bird's still stunned.'

A murderous glance revealed Quick Ben's sorry state — blood streamed from the man's ears, nose and mouth. His leather armour had split along every seam. Paran looked down to see that his own banded armour was similarly mangled. He wiped at his mouth — his gauntlet came away smeared red.
'I've still got my pig-sticker.'

'Pull it out, I think we're close ...'

Ahead, between the trees, broken branches littered the floor. Smoke drifted from the ground.

Then Paran saw it – Quick Ben's warning grip on the captain's arm indicated that the wizard, too, had detected the black mass in the shadows off to one side, a mass that glistened as it moved.

The flash of a pale grey neck, the glimmer of a hooked beak. Tendrils of sorcery, dancing, building.

Paran hesitated no longer, rushing past the wizard, knife sliding from its scabbard.

The creature was huge, its body the size of a female bhed-erin, the neck rising from hunched shoulders like a snake. Black, slimy head with nightmare eyes swinging towards him.

Something whipped past Paran from behind – a wraith, clawed hands reaching for the condor.

The creature hissed, recoiling, then the head snapped out.

Sorcery flashed.

The wraith was gone.

Paran twisted away from the condor's head. Drove the sticker's long blade down, deep into its back. He felt the blade deflect from the spine and cursed.

A shrill scream, a flash of black motion, and Paran found himself engulfed in black, oily, smothering feathers. Hooked beak scored lashing pain along his temple, ripping down to take his ear – he felt the grisly snip, the spray of hot blood down onto his neck.

Awareness fragmented to an explosion of bestial rage, rising within him—

Ten paces away, on his knees – too battered to do more than simply watch – Quick Ben stared, disbelieving, as the two figures thrashed in battle. Paran was almost invisible within a writhing, shadow-woven Hound. *Not a Soletaken – not a veering. These are two creatures – man and beast – woven together . . . somehow. And the power behind it – it's Shadow. Kurald Emurlahn.*

The Hound's massive jaws and finger-long canines ripped into the condor, chewing a path up the creature's shoulders towards the neck. The demon, in turn, tore again and again into the beast – its flanks ribboned and spurting all too real blood.

The earth shook beneath the two beasts. A wing shot up to hammer into a tree. Bone and wood snapped as one. The condor screamed.

The tree's broken base – knee-high – punched out and then down, pinning the flailing wing, then grinding through the limb as it toppled back, away from the two contestants, crashing in a storm of branches and bark.

Hound's jaws closed on condor's neck.

Vertebrae crunched.

The creature's head flopped back to thud onto the churned forest floor.

The shadows of the triumphant Hound flickered – then the beast vanished.

Paran rolled from the dead bird's body.

Quick Ben could barely see the man beneath the shredded flesh and blood. The wizard's eyes widened as the ghastly figure slowly climbed to its feet. The skin along his right temple hung down, away from the bone. Half the ear on that side was gone, cut in a curved line that streamed blood.
Paran lifted his head, met the wizard's gaze. 'What happened?'

Quick Ben pushed himself to his feet. 'Come with me, Captain. We're taking a warren to a healer.'

'A healer?' Paran asked. 'Why?'

The wizard looked into the captain's eyes and saw no sign of awareness at all. 'All right.' Quick Ben took Paran's arm. 'Here we go ...'

Picker pushed her way through the boughs until she came within sight of the forest floor below. No-one in sight. Muddy tracks were all that remained of the Beklites who had passed beneath them half a bell past. She could hear fighting upslope, along the embankment and perhaps beyond.

The explosions of sorcery that had struck the legions at the base of the ramp had not continued – a cause for worry. They'd had a worse scare with the avalanche, but its path had missed them by a hundred paces or more. As if Quick Ben had known where we were. Somehow. Even more incredible, that damned wizard also managed to control the descent of a third of the mountainside. Maybe if a dozen High Mages had showed up to give him a hand, I might believe it.

Or a god . . .

With that chilling thought, she began to make her way down the tree.

There had been condors in the sky earlier, and at least one had attacked the Malazan defences. Briefly. Where the others had gone, she had no idea.

Not here, thank Hood . . .

She dropped the last man's height to land on the ground in a jangle and clank of armour.

'That was subtle.'

Picker spun. 'Damn you, Blend—'

'Shh ... uh, sir.

'Do you know where the others are?'

'More or less. Want me to collect them?'

'That would be useful.'

'Then what?'

Damned if I know, woman. 'Just get them, Blend.'

'Aye, sir.'

Paran awoke to the stench of vomit, which he realized, from the stale taste in his mouth, was his own. Groaning, he rolled onto his side. It was dark. Muted voices conversed nearby. He sensed, but could not quite see, that others lay in the trench he'd found himself in.

Other . . . casualties . . .

Someone approached, a wide, burly shape.

Paran reached up to his temple, winced as his fingertips touched knotted gut. He tentatively traced the wound's length, down to a mass of damp bandages covering his ear.

'Captain?'
'That you, Mallet?"

'Aye, sir. We only just made it back.'

'Picker?"

'The squad's still breathing, sir. Had a couple of scrapes on the way up, but nothing to slow us much.'

'Why's it so dark?"

'No torches, sir. No lanterns. Dujek's order – we're assembling.'

Assembling. No, ask that later. 'Is Quick Ben still breathing? The last I remember, we were closing in on a
downed condor...'

'Aye, though from what I hear, it was you plucking the goose, Captain. He brought you here and the cutters
put you back together... more or less. Mostly superficial, you'll be glad to hear – I've come to make your face
pretty again.'

Paran slowly sat up. 'There's plenty of soldiers around me who need your healing touch more than I do,
Mallet.'

'True enough, sir, only Dujek said—'

'I'll carry my scars, Healer. See what you can do with these wounded. Now, where will I find the High Fist
and Quick Ben?'

'Headquarters, Captain. That big chamber—'

'I know it.' Paran rose, stood for a moment until the spinning nausea passed. 'Now, a more important question
– where am I?'

'Main trench, sir. Head left, straight down.'

'Thanks.'

The captain slowly threaded through the rows of wounded marines. The fight, he saw, had been bad – but not
as bad as it might have been.

Dujek's Untan bodyguard commanded the tunnel's entrance. By their kit, they'd yet to draw blades. Their
officer waved the captain past without a word.

Thirty paces later, Paran reached the chamber.

High Fist Dujek, Quick Ben and Lieutenant Picker were seated at the map table, a small lantern hanging
from the wood-beamed ceiling above them. All three turned in their chairs as the captain entered.

Dujek scowled. 'Didn't Mallet find you?'

'He did, High Fist. I am fine.'

'You'll be seamed with scars, lad.'

Paran shrugged. 'So, what has happened? The Beklites don't like fighting at night?'

'They've withdrawn,' Dujek replied. 'And before you ask, no, it wasn't because we were too hard – they
could've pushed, and if they had we'd be doubletiming through the woods right now – those few of us still able
to draw breath, that is. Only one of those condors came after us, as well. We've been sitting here, Captain,
trying to figure out why we got off so easy.'

'Any possible answers to that, sir?'
'Only one. We think Whiskeyjack and Brood are closing fast. The Seer doesn't want his forces tangled up
with us when they arrive. He also doesn't want to risk any more of his damned condors.'

'One was more than enough,' Quick Ben muttered.

The wizard's exhaustion left the man looking aged, almost bent as he leaned on the table with both arms,
bleary, red-webbed eyes fixed on the table's scarred surface.

Numb, Paran pulled his gaze away, back to the High Fist. 'Mallet said we were assembling,
sir. Since Lieutenant Picker is here, I assume you have something in mind for the Bridgeburners.'

'We do. We were just waiting for you, Captain.'

Paran nodded, said nothing.

'These trenches are indefensible,' Dujek growled. 'We're too exposed up here. Two or three more of those
condors will finish us – and the Black Moranth. And I won't risk sending any more Moranth messengers back
to Whiskeyjack – the Seer's birds cut the last ones down before they'd gone a tenth of a league from the
mountainside. This close to Coral, it seems they're willing to fly at night. Nor is Quick Ben in any shape to try
to magically contact Whiskeyjack. So, we're not waiting.'

'We're going into Coral. From the night sky, straight down into the damned streets. 'Understood, High Fist.
And the Bridgeburners are the first in, sir?'

'First in ...' Dujek slowly nodded.

And last out.

'You're to strike straight for that keep. Knock a hole in the wall of its compound. The Black Moranth will
take you in as close as they can.'

'Sir,' Paran said, 'if Brood and Whiskeyjack aren't as close as you think ...'

Dujek shrugged. 'As I said earlier, Captain, this ain't the place to be waiting for one or the other. We're all
going in – my first wave will be half a bell behind you.'

This could drop us into a viper's nest. . . 'The lieutenant and I had better ready the squads, then.'

'Aye. You'll have Quick Ben with you, and the mages – his cadre – are back with their respective squads.
Hedge and the rest of the sappers have six cussers between them, ten crackers and twenty sharpers – you're to
breach that wall, then pull back to us. Don't go after the Seer yourselves, understood?'

'Understood, High Fist.'

'All right, you three, get going.'

Dawn still almost two bells away, the mists drifted grey and low through the parkland north of Coral, reaching
tendrils out onto the plain beyond.

Korlat rode to where Whiskeyjack had halted beneath the tree-lined crest that marked the beginning of the
coppiced parkland, and drew rein alongside him.

The Malazan wasted no time, 'What did he say?'

'All rather peculiar, Whiskeyjack. Formal apologies from himself and from Brood. He humbly offers both his
sword and his, as he called it, tactical prowess. I admit, it leaves me ... uneasy.'

Whiskeyjack shrugged. 'I'd welcome any advice Kallor might provide.'

He noted but chose to ignore Korlat's wry disbelief at this statement.
After a moment, the Malazan continued, 'Follow me.' He nudged his horse forward, down the wide trader road as it wound between groves and across gently humped glades.

Their horses stumbled often, heads drooping as they trotted through the dark. A short while later they approached another ridge, this one cleared of trees. Beyond it, rising slowly as they drew nearer, was the city of Coral, climbing in tiers revealed by dull reflections of torchlight from the streets. The dark mass of the keep was an indistinct presence hunched above the last visible tier.

They reached the ridge and halted.

Korlat studied the lie of the land before them. The killing ground before the city's wall was a sixth of a league across, a single stone bridge spanning a ditch close to the wall. Half a league to the west loomed a forested mountain, the flank facing them wreathed in mist or smoke.

'Aye,' Whiskeyjack said, following her gaze, 'that's where the flashes of sorcery came from. It's where I would have positioned an army to break the siege, were I the Seer.'

'And Dujek has fouled their plans.'

'He's there, I suspect. Likely driven back or surrounded – that magic we saw lighting the sky was mostly Pannion. Quick Ben must have been overwhelmed. I think Dujek's taken a beating, Korlat. We need to draw the Seer's attention away from that mountain, buy the High Fist time to regroup.'

She faced him, was silent for a moment, then said, 'Your soldiers are dead on their feet, Whiskeyjack. As you are, my love.'

'None the less, I will have us lining this ridge come the dawn, the Ilgres Clan on our left, Taur and his White Faces on our right.' He glanced at her. 'I admit the thought of the other ... form you can assume still leaves me, uh, alarmed. None the less, if you and Orfantal could take to the sky...'

'My brother and I have already discussed it, Whiskeyjack. He would fly to Dujek. Perhaps his presence will give the Seer's condors pause.'

'More likely draw them like a lodestone, Korlat. With the two of you together, guarding each other ...'

'Even alone, we are not easily driven off. No, Dujek's need is greater. I shall take my Soletaken form and guard your forces. Orfantal will strike for the mountain. At the very least, he will be able to determine the disposition of the High Fist and his army.'

She saw the muscles of his jaw bunching beneath the beard. Finally, he sighed and said, 'I fear for you, Korlat – you will be alone above us.'

'With, among your soldiers, my remaining kin – mages all, my love – I shall not be as alone as you imagine.'

Whiskeyjack gathered his reins. 'Have you sensed anything at all of your Lord?'

She shook her head.

'Does that trouble you? No, you've no need to answer that.'

*True, it seems there is little I can disguise from you.*

'We'd best get back,' Whiskeyjack continued.

Both swung their mounts round.

Had their conversation continued for another half-dozen heartbeats, Korlat – with her preternatural vision – would have seen the first flight of Black Moranth rise from the mountain's forested slope, forty in all, and, flying low, wing hard and fast for the city.

A half-dozen heartbeats, within which Oponn's coin spun...
A single, lazy turn ...

From Lady to Lord.

Less than a man's height beneath them, the city's wall blurred past. Once past it, the Moranth swept their quorls still lower, slipped into an avenue between buildings, flying below the roof-lines. A sharp turn at an intersection directed the flight towards the keep.

Paran, struggling to ignore the fierce burning itch of the stitches threading the side of his face, risked a glance down. Feast-piles were visible in the street, many of them still glowing dull red and sheathed in smoke. The occasional torch mounted on building walls revealed cobbles cluttered with refuse. The city slept beneath them, it seemed – he saw not a single guard or soldier.

The captain returned his attention to the keep. Its outer wall was high, well fortified – if anything, stronger than the one enclosing the city. The main structure beyond it was as much raw rock as worked stone. The keep had been carved into a mountainside.

Monstrous gargoyles lined the ragged roof's edge, black and hunched, barely visible as darker blots against the night sky.

Then Paran saw one move.

*Condors. Oh, we're in the Abyss now* ... He thumped on the Moranth's shoulder, jabbed a gloved finger down to the street below. The officer nodded.

As one, the quorls carrying the Bridgeburners darted down, skimmed a dozen paces at waist-height over the street, then settled with a single tilt of wings.

Soldiers scrambled from the saddles, seeking shadows.

The Moranth and their quorls leapt skyward once more, wheeling for the return flight.

Crouched in a dark alley mouth, Paran waited for the squads to gather around him. Quick Ben was first to his side.

'The keep's roof—'

'I saw,' Paran growled. 'Any ideas, Wizard?'

Antsy spoke up, 'How 'bout finding a cellar and hiding, Captain?'

Quick Ben glared at the sergeant, then looked around. 'Where's Hedge?'

The sapper pushed forward, waddling beneath bulging leather sacks.

'Did you see the damned sparrows?' the wizard asked him, making a strange half-shrugging motion with his left shoulder.

'Aye. We need sharpshooters atop the wall. I got twelve quarrels with sharpers instead of points. We do it right and we can take out that many—'

'Raining bird-meat,' Spindle cut in. 'Burning feathers.'

'Is that worse than burning hairshirt, Spin?'

'Quiet,' Paran snapped. 'All right, get hooks on the wall and line our brilliant crossbow experts to the top. Hedge, find the right place to set the cusser-bundle and crackers, and do it fast – we've got to time this right. I want those birds knocked from their perches, not in the air. Dujek's first wave is probably already on the way, so let's move.'
The captain waved Picker to point. They headed towards the keep wall.

Reaching the street's edge opposite, Picker raised a hand and crouched low. Everyone froze.

Paran moved up to just behind her. She leaned back. 'Urdomen guards,’ she whispered. 'The gate's twenty paces to the left, well lit—'

'The guards are well lit?'

'Aye.'

'Idiots!'

'Aye, but I'm wondering ...'

'What?'

'We switch back and head right, come up again, we'll be at a corner of the wall. Hedge likes corners...'

'So we leave the guards where they are.'

'Aye, Captain. Hood knows, in that light, they won't see a damned thing. And we'll be far enough away for the sound the hooks make if they make any not to reach 'em.'

'You hope.'

'They're all wearing great-helms, sir.'

'All right, take us round, Lieutenant.'

'A moment, sir. Blend?'

'Here.'

'Stay here. Keep an eye on those guards.'

'Aye, sir.'

Picker nodded to Paran and headed back down the street. The squads wheeled and followed.

It seemed to the captain as he padded along that he was the only one making a sound – and far too much sound at that. The thirty-odd soldiers around him were ghostly silent. They moved from shadow to shadow without pause.

A sixth of a bell later, Picker once more approached the street facing the compound wall. Directly ahead was a squared corner tower, surmounted by a massive battlement. The squads closed in behind the lieutenant.

Paran heard the sappers whispering with glee upon seeing the tower.

'Won't that come down pretty—'

'Like a potato on a spindly stick—'

'Brace the crackers, right? Drive the forces in at an angle to meet an arm's reach inside the cornerstone—'

'You tellin' Granda where's the pretty hole, Runter? Shut up and leave it to me and Spin, right?'

'I was just sayin', Hedge—'

Paran cut in, 'Enough, all of you. Crossbows up top before any of you do anything else.'

'Aye, sir,' Hedge agreed. 'Ready the hooks, dearies. You with the crossbows, line up and get your sharper-quarrels – hey, no cutting in, show some manners, woman!'
Paran drew Quick Ben to one side a few paces behind the others. 'Twelve explosive quarrels, Wizard,' he muttered under his breath. 'There's at least thirty condors.'

'You don't think Dujek's attack inside the city walls will draw 'em away?'

'Sure, long enough for them to annihilate that first wave, leave a few of their own circling to greet the second wave, while the rest come back to take care of us.'

'You've something in mind, Captain?'

'A second diversion, one to pull the rest of the condors away from both Dujek and the Bridgeburners. Quick, can you take us through a warren to that roof?'

'Us, sir?'

'You and I, yes. And Antsy, Spindle, Detoran, Mallet and Trotts.'

'I can do that, Captain, but I'm just about used up—'

'Just get us there, Wizard. Where's Spin?' Paran looked back at the others, nodded when he found the man. 'Wait here.' The captain hurried to where Spindle crouched with the other sappers, reached out and dragged him from the huddle. 'Hedge, you'll have to do without this man.'

Hedge grinned. 'What a relief, Captain.'

'Hey!'

'Quiet, Spindle.' Paran pulled him to where Quick Ben waited.

'What have you got in mind?' the wizard asked as soon as they arrived.

'In a moment. Quick, those condors – what precisely are they?'

'Not sure, sir.'

'Not what I want to hear, Wizard. Try again.'

'All right, I think they once were real condors – smaller, normal sized, that is. Then the Seer somehow figured out a way of stuffing the birds—'

'Stuffing the birds, ha!' Spindle snickered.

Quick Ben reached out and cuffed the man. 'Don't interrupt again, Spin. Demons, Captain. Possession. Chaos-aspected, which is why their bodies can't quite hold it all.'

'So, demon and bird both.'

'One the master over the other, of course.'

'Of course. Now, which one does the flying?'

'Well, the condor...' Quick Ben's eyes narrowed. He glanced at Spindle, then grinned. 'Well, hey, maybe ...'

'What are you two going on about?'

'You hoarding any munitions, Spindle?' Paran asked.

'Six sharpers.'

'Good, in case this goes wrong.'

They turned at a hissed command from Picker to see a half-dozen soldiers sprinting across the street to pull up at the base of the compound wall. Hooks and ropes were readied.
Damn, I didn’t realize how high that wall was – how are they—’

‘Look again, sir,’ Quick Ben said. ‘Toes is with them.’

‘So?’

‘Watch, sir.’

The squad mage had opened his warren. Paran tried to recall the man’s speciality, was answered by the smoky appearance of a dozen ghosts who drifted close around Toes. Paran softly grunted, ‘If those are the ones who keep falling over . . .’

‘No, these are local spirits, Captain. People fall from walls all the time, and since this one is more than a few hundred years old, well, the numbers pile up. Anyway, most ghosts are somewhat . . . single-minded. The last they remember, they were on the wall, patrolling, standing guard, whatever. So, they want to get back up there . . .’

Paran watched the spirits, six of them now somehow carrying hooks, slither up the wall. The other six had closed ghostly, hands on Toes and were lifting him to follow. The squad mage did not look happy, legs flailing.

‘I thought the warrens were poisoned.’

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘Hood’s hit back hard, Captain. He’s cleared a space . . .’

Paran frowned, but said nothing.

Reaching the top of the wall, Toes took charge once more, retrieving and placing each hook since it was clear that the spirits were either incapable of such precision with physical objects, or disinclined. The mage had to struggle with a couple of them to get the roped hooks from their hands. Eventually, he had all the hooks positioned. Ropes uncoiled, snaked down to the soldiers waiting below.

The first six crossbow-equipped soldiers began climbing.

Paran cast an anxious glance up at the row of condors surmounting the main building. None stirred. ‘Thank Hood they sleep deep.’

‘Aye, building power for what’s to come. Far into their chaotic warren.’

Paran turned round and studied the dark sky to the northwest. Nothing. Then again, it wasn’t likely that he’d be able to see them in any case. They’d be coming in low, just as his flight had done.

The second six soldiers with crossbows strapped to their backs crossed the street and set hands to ropes.

‘Wizard, ready that warren . . .’

‘It’s ready, Captain.’

Picker was suddenly waving madly in Paran’s direction. Hissing a curse, the captain rushed to join her. The remaining squads had pulled far back from the street.

‘Captain! Lean out, sir, and check down at the gate.’

Paran did so.

There was activity there. The gates had opened, and out were filing, one after another, huge reptilian warriors – K’Chain Che’Malle – so that’s what the damned things look like. Hood’s breath. Five . . . ten . . . fifteen . . . still more, marching out into the city – towards the north wall.

And Dujek’s about to land in their laps . . .

He settled back, met Picker’s eyes. ‘Lieutenant, we’ve got to divert those damned things.’
She rubbed at her face, glanced back at the remaining squads. 'They're supposed to be pretty fast, those undead lizards, but with all these alleys and streets...' She faced Paran once more, gave a swift nod. 'We've a few sharpeners in hand – we'll give 'em good reason to come after us.'

'Just make sure you stay ahead, Lieutenant. If you can, keep everyone together.'

'Sir, that's not likely – we'll have to scatter, I expect, just to keep the things confused.'

'All right, but try anyway.'

'And you, Captain?'

'Quick and Antsy's squad – we're headed onto the keep's roof. We'll be trying our own diversion with the rest of those condors. You've got the Bridgeburners now, Lieutenant.'

'Aye, Captain. So, who do you figure will die first, you or us?'

'That's too close to call.'

She grinned. 'Half my back pay, Captain, we'll be a step behind you. Pay up at Hood's Gate.'

'You're on, Lieutenant. Now, leave Hedge and his sappers to blowing that tower, gather up Blend and the rest of you get going.'

'Aye, sir.'

Paran made to move away, but Picker reached out and touched his arm.

'Captain?'

'What?'

'Well, uh, those knives at your back? They've been turned the other way for some time. Just wanted you to know.'

Paran glanced away. 'Thank you, Lieutenant.'

Quick Ben had pulled together Antsy and his squad, minus Hedge and Blend. As soon as Paran joined them, the wizard nodded and said, 'Say when, Captain.'

Paran glanced over at the compound wall. The ropes hung slack. No-one was in sight along the top. 'How long since you last saw them?'

The wizard shrugged. 'I expect they're in position now, sir. Hedge looks about ready.'

Paran's eyes dropped to see the team of sappers gathered in a tight, nervously shifting pack at the tower's base. 'That was fast.'

'Hedge is lightning when he's scared witless, sir. We'd better—'

'Yes. Open your warren.' He glanced over at Antsy. The sergeant, Detoran, Trotts and Mallet had dropped the visors on their helms. Weapons were out. Spindle crouched nearby, a sharper clutched in his right hand. 'Hold it, Quick – did you tell Spin what—'

'Aye, sir, and he's working on it just fine.'

Spindle managed a weak grin.

'All right. Let's go.'

The portal flashed open, bled darkness into the street. Paran's eyes widened. *Kurald Galain. What*—
'Follow me!' Quick Ben hissed, darting into the warren.

The squad plunged forward, was swallowed. Paran flung himself into their wake.

The transition was almost instantaneous. The captain stumbled across slick tiles – they were on the keep's roof, thirty paces behind the row of condors—

A dozen of the huge, demonic creatures suddenly exploded, spraying blood and flesh to spatter across the roof. The others jerked awake as one. Loosing piercing cries, they spread vast wings and launched themselves upward.

Spindle had already unleashed his warren, and its effect was instantaneous.

The condors shrilled with terror, wings thundering in panic, heads twisting on spasming necks as the mortal beast within each body – gripped with blind fear engendered by Spindle's twisted talent – warred with demon for command.

Crossbow quarrels shot up from along the compound wall, thudded into the flailing creatures.

The entire keep shuddered. Paran spun to see the compound tower to his left suddenly topple, the enormous battlement pitching towards the street. Smoke billowed. Shouts followed as the Bridgeburners lining the top of the wall scrambled towards the ropes.

Sharpers echoed from the streets to the east – Picker and her remaining Bridgeburners had just surprised the column of K'Chain Che'Malle – and the pursuit was on.

Quick Ben pulled Paran close. 'The demons are winning the struggle!'

The condors were slowly gaining height, drawing ever further from the influence of Spindle's warren. If they felt any discomfort for being studded with quarrels, they showed no sign of it. Sorcery crackled around them.

'They'll come round for us, Captain,' Quick Ben predicted.

'Better us than Dujek. Now, can we keep them occupied for a time, Wizard?'

'Most of 'em, aye.'

'How?'

'Well, to start, we can run to the south side of this building.'

Run? That's it? 'Let's move, then.'

Outside the city's west wall, close to the shoreline's broken, jagged edge, a lazy swirl of dust rose from the ground, took form.

Tool slowly settled the flint sword into its shoulder-hook, his depthless gaze ignoring the abandoned shacks to either side and fixing on the massive stone barrier before him.

Dust on the wind could rise and sweep high over this wall. Dust could run in streams through the rubble fill beneath the foundation stones. The T'lan Imass could make his arrival unknown.

But the Pannion Seer had taken Aral Fayle. Toc the Younger. A mortal man ... who had called Tool friend.

He strode forward, hide-wrapped feet kicking through scattered bones.

The time had come for the First Sword of the T'lan Imass to announce himself.

The second wave, bearing another thousand soldiers, plunged down to fill the streets directly behind Dujek's position, even as explosions lit the skyline to the south – along the keep's roof-line, then directly beneath it, the
latter a deeper sound, rumbling through the ground to rattle the cobbles – a sound the High Fist recognized. The breach had been made.

'Time to push forward,' he barked to his officers. 'Take your commands – we drive for the keep.'

Dujek raised his visor. The air above was filled with the whispering flutter of quorl wings. The second wave of carriers were climbing back into the night sky, even as a third approached from the north – moments from delivering another thousand marines.

Sharpers echoed from the city to the east. Dujek paused to wonder at that – then the sky ignited, a grey, rolling wave, sweeping towards the third flight.

The High Fist watched, silent, as between two beats of his cold heart a thousand Black Moranth, their quorls, and five companies of Onearm's Host disintegrated in grey flames.

Behind the wave, sailing black and deadly, flew three condors.

The Moranth of the second wave, who had climbed high before intending to turn about and race north, reappeared, above the three condors, diving en masse towards the creatures.

A fourth flight of carriers approaching from the northwest had captured the birds' attention.

Rider and quorl descended on the unsuspecting condors, in successive, suicidal attacks. Black-armoured warriors drove lances deep into feathered bodies. Quorls twisted their triangular heads, chitinous jaws tearing strips of flesh, even as the collisions shattered their frail bodies and frailer wings.

Hundreds of quorls died, their riders falling with them to strike roofs and streets, lying broken and unmoving.

The three condors followed, dying as they fell.

Dujek had no time to think of the horrific price his Moranth had paid for that momentary victory. The fourth wing dropped down into the streets, soldiers flinging themselves from the saddles and scrambling for cover.

The High Fist beckoned for a messenger.

'New orders to the officers – the companies are to take buildings – defensible ones. The keep will have to wait – I want roofs over us—'

Another message-bearer appeared. 'High Fist!'

'What?'

'The Pannion legions are assembling, sir – every street in a line from the north gate right up to the keep.'

'And we hold the west third of the city. They're coming to drive us out. All right.' He faced the first messenger and said, 'Let the officers know so they can adjust their defence—'

But the second message-bearer wasn't finished. 'High Fist, sir – sorry. There's K'Chain Che'Malle with those legions.'

_Then where is Silverfox and her damned T'lan Imass? 'They could be dragons for all it matters,'_ he growled after a moment. 'Go,' he said to the first messenger. The soldier saluted and left. The High Fist glared at the other message-bearer, then said, 'Find Twist and inform him we'll need a pass of his heavies – east of our position – just one, though. Tell him that they probably won't make it back, so he'd better hold a wing in reserve.' Dujek raised his visor and studied the sky overhead. Dawn was arriving – the fifth and sixth wings had delivered their troops and were distant specks racing back towards the mountain. _That's it, then, we're all in Coral. And if we don't get help soon we'll never leave._ 'That's all.' He nodded to the soldier.

The condors circled above the rooftop, crying out to each other, dipping and diving then, wings thudding the
air, lifting back towards the paling sky.

Paran stared up, disbelieving. 'They must be able to see us!' he hissed.

They crouched against a low wall beyond which was a parapet overlooking the harbour and Coral Bay, and the darkness that had swallowed them was fast fading.

'They can't see us,' Quick Ben muttered at his side, 'because I'm keeping them from seeing us. But they know we're here ... somewhere.'

And that's why they're hanging around. Fine. Good. That means they're not busy annihilating Dujek's army.

The keep shook beneath them, rattling tiles. 'Hood's breath, what was that?'

The wizard at his side scowled. 'Not sure. That didn't sound like munitions ... but I'd say the compound wall's been breached again.'

Again? By whom? The detonation had come from the harbour side, east. A billowing cloud of dust slowly lifted into view.

Paran cautiously lifted his head until he could see past the low wall.

Out over the bay, seagulls were screaming. The sea beyond, which seemed to be solid ice, was rumbling. Spouts exploded skyward along that south horizon. A storm was building out there. Let's hope it comes here – we could do with the confusion.

'Get your head down!' Quick Ben hissed.

'Sorry.'

'I'm having enough trouble as it is, Captain – we need to stay tight – stop kicking, Detoran – what? Oh. Captain, look north, sir! High up!'

Paran twisted round.

A wing of Moranth – no more than specks – were sailing over the city, east to west.

Six condors were climbing to meet them – but they had a long way to go.

Smaller specks dropped from the Moranth, down onto the east half of the city.

Their descent seemed to take for ever, then the first one struck the roof of a building. The explosion shattered the roof and upper floor. All at once, detonations trembled as cusser after cusser struck.

Sorcery swept from the six condors, raced up towards the distant Moranth.

Bombs expended, the wing scattered. None the less, more than a score did not escape the sorcerous wave.

Smoke and dust shrouded the east side of Coral.

Above the captain and the squad, the remaining condors screamed with rage.

'That worked, more or less,' Quick Ben whispered. 'Those streets were likely packed solid with Pannion soldiers.'

'Not to mention,' Paran gritted, 'the rest of the Bridgeburners.'

'They'd have withdrawn by now.'

Paran heard the effort in the wizard's hopeful tone.
A cusser had struck the street fifty paces behind Picker and her decimated squads, less than ten paces behind
the K'Chain Che'Malle K'ell Hunter that had been closing on them. The undead creature was obliterated by the
blast, its mass absorbing most of the lethal, flailing rain of shattered cobbles.

Fragments of withered skin, flesh and splinters of bone pattered down almost within reach of the
Bridgeburners.

Picker raised a hand to call the soldiers to a halt. She was not alone in needing to catch her breath, to wait
until her hammering heart slowed somewhat.

'That makes a damned change,' Blend gasped at the lieutenant's side.

Picker did not bother replying, but she could not help but agree with Blend's bitter comment. As Paran had
instructed, they had indeed drawn the attention of at least some of the K'Chain Che'Malle.

And had paid for it.

Her last count had sixteen Bridgeburners capable of combat and six wounded, of whom three were at Hood's
Gate. The K'Chain Che'Malle were more than fast, they were lightning. And relentless. Sharpers did little more
than irritate them.

In any case, the munitions were gone. Picker had turned her soldiers back on one of the K'ell Hunters, to
gauge their chances in a close-in fight. She would not do that again. They'd been lucky to disengage at all.
Seeing friends on all sides cut into pieces where they stood was an image that would haunt her all her
remaining days – days? I haven't got days. I'll be surprised if we live out this bell.

'Hood take us, another one!'

The lieutenant wheeled at the shout.

Another Hunter had appeared from a side alley, claws scraping on cobbles, head hunched low, blades out.

Less than fifteen paces away, head swinging to face them.

All right . . . heartbeats, then.

'Scatter!'

Even as the Bridgeburners began to bolt, a wall close to the K'Chain Che'Malle exploded onto the street.
Another Hunter arrived within the dust and bricks that tumbled out, this one a chopped-up ruin, head swinging
wildly – connected to neck by a thin strip of tendon – missing one arm, a leg ending in a stump at the ankle.
The creature fell, pounded onto the cobbles, ribs snapping, and did not move.

The Bridgeburners froze in place.

As did the first K'Chain Che'Malle. Then it hissed and swung to face the ragged hole in the building's wall.

Through the dust stepped a T'lan Imass. Desiccated flesh torn, hanging in strips, the gleam of bone visible
everywhere, a skull-helmed head that had once held horns. The flint sword in its hands was so notched it
appeared denticulated.

Ignoring the Malazans, it turned to the other K'Chain Che'Malle.

The Hunter hissed and attacked.

Picker's eyes could not fully register the speed of the exchange of blows. All at once, it seemed, the K'Chain
Che'Malle was toppling, a leg severed clean above what passed for a knee. A sword clanged on the cobbles as a
dismembered arm fell. The T'lan Imass had stepped back, and now moved forward once more, an overhead
chop that shattered bone down through shoulder, chest, then hip, bursting free to strike the cobbles in a spray of
sparks.
The K'ell Hunter collapsed.
The lone T'lan Imass turned to face the keep, and began walking.
Picker and the others watched the warrior stride past them, continue on up the street.
'Hood's breath!' Blend muttered.
'Come on!' Picker snapped.
'Where?' Corporal Aimless demanded.
'After him,' she replied, setting off. 'Looks like the safest place to be is in that thing's shadow.'
'But it's heading for the keep!'
'Then so are we!'

Crusted in mud, boots dragging, Whiskeyjack's army slowly moved forward to form a line facing the killing field, and the city beyond it. Far to either flank were the Barghast, Ilgres Clan on one side, White Faces on the other.

Korlat left her horse with the others behind the line and strode to the low hill immediately to the west of the trader road, where stood Whiskeyjack, Kallor and the standard-bearer, Artanthos.

They had witnessed, one and all, the aerial battles over Coral, the slaughter of the Black Moranth and at least one wing carrying troops of Onearm's Host. They had watched the bombardment, but not a single soldier on the ridge had cheered. There could be no disguising the brutal truth: Dujek was trapped in Coral, his army was being slaughtered, and Whiskeyjack and his exhausted force could do little about it.

Condors had been seen following the Black Moranth flying back to the mountain entrenchments – but there they would meet Orfantal. In his Soletaken form, her brother was second only to Rake himself. Korlat envied him his chance for immediate vengeance.

She approached her companions, preparing her mind for the veering into her draconic form. The power that came with the transition had always frightened her, for it was a cold, hard manifestation, unhuman and inhuman both. This time, however, she would welcome it.

Reaching the crest, she saw what the others were seeing. The north gate had opened across from them. K'Chain Che'Malle were emerging, spreading out to form a line. Eight hundred, perhaps more.

Weapons were readied among the Malazans. When Whiskeyjack gave the order, they would march down to meet that undead line of slayers.

And die. Eight hundred less K'Chain Che'Malle in Coral. Eight hundred K'Chain Che'Malle . . . occupied for a time. Does Dujek even know? Brood is still half a day behind us. The Grey Swords two bells, perhaps more – I'd not expected that news from Kallor – but they will have ridden too hard, too long.

And Grunde and his legion – they seem to have vanished entirely. Have we lost our shock-troops? Abyss knows, that Daru had no love of battle . . .

Does Dujek comprehend what we do to purchase for him this day?

Eight hundred K'Chain Che'Malle on the plain. How many remain in the city? How many now carve deadly paths through the High Fist's companies?

The twenty or so condors left over the city were one and all circling the keep itself, a measure, perhaps, of the Seer's confidence, that he would see no need for their participation in what was to come.

The thought brought a bitter taste to her mouth.
Whiskeyjack turned as she arrived, nodded in greeting. 'Did you find Kruppe? I trust he has chosen a safe place.'

'With Hetan,' Korlat replied. 'Demanding white paint for his face.'

Whiskeyjack could not quite manage a smile.

'My Tiste Andii will precede your soldiers when they advance,' Korlat said after a moment. 'We will see how these undead fare against Kurald Galain.'

Kallor's expression hinted at a smirk, 'Your warren is still beset, Korlat. You would require a full unveiling – by all your kin, not just the ones here – to achieve a cleansing. Your brothers and sisters are about to be slaughtered.'

Her eyes narrowed. A full unveiling. Kallor, you know far too much of us. 'I appreciate your tactical acumen,' she replied drily.

She saw Whiskeyjack glance back at Artanthos, who stood fifteen paces from the others, wrapped against the morning chill in a fur-lined cloak. The man was paying no attention to the others, his gaze fixed on the plain below, a slight frown slowly marring his unlined brow.

Two marines approached on horseback from the east, riding hard in front of the Malazan line.

Whiskeyjack's two marines . . .

Labouring, coughing froth, the horses galloped up the slope. The two women reined in. 'Commander!' one shouted.

The other added, 'We found her!' Then she pointed.

Emerging from the ranks to the east . . . Silverfox.

The sound of thousands of voices crying out in surprise alerted Korlat – she turned to see the killing field before the K'Chain Che'Malle vanish in a sudden haze of dust, thinning quickly to reveal rank upon rank of T'lan Imass.

Silverfox approached. She seemed to have chosen Artanthos as her destination, her eyes half lidded, her round, heavy face expressionless.

A roar from Whiskeyjack's army rose into the morning air.

'Yes ...' rasped Kallor beside her.

Korlat pulled her gaze from Silverfox, curious enough at Kallor's tone to draw her attention.

In time to see the rough-edged blade flashing at her head.

Pain exploded. A moment of confusion, when all was strangely still, then the ground hammered her side. Heat flared down her face, lancing down from her forehead. She blinked, wondered at her own body, which had begun thrashing.

Warren—

—chaotic—

Kallor—

A blurred scene before her eyes, her point of view from the ground.

Skull – broken – dying—

Her vision cleared, every line and edge of what she saw too sharp, sharp like knife-blades, slicing her soul to
ribbons. Kallor, with a delighted roar, charged towards Silverfox, chain armour flowing like a cloak. Grey-veined magic danced on the ground around the warrior.

The Rhivi woman stopped, mouth opening, terror filling her eyes. She screamed something—
—something—
'T'lan Ay. Defend me!'

Yet she remained alone—

Kallor closed, sword gripped in both gauntleted hands, closed, raising the weapon high.

Then Whiskeyjack stood in his path, longsword lashing up to clang against Kallor's weapon. A sudden, fierce exchange, sparks flashing. Kallor leapt back, bellowing his frustration, and his heel caught—

Whiskeyjack saw his moment. Sword thrusting out, a duellist's lunge, fully extending, weight pounding down on the lead leg—

Which buckled.

She saw the sliver of bone rip up through the man's leather-clad thigh.

Saw the pain on her lover's face, the sudden recognition—

As Kallor's huge sword punched into his chest. Slid between ribs. Ripped through heart and lungs in a diagonal, inward-slicing thrust.

Whiskeyjack died on that blade – life dropping back from the eyes that met Korlat's, back, away, then gone.

Kallor dragged his weapon free.

He reeled suddenly, impaled by two crossbow quarrels. Chaotic magic snaked up around the offending missiles, disintegrating them. Blood spurted. Unmindful, Kallor readied his sword once more, as the two marines closed in tandem.

The women were superb, fighting as one.

But the man they fought—

A mortal scream – the marine on the right stumbled in a welter of blood, reaching down to gather uncoiling, tumbling intestines, then sinking earthward. Her helmed head left her shoulders before her knees touched ground.

The other woman rushed Kallor, sword thrusting high for the warrior's face.

A side-step, a downward chop, severing the arm—

But the marine had already surrendered it, and her left hand, gripping a pig-sticker, was unimpeded as it punched through the chainlinks covering Kallor's stomach.

The edge of Kallor's sword carved up through the marine's throat. She spun in a red spray, toppled.

Gasping, the ancient warrior reeled back, yellow-streaked blood spurting from the hole in his stomach. 'Chained One!' he screamed. 'Heal me!'

Hot – a warren—
—not chaotic – where?

A wave of knotted gold hammered into Kallor, swallowed him in frenzied fire. He shrieked, thrown off his feet, battered as the magic pursued, ripping into him, blood threading the air as he sprawled to the ground.
A second wave rolled towards the man, coruscating with sunfire—

The warren that opened around Kallor was a miasmatic stain, a sickly tear – that swept around him—

—to vanish, taking Kallor with it.

The golden sorcery flickered, dissipated.

*No – such control. Who?*

Korlat's body no longer spasmed. It was now numb and cool, strangely remote. Blood was filling one eye. She had to keep blinking to clear it. She was lying on the ground, she finally realized. Kallor had struck her—

Someone knelt by her side, a soft, warm hand settling on her cheek.

Korlat struggled to focus.

'It's me, Silverfox. Help is coming—'

The Tiste Andii tried to lift a hand, to manage some kind of gesture towards Whiskeyjack, but the desire remained within her mind, racing in circles, and she knew by the faint feel of damp grasses under her palm that her hand did not heed her call.

'Korlat! Look at me. Please. Brood is coming – and I see a black dragon approaching from the west – Orfantal? The warlord possesses High Denul, Korlat. You must hold on—'

A shadow over her face. Silverfox glancing up, features twisting into something bitter. 'Tell me,' she said to the newcomer, 'the sorcery that accompanied Kallor's betrayal: was it truly so efficacious as to leave you stunned for so long? Or did you hold back? Calculating your moment, observing the consequences of your inaction – after all, you've done it before, Tayschrenn, haven't you?'

*Tayschrenn?*

But the ragged, pain-racked voice that replied was that of Artanthos, the standard-bearer. 'Silverfox. Please. I would not—'

'Wouldn't you?'

'No. Whiskeyjack – he's—'

'I know,' Silverfox snapped.

*A poorly mended leg . . . never the right time – Brood could have—*

*He's dead. Oh, my love, no . . .*

Blurred figures were on all sides now. Malazan soldiers. Barghast. Someone began keening with grief.

The man she had known as Artanthos leaned over her. Sorcery had split the flesh of his face – the touch of chaos, she recognized. A fiercer touch than what she could have survived. She knew, then, in her soul, that the High Mage had willed no delay to his response. That he'd managed anything at all was ... extraordinary. She met his eyes, saw the layers of pain that still racked through the man.

'Sil...'

'Korlat?'

'Woman,' the Tiste Andii said, the word slurred but audible, 'this man . . .'

'Yes? He is Tayschrenn, Korlat. The part of me that is Nightchill has known for a long time. I was coming to conf—'
'... thank him.'

'What?'

'For . . . your ... life. Thank him, woman ...' She held still to Tayschrenn's eyes. Dark grey, like Whiskeyjack's. 'Kallor – he surprised us all...'

The man winced, then slowly nodded. 'I am sorry, Korlat. I should have seen—'

'Yes. Me, too. And Brood.'

She could feel horse hooves drumming the earth beneath her, the vibration rising up to settle into her bones.

_A dirge. Drums, a lost sound. Horses, driven hard . . . knowing nothing of the reason, yet on they come. Closer. Mindless, yet filled with the urgency of incomprehensible masters._

_But death has already ridden across this hilltop._

_Knowing nothing of reason._

_He is yours, now, Hood . . . do you smile?_  

_My love is . . . yours . . ._

Brave and magnificent as it was, Itkovian's mount was faltering. With dawn still two bells away, Gruntle had roused him with uncharacteristic curtness. 'Something's gone wrong,' he'd growled. 'We must ride for Coral, friend.'

The Grey Swords had not stopped for the night – Itkovian had watched them for as long as he could, until the night's gloom took them from his vision. The Shield Anvil had elected to ride to Whiskeyjack's support. He had thought himself indifferent to the decision, and to what their departure signified, yet bleakness filled his heart, and the sleep that eventually came to him was troubled. After Gruntle's rough awakening, he sought to reflect upon the source of his restlessness, but it eluded him.

Saddling his horse, Itkovian had paid little attention to Gruntle and his legion, and only when he swung himself up onto his mount and gathered the reins did he note that the Daru and his followers waited – on foot.

Itkovian had frowned at Gruntle. 'Mortal Sword, what do you intend?'

The large man grimaced, then said, 'For this journey, swiftness is required. For this journey,' he repeated, glancing at a fiercely scowling Stonny Menackis, 'Trake risks the heart of his power.'

'Not my god!' Stonny snapped.

Gruntle offered her a sad smile, 'No, alas. You will have to join Itkovian, and simply ride. We'll not wait for you, but perhaps you will keep up with us ... for a while.'

Itkovian had not understood any of this. 'Sir,' he said to Gruntle, 'will you travel by warren?'

'No. Well, not quite. Maybe, how do I know? I just know – somehow – that my legion is capable of... well, of something different. Something ... fast.'

Itkovian had glanced at Stonny, then shrugged. 'Both Stonny Menackis and I are blessed with exceptional horses. We shall endeavour to keep pace.'

'Good.'

'Mortal Sword.'
'What is it, Itkovian?'

'What lies ahead, sir, that troubles you so?'

'I'm not sure, friend, but I'm feeling sick to my stomach. I believe we are about to be betrayed.'

Itkovian had said nothing to that for a long moment, then, 'Sir, if one regards recent events with an unclouded eye, then one might observe that the betrayal has already occurred.'

Gruntle had simply shrugged, turning to his followers. 'Stay tight, you damned misfits. Anyone straggles at the start and you'll be left behind.'

Stonny moved over to Itkovian's side, leading her horse.

'Do you know,' Itkovian asked her, 'what is about to occur?'

'Probably nothing,' she snapped, swinging up into her saddle. 'Gruntle must've bumped his head—'

She got no further, as before them Gruntle and his legion seemed to blur, to meld together in an indistinct flicker of barbed stripes, a single form, massive, low to the ground – that suddenly flowed forward, cat-like, and was gone in the night.

'Bern fend!' Stonny hissed. 'After it!' she cried, driving heels to her horse's flanks.

And so they had ridden, hard.

They passed by Brood's encampment, had noted that it was rousing, even though dawn was still a bell away, with considerable haste.

They witnessed, without a word exchanged between them, the flash and flare of sorcery in the sky to the southwest.

Occasionally, through the darkness, they caught a glimpse of the huge creature they pursued, the dull flicker of yellow, black-slashed, moving as if through impossibly high grasses, as if beneath jungle fronds, webbed in shadows, a fluid hint of motion, deadly in its speed and in its silence.

Then the sky began to lighten, and the horizon to the south was revealed, stands of trees, the trader road wending between them.

Still the striped beast defied the eye, evaded sharp detection as it reached the parkland's hills.

Lathered, mouths coughing foam, the horses thundered on, hooves pounding heavy and ragged. Neither animal would ever recover from this ordeal, Itkovian knew. Indeed, their deaths waited only for the journey's end.

Brave and magnificent, and he wondered if the sacrifice was worth it.

They rode the track between coppiced stands, the path gently rising towards what Itkovian judged to be an escarpment of some kind.

Then, directly ahead, wagons. A few figures, turning to watch them approach.

If they had seen the creature, they showed no sign – no alarms had been raised, all seemed calm.

Itkovian and Stonny rode past the Malazan rearguard.

The crackle of sorcery – close.

Soldiers lined the ridge before them, an army assembled, facing south – now breaking into disorganized motion. Dismay struck Itkovian with palpable force, a flood of raw pain, of immeasurable loss.

He reeled in his saddle, forced himself upright once more. Urgency thundered through him, now, sudden,
overwhelming.

Stonny was shouting, angling her stumbling horse to the right, leaving the road, approaching a hilltop where stood the Malazan standard, drooped in the windless air. Itkovian followed, but slower, drawing back. His soul was drowning in cold horror.

His horse surrendered its gallop, staggered, head thrusting out. Canter to a weaving, loose walk, then halting, slowly drawing square-footed twenty paces from the hill’s base.

Then dying.

Numbed, Itkovian slipped his boots from the stirrups, drew an aching leg over the beast’s rump, then dropped down to the ground.

On the hill to his right, he saw Stonny, stumbling free from her horse – the slope had defeated it – and clambering upward. Gruntle and his troop had arrived, human once again, crowding the hill, yet seemingly doing nothing.

Itkovian turned his gaze away, began walking along one side of the road, which had straightened for the final, downhill approach to the killing field, and the city beyond.

Cold horror.

His god was gone. His god could not deflect it as it had once done, months ago, on a plain west of Capustan.

Loss and sorrow, such as he had never felt before.

*The truth. Which I have known. Within me. Hidden, now revealed. I am not yet done.*

Not yet done.

He walked, seeing nothing of the soldiers to his left and right, stepping clear of the uneven line, leaving behind the army that now stood, weapons lowered, broken before the battle had even begun – broken by a man’s death.

Itkovian was oblivious. He reached the slope, continued on.

Down.

Down to where the T’lan Imass waited in ranks before eight hundred K’Chain Che’Malle.

The T’lan Imass, who, as one, slowly turned round.

Warrens flared on the hilltop.

Bellowing, Gruntle ordered his followers to take position on the south slope. He stood, motionless after so long, still trembling from the god’s power. The promise of murder filled him, impassive yet certain, a predator’s intent that he had felt once before, in a city far to the north.

His vision was too sharp, every motion tugging at his attention. He realized he had his cutlasses in his hands.

He watched Orfantal stride from a warren, Brood appearing behind him. He saw Stonny Menackis, looking down on three corpses. Then the warlord was pushing past her, sparing but a single glance at the bodies on his way to where a fourth body lay – closer to where Gruntle stood. A Tiste Andii woman. Two figures crouched beside her, flesh rent, one whose soul still writhed in the grip of savage, chaotic sorcery. The other ... Silverfox, round face streaked with tears.

He saw Kruppe, flanked by Hetan and Cafal. The Daru was pale, glassy-eyed, and seemed moments from unconsciousness. Strange, that, for it was not grief that so assailed the Daru. He saw Hetan suddenly reach for him even as he collapsed.
But the man Gruntle was looking for was nowhere to be seen.

He strode to the south crest to observe the positioning of his legion. They were readying weapons. Assembling below them were the Grey Swords, clearly preparing to advance on the city—

—a city shrouded in smoke, lit with the flash of sorcery, of munitions, a city ripping itself apart—

Gruntle's hunting gaze found the man.

Itkovian.

Walking towards the T'lan Imass.

A sharp cry sounded from the hilltop behind Gruntle, and he turned to see Silverfox straightening from Korlat's side, wheeling round—

But the tens of thousands of T'lan Imass faced Itkovian now.

Gruntle watched his friend's steps slow, then stop when he was twenty paces from the undead warriors.

Silverfox screamed in comprehension, began running—

Aye, Summoner. You were about to send them against the K'Chain Che'Malle. Gruntle did not need to stand within hearing range to know what Itkovian said, then, to the silent T'lan Imass.

You are in pain. I would embrace you now . . .

He felt his god's horror, burgeoning to overwhelm his own—

As the T'lan Imass made reply.

Falling to their knees. Heads bowing.

Ah, Summoner . . .

And, now, it was far too late.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

There can be no true rendition of betrayal, for the moment hides within itself, sudden, delivering such comprehension that one would surrender his or her own soul to deny all that has come to pass. There can be no true rendition of betrayal, but of that day, Ormulogun's portrayal is the closest to what was true that any mortal could hope to achieve ...

N'aruhl's Commentary on Ormulogun's Slaying of Whiskeyjack

Footsteps in the hallway announced yet another guest – Coll had no idea if invited or not – and he pulled his gaze away from the two ancient Rath' councillors kneeling before the burial pit, to see a robed figure appear in the doorway. Unmasked, face strangely indistinct.

The Knight of Death swung in a crackle of armour to face the newcomer. 'K'rul,' he grated, 'my Lord welcomes you to his sacred abode.'

K'rul? Isn't there an old temple in Darujhistan – the one with the belfry – K'rul's Belfry. Some kind of elder.

Coll glanced over, met Murillio's eyes, saw the same slow realization writ plain on his friend's features. An Elder God has entered this chamber. Stands a half-dozen paces away. Beru fend us all! Another blood-hungry bastard from antiquity—

K'rul strode towards the Mhybe.

Coll, hand settling on the grip of his sword, fear rising to lodge in his throat, stepped into the Elder God's path. 'Hold,' he growled. His heart pounded as he locked gazes with K'rul, seeing in those eyes ... nothing. Nothing at all. 'If you're planning on opening her throat on that altar, well, Elder God or not, I won't make it easy for you,'

Rath'Togg's toothless mouth dropped open in a gasp on the other side of the pit.

The Knight of Death made a sound that might have been laughter, then said in a voice that was no longer his own, 'Mortals are nothing if not audacious.'

Murillio moved up to stand at Coll's side, raising a trembling hand to close on the hilt of his rapier.

K'rul glanced at the undead champion and smiled. 'Their most admirable gift, Hood.'

'Until it turns belligerent, perhaps. Then, it is best answered by annihilation.'

'Your answer, yes.' The Elder God faced Coll. 'I have no desire to harm the Mhybe. Indeed, I am here for her ... salvation.'

'Well then,' snapped Murillio, 'maybe you can explain why there's a burial pit in here!'

'That shall become clear in time ... I hope. Know this: something has happened. Far to the south. Something ... unexpected. The consequences are unknown – to us all. None the less, the time has come for the Mhybe—'

'And what does that mean, precisely?' Coll demanded.

'Now,' the Elder God replied, moving past him to kneel before the Mhybe, 'she must dream for real.'

They were gone. Gone from her soul, and with their departure – with what Itkovan had done, was doing – all that she had hoped to achieve had been torn down, left in ruins.
Silverfox stood motionless, cold with shock.

Kallor’s brutal attack had revealed yet another truth – the T’lan Ay had abandoned her. A loss that twisted a knife blade into her soul.

Once more, betrayal, the dark-hearted slayer of faith. Nightchill’s ancient legacy. Tattersail and Belluridan Skullcrusher both – killed by the machinations of Tayschrenn, the hand of the Empress. And now . . . Whiskeyjack. The two marines, my twin shadows for so long. Murdered.

Beyond the kneeling T’lan Imass waited the K’Chain Che’Malle undead. The huge creatures made no move towards the T’lan Imass – yet. They need only wade into the ranks, blades chopping down, and begin destroying. My children are beyond resistance. Beyond caring. Oh, Iikovian, you noble fool.

And this mortal army – she saw the Grey Swords down below, readying lassos, lances and shields – preparing to charge the K’Chain Che’Malle. Dujek’s army was being destroyed within the city – the north gate had to be breached. She saw Gruntle, Trake’s Mortal Sword, leading his motley legion down to join the Grey Swords. She saw officers riding before the wavering line of Malazans, rallying the heartbroken soldiers. She saw Artanthos – Tayschrenn – preparing to unleash his warren. Caladan Brood knelt beside Korlat, High Denul sorcery enwreathing the Tiste Andii woman. Orfantal stood behind the warlord – she felt the dragon in his blood, icy hunger, eager to return.

All for naught. The Seer and his demonic condors . . . and the K’Chain Che’Malle . . . will kill them all.

She had no choice. She would have to begin. Defy the despair, begin all that she had set in motion so long ago. Without hope, she would take the first step on the path.

Silverfox opened the Warren of Tellann.

Vanished within.

A mother’s love abides.

But I was never meant to be a mother. I wasn’t ready. I was unprepared to give so much of myself. A self I had only begun to unveil.

The Mhybe could have turned away. At the very beginning. She could have defied Kruppe, defied the Elder God, the Imass – what were these lost souls to her? Malazans, one and all. The enemy. Dire in the ways of magic. All with the blood of Rhivi staining their hands.

Children were meant to be gifts. The physical manifestation of love between a man and a woman. And for that love, all manner of sacrifice could be borne.

Is it enough that the child issued from my flesh? Arrived in this world in the way of all children? Is the simple pain of birth the wellspring of love? Everyone else believed so. They took the bond of mother and child as given, a natural consequence of the birth itself.

They should not have done that.

My child was not innocent.

Conceived out of pity, not love; conceived with dread purpose – to take command of the T’lan Imass, to draw them into yet another war – to betray them.

And now, the Mhybe was trapped. Lost in a dreamworld too vast to comprehend, where forces were colliding, demanding that she act, that she do . . . something.

Ancient gods, bestial spirits, a man imprisoned in pain, in a broken, twisted body. This cage of ribs before me – is it his? The one I spoke with, so long ago? The one writhing so in a mother’s embrace? Are we as kin, he and I? Both trapped in ravaged bodies, both doomed to slide ever deeper into this torment of pain?
The beast waits for me – the man waits for me. We must reach out to each other. To touch, to give proof to both of us that we are not alone.

Is this what awaits us?

The cage of ribs, the prison, must be broken from the outside.

Daughter, you may have forsaken me. But this man, this brother of mine, him I shall not forsake.

She could not be entirely sure, but she believed that she started crawling once more.

The beast howled in her mind, a voice raw with agony.

She would have to free it, if she could. Such was pity's demand.

Not love.

Ah, now I see . . .

Thus.

He would embrace them. He would take their pain. In this world, where all had been taken from him, where he walked without purpose, burdened with the lives and deaths of tens of thousands of mortal souls – unable to grant them peace, unable – unwilling – to simply cast them off, he was not yet done.

He would embrace them. These T’lan Imass, who had twisted all the powers of the Warren of Tellann into a ritual that devoured their souls. A ritual that had left them – in the eyes of all others – as little more than husks, animated by a purpose they had set outside themselves, yet were chained to – for eternity.

Husks, yet... anything but.

And that was a truth Itkovian had not expected, had no way to prepare for.

Insharak Ulan, who was born third to Inal Thoom and Sultha A’rad of the Nashar Clan that would come to be Kron’s own, in the spring of the Year of Blighted Moss, below the Land of Raw Copper, and I remember—

I remember—

A snow hare, trembling, no more than a dusk-shadow's length from my reach, my child's arm and hand stretching. Streaks in the white, the promise of summer. Trembling hand, trembling hare, born together in the snows just past. Reaching out. Lives touching – small-heart-patter, slow-drum-hunger my chest's answer to the world's hidden music – I remember—

Kalas Agkor – my arms wrapped about little Jala, little sister, hot with fever but the fire grew too hot, and so, in my arms, her flesh cooled to dawn-stone, mother keening – Jala was the ember now lifeless, and from that day, in mother's eyes, I became naught but its bed of ash—

Ulthan Arlad herd-tracks in the snow, tufts of moult, ay on the flanks, we were hungry in that year yet held to the trail, old as it was—

Karas Av riding Bonecaster Thai’s son in the Valley of Deep Moss, beneath the sun we were breaking the ancient law – I was breaking the ancient law, I, mate to Ibinahl Chode, made the boy a man before his circle was knotted—

—in the Year of the Broken Antler, we found wolf cubs—

—I dreamed I said no to the Ritual, I dreamed I strode to Onos T’oolan’s side—

—a face streaming tears – my tears—

—Chode, who watched my mate lead the boy into the valley, and knew the child would be remade into a man
– knew that he was in the gentlest of hands—
— the grasslands were burning—
— ranag in the Homed Circle—
— I loved her so—

Voices, a flood, memories – these warriors had not lost them. They had known them as living things – within their own dead bodies.

Known them.

For almost three hundred thousand years.

— friend to Onrack of the Logros, I last saw him kneeling amidst the corpses of his clan. All slain in the street, yet the Soletaken were finally broken. Ah, at such a cost—

— oh, heart laid at his feet, dear Legana Breed. So clever, sharpest of wit, oh how he made me laugh—

— our eyes met, Maenas Lot and I, even as the Ritual began its demand, and we saw the fear in each other’s eyes – our love, our dreams of more children, to fill the spaces of those we had lost out on the ice, our lives of mingled shadows – our love, that must now be surrendered—

— I, Cannig Tol, watched as my hunters hurled their spears. She fell without making a sound, the last of her kind on this continent, and had I a heart, it would have burst, then. There was no justice in this war. We’d left our gods behind, and knelt only before an altar of brutality. Truth. And I, Cannig Tol, shall not turn away from truth—

Itkovian’s mind reeled back, sought to fend off the diluvial tide, to fight himself clear of his own soul’s answering cry of sorrow, the torrent of truths shattering his heart, the secrets of the T’lan Imass – no, the Ritual – how – Fener’s Tusks, how could you have done that to yourselves?

And she has denied you. She has denied you all—

He could not escape – he had embraced their pain, and the flood of memories was destroying him. Too many, too fiercely felt – relived, every moment relived by these lost creatures – he was drowning.

He had promised them release, yet he knew now he would fail. There was no end, no way he could encompass this yearning gift, this desperate, begging desire.

He was alone—

— am Pran Chole, you must hear me, mortal!

Alone. Fading ...

Hear me, mortal! There is a place – I can lead you! You must carry all we give you – not far, not long – carry us, mortal! There is a place!

Fading...

Mortal! For the Grey Swords – you must do this! Hold on – succeed – and you will gift them. I can lead you!

For the Grey Swords . . .

Itkovian reached out—

—and a hand, solid, warm, clasped his forearm—

The ground crawled beneath her. Lichens – green-stalked and green-cupped, the cups filled with red; another
kind, white as bone, intricate as coral; and beneath these, grey shark-skin on the mostly buried stones – an entire world, here, a hand’s width from the ground.

Her slow, inexorable passage destroyed it all, scraped a swathe through the lichens’ brittle architecture. She wanted to weep.

Ahead, close now, the cage of bone and stained skin, the creature within it a shapeless, massive shadow.

Which still called to her, still exerted its terrible demand.

To reach.

To touch the ghastly barrier.

The Mhybe suddenly froze in place, a vast, invisible weight pinning her to the ground.

Something was happening.

The earth beneath her twisting, flashes through the gathering oblivion, the air suddenly hot. A rumble of thunder—

Drawing up her legs, pushing with one arm, she managed to roll onto her back. Breath rasping in shallow lungs, she stared—

The hand held firm. Itkovian began to comprehend. Behind the memories awaited the pain, awaited all that he come to embrace. Beyond the memories, absolution was his answering gift – could he but survive ...

The hand was leading him. Through a mindscape. Yet he strode across it aswould a giant, the land distant below him.

Mortal, shed these memories. Free them to soak the earth in the seasons gift. Down to the earth, mortal – through you, they can return life to a dying, desolate land.

Please. You must comprehend. Memories belong in the soil, in stone, in wind. They are the land’s unseen meaning, such that touches the souls of all who would look – truly look – upon it. Touches, in faintest whisper, old, almost shapeless echoes – to which a mortal life adds its own.

Feed this dreamscape, mortal.

And know this. We kneel before you. Silenced in our hearts by what you offer to us, by what you offer of yourself.

You are Itkovian, and you would embrace the T’lan Imass.

Shed these memories – weep for us, mortal—

Heaving, churning cloud where before there had been naught but a formless, colourless, impossibly distant dome – the cloud spreading, tumbling out to fill the entire sky, drawing dark curtains across bruised rainbows. Lightning, crimson-stained, flickered from horizon to horizon.

She watched the falling, watched the descent – rain, no, hail—

It struck. Drumming roar on the ground, the sound filling her ears – sweeping closer—

To pummel her.

She screamed, throwing up her hands.

Each impact was explosive, something more than simply frozen rain.
And memories—
All raining down.
The pain was unbearable—
Then cessation, a shadow slipping over her, close, a figure, hunched beneath the trammelling thud of hail. A warm, soft hand on her brow, a voice—

‘Not much further, dear lass. This storm – unexpected—’ the voice broke, gasping as the deluge intensified, ‘yet . . . wonderful. But you must not stop now. Here, Kruppe will help you . . .’

Shielding as much of her from the barrage as he could, he began dragging her forward, closer . . .

Silverfox wandered. Lost, half blinded by the tears that streamed without surcease. What she had begun as a child, on a long forgotten barrow outside the city of Pale – what she had begun so long ago – now seemed pathetic.

She had denied the T’lan Imass.
Denied the T’lan Ay.

But only for a time – or so had been her intent. A brief time, in which she would work to fashion the world that awaited them. The spirits that she had gathered, spirits who would serve that ancient people, become their gods – she had meant them to bring healing to the T’lan Imass, to their long-bereft souls.

A world where her mother was young once more.
Gift of love, in answer to all she had taken from her mother.

But the T’lan Ay had turned away, were silent to her desperate call – and now Whiskeyjack was dead. Two marines, women whose solid presence she had come to depend on – more than they could ever have realized. Two marines, killed defending her.

Whiskeyjack. All that was Tattersail keened with inconsolable grief. She had turned from him as well. Yet he had stepped into Kallor’s path.

He had done that, for he remained the man he had always been.

And now, lost too were the T’lan Imass. The man, Itkovian, the mortal, Shield Anvil without a god, who had taken into himself the slain thousands of Capustan – he had opened his arms—

You cannot embrace the pain of the T’lan Imass. Were your god still with you, he would have refused your thought. You cannot. They are too much. And you, you are but one man – alone – you cannot take their burden. It is impossible.

Heart-breakingly brave.
But impossible.

Ah, Itkovian . . .

Courage had defeated her, but not her own – which had never been strong – no, the courage of those around her. On all sides – Coll and Murillio, with their misguided honour, who had stolen her mother and were no doubt guarding her even now, as she slowly died. Whiskeyjack and the two marines. Itkovian. And even Tayschrenn, who had torn himself – badly – unleashing his warren to drive Kallor away. Such extraordinary,
tragically misguided courage—

I am Nightchill, Elder Goddess. I am Bellurdan, Thelomen Skullcrusher. I am Tattersail, who was once mortal. And I am Silverfox, flesh and blood Bonecaster, Summoner of the T’lan.

And I have been defeated.

By mortals—

The sky heaved over her – she looked up. Eyes widening in disbelief—

The wolf thrashed, battered against the bone bars of its cage – its cage ... my ribs. Trapped. Dying—

And that is a pain I share.

His chest was on fire, blossoms of intense agony lashing into him as if arriving from somewhere outside, a storm, blistering the skin covering his ribs—

—yet it grew no stronger, indeed, seemed to fade, as if with each wounding something was imparted to him, a gift—

Gift? This pain? How – what is it? What comes to me?

Old, so very old. Bittersweet, lost moments of wonder, of joy, of grief – a storm of memories, not his – so many, arriving like ice, then melting in the flare of impact – he felt his flesh grow numb beneath the unceasing deluge—

—was suddenly tugged away—

Blinking in the darkness, his lone eye as blind as the other one – the one he had lost at Pale. Something was pounding at his ears, a sound, then. Shrieking, the floor and walls shaking, chains snapping, dust raining from the low ceiling. I am not alone in here. Who? What?

Claws gouged the flagstones near his head, frantic and yearning.

Reaching. It wants me. What does? What am I to it?

The concussions were growing closer. And now voices, desperate bellowing coming from the other side of walls ... down a corridor, perhaps. Clash of weapons, screams and gurgles, clatter of armour – pieces dancing on the floor.

Toc shifted his head – and saw something in the darkness. Huge, straining as it shrieked without pause. Massive, taloned hands stretched imploringly – reaching out—

For me.

Grey light flashed in the cavern, revealing in an instant the monstrous, fat-layered reptile chained opposite Toc, its eyes lit with terror. The stone that was within reach of the creature was gouged with countless scars, on all sides, a hatch-marked nightmare of madness, triggering horror within the Malazan ... for it was a nightmare he recognized within himself.

She – she is my soul—

The Seer stood before him, moving in desperate, jerky motions – the old man’s body, that the Jaghut had occupied for so long, was falling to pieces – and muttering a singsong chant as, ignoring Toc, he edged ever closer to the Matron, to Mother.

The enormous beast cringed, claws scraping as it pushed itself against the wall. Its shrieks did not pause, resounding through the cavern.
The Seer held something in his hands, pallid, smooth and oblong – an egg, not from a bird. A lizard's egg, latticed in grey magic.

Magic that waxed with every word of the Seer's song.

Toc watched as something exploded from the Matron's body, a coruscation of power that sought to flee upward—

—but was, instead, snared by the web of sorcery; snared, then drawn into the egg in the Seer's hands.

The Matron's shrieking suddenly ceased. The creature settled back with a mindless whimper.

In the numbing silence within the cavern, Toc could now hear more clearly the sounds of battle in the corridor beyond. Close, and closing.

The Seer, clutching the Finnest, spun to stare down at Toc. The Jaghut's smile split the corpse's desiccated lips. 'We shall return,' he whispered.

The sorcery blossomed once more, then, as heavy chains clattered freely to the floor, darkness returned.

And Toc knew that he was alone within the cavern. The Seer had taken Mother's power, and then he had taken her as well.

The wolf thrashed in his chest, launching spikes of pain along his broken, malformed limbs. It yearned to loose its howl, its call to lover and to kin. Yet it could not draw breath—

—cannot draw breath. It dies. The hail, these savage gifts, they mean nothing. With me, the god's fatal choice, we die—

The sounds of fighting had stopped. Toc heard iron bars snap, one after another, heard metal clang on the flagstones.

Then someone was crouching down beside him. A hand that was little more than rough bone and tendon settled on Toc's forehead.

The Malazan could not see. There was no light. But the hand was cool, its weight gentle.

'Hood? Have you come for us, then?' The words were clearly spoken in his mind, but came out incomprehensibly – and he realized that his tongue was gone.

'Ahn, my friend,' the figure replied in a rasp. 'It is I, Onos T’oolan, once of the Tarad Clan, of the Logros T’lan Imass, but now kin to Aral Fayle, to Toc the Younger.'

Kin.

Withered arms gathered him up.

'We are leaving now, young brother.'

Leaving?

Picker eyed the breach. The bravado that had been behind her proclamation that they would follow the T’lan Imass into the keep had not survived a sudden return to caution once they came within sight of the fortress. It was under assault, and whatever enemy had stormed into the keep had kicked hard the hornet nest.

K’Chain Che’Malle were thundering back through the compound gate. Sorcerous detonations shook the entire structure. Urdomen and Beklites raced along the top of the walls. Twisting spirals of grey lightning writhed skyward from the south roof, linking the score of condors wheeling overhead. Beyond it, filling the sky above the harbour, was an enormous storm-cloud, flashes burgeoning from its heaving depths.
The lieutenant glanced back at her paltry squads. They’d lost the three badly wounded soldiers, as she had expected. Not one of the Bridgeburners crouching in the smoke-hazed street had been spared – she saw far too much blood on the soot-smeared uniforms behind her.

To the northwest, the sounds of battle continued, drawing no closer. Picker knew that Dujek would have sought to reach the keep, if at all possible. From what she could hear, however, he was being pushed back, street by street.

The gambit had failed.

_Leaving us on our own._

‘K’Chain Che’Malle!’ a soldier hissed from the back. ‘Coming up behind us!’

‘Well, that settles it, then,’ Picker muttered. ‘Doubletime to Hedge’s breach!’

The Bridgeburners sprinted across the rubble-littered street.

Blend was the first to complete her scramble over the tower’s wreckage. Immediately beyond was a shattered building – three walls and half of the roof remaining. Within lay dusty darkness, and what might be a doorway far to the left of the room’s far wall.

Two steps behind Blend, Picker leapt clear of the tumbled stone blocks to land skidding on the room’s floor – colliding with a cursing, backpedalling Blend.

Feet tangling, the two women fell.

‘Damn it, Blend—’

‘Guards—’

A third voice cut in. ‘Picker! Lieutenant!’

As her Bridgeburners gathered behind her, Picker sat up to see Hedge, Bluepearl and seven additional Bridgeburners – the ones who had taken crossbows to the top of the wall and had survived the consequences – emerge from the shadows.

‘We tried getting back to you—’

‘Never mind, Hedge,’ Picker said, clambering to her feet. ‘You played it right, soldier, trust me—’

Hedge was holding a cusser in one hand, which he raised with a grin. ‘Held one back—’

‘Did a T’lan Imass come through here?’

‘Aye, a beat-up bastard, looked neither left nor right – just walked right past us – deeper into the keep—’

A Bridgeburner to the rear shouted, ‘We got that K’Chain Che’Malle coming up behind us!’

‘Through the door back there!’ Hedge squealed. ‘Clear the way, idiots! I’ve been waiting for this—’

Picker began shoving her soldiers towards the back wall.

The sapper scrambled back towards the breach.

The following events were a tumble in Picker’s mind-

Blend gripped her arm and bodily threw her towards the doorway, where her soldiers were plunging through into whatever lay beyond. Picker swore, but Blend’s hands were suddenly on her back, pushing her face first through the portal. Picker twisted with a snarl, and saw over Blend’s shoulder—

The K’Chain Che’Malle seemed to flow as it raced over the rubble, blades lifting.
Hedge looked up – to find himself four paces away from the charging reptile.

Picker heard him grunt, a muted, momentary sound—

The sapper threw the cusser straight down.

The K'Chain Che'Malle was already swinging – two huge blades descending—

The explosion beat them clean.

Blend and Picker were thrown through the doorway. The lieutenant's head snapped back to the thudding, staccato impact of flying stones against her helm and the lowered visor and cheek-guards. Those that made it past lanced fire into her face, filled her nose and mouth with blood.

Deafened, she reeled back through clouds of dust and smoke.

Voices were screaming – issuing from what seemed very far away then swiftly closing to surround her.

Stones falling – a cross-beam of tarred wood, raging with flames, sweeping down, ending with a solid thud and crunch of bones – a death-groan amidst the chaos, so close to Picker that she wondered if it wasn't her own.

Hands gripped her once again, pulled her round, propelled her down what seemed to be a corridor.

A tunnel of smoke and dust – no air – the pounding of boots, blind collisions, curses – darkness – that suddenly dissipated.

Picker stumbled into the midst of her soldiers, spitting blood, coughing. Around them, a room littered with dead Beklites, another door, opposite, that looked to have been shattered with a single punch. A lone lantern swung wildly from a hook above them.

'Look!' someone grunted. 'A dog's been chewing on the lieutenant's chin!'

Not even a jest – simply the absurd madness of battle. Shaking her head to a spatter of blood, Picker spat again and surveyed her troops through stinging, streaming eyes.

'Blend?' The name came out mangled but understandable.

Silence.

'Bucklund – back into the corridor! Find her!'

The Twelfth Squad's sergeant was back a moment later, dragging a blood-drenched body through the doorway. 'She's breathing – Hood knows how! Her back's full of stones and shards!'

Picker dropped to her knees beside her friend. 'You damned idiot,' she mumbled.

'We should've had Mallet with us,' Bucklund grumbled beside her.

'Aye, not the only mistake in this fouled-up game.

'Oh!' a woman's voice cried. 'You are not Pannions!'

Weapons swung to the doorway.

A woman in a blindingly white telaba stood there, her long black hair shimmering, impossibly clean, perfectly combed. Veiled, stunningly beautiful eyes studied them. 'Have you, by any chance, seen three masked warriors? They should have passed this way, looking for the throne room, assuming there is one, that is. You might have heard some fighting—'

'No,' Bucklund growled. 'I mean, yes, we've heard fighting. Everywhere, ma'am. That is—'

'Shut up,' Picker sighed. 'No,' she said to the woman, 'we ain't seen no three masked warriors—'
'What of a T'lan Imass?'

'As a matter of fact, yeah—'

'Excellent! Tell me, does she still have all those swords impaling her? I can't imagine she'd leave—'

'What swords?' Picker demanded. 'Besides, it was male. I think.'

'It was,' another soldier piped up, then reddened as her comrades swung to her with broad grins.

'A male T'lan Imass?' The white-robed woman raised a finger to her full lips, then smiled, 'Why, that would be Tool! Excellent! The smile vanished. 'Unless, of course, Mok finds him ...'

'Who are you?' Picker demanded.

'You know, dear, it's growing increasingly difficult to understand what you are saying through all that blood and such. I believe you're Malazans, yes? Unwitting allies, but you are all so terribly injured. I have an idea, a wonderful idea – as are all my ideas, of course. Wonderful, that is. We are here, you see, to effect the rescue of one Toc the Younger, a soldier of—'

'Toc the Younger?' Picker repeated. 'Toc? But he's—'

'A prisoner of the Seer, alas. A distressing fact, and I dislike being distressed. It irritates me. Immeasurably. Now, as I was saying, I have an idea. Assist me in this rescue, and I will heal those of you who need healing – which seems to be all of you.'

Picker gestured down at Blend. 'Deal. Start with her.'

As the woman stepped into the room, Bucklund shouted and scrabbled back from the doorway.

Picker looked up. A massive wolf stood in the hallway beyond, eyes gleaming through the dust-shrouded gloom.

The woman glanced back. 'Oh, not to worry. That is Baaljagg. Garath has wandered off, I believe. Busy killing Pannions, I expect. He seems to have acquired a taste for Seerdomin... now, this poor woman – well, we'll have you right in no time, dear...'

'What in Hood's name is happening over there?'

On the other side of the low wall, a flight of stairs gave access to the parapet overlooking the harbour and the bay beyond – or, rather, so Paran concluded, since nothing else made sense. In any case, some kind of approach was being contested, and from the screams, whatever was on its way to the flat rooftop was wreaking havoc on the defenders.

Beside Paran, Quick Ben raised his head a fraction. 'I don't know and I'm not popping up for a look, either,' he said in answer to the captain's question, 'but let's hope it proves a worthwhile diversion. I can't keep us here much longer, without those condors finding us.'

'Something's keeping them busy,' Spindle asserted, 'and you know it, Quick. If one of them took the time to look hard – we'd be feeding the chicks in its nest by now.'

'You're right.'

'Then what in Hood's name are we still doing here?'

*Good question.* Paran twisted round, looked back along the roof to the north. There was a trapdoor there.

'We're still here,' Quick Ben grunted, 'because this is where we need to be—'

'Hold it,' Paran growled, reaching up to wipe what he thought was sweat from his eyes, though the smear on
his hand was red – the stitches on his temple had pulled loose. 'Not quite true, Quick. It's where you and I need to be. Mallet, if there's anything left of the Bridgeburners, they need you right now.'

'Aye, Captain, and knowing that's been eating me up inside.'

'All right. Listen, then. The fiery Abyss has broken loose down in this keep under us. We've no idea who's doing the fighting, but we do know one thing – they're no friends of the Pannions. So, Mallet, take Spindle and the rest – that trapdoor back there looks flimsy enough to break open if it's locked.'

'Aye, Captain. Only, how do we get there without being seen?'

'Spindle's right about those condors – they're busy with something else, and looking more agitated with every beat of the heart. It's a short sprint, Healer. But if you're not willing to risk it—'

Mallet glanced at Spindle, then at Detoran and Trotts. Finally, at Antsy. The sergeant nodded. Mallet sighed. 'Aye, sir, we'll give it a go.'

Paran glanced at Quick Ben. 'Any objections, Wizard?'

'No, Captain. At the very least. . .' He fell silent.

At the very least, they've a better chance of getting out alive. I hear you, Quick. 'OK, Mallet, make your run when you're ready.'

'Push and pull, Captain.'

'And to you, Healer.'

With a grunted command, the squad scrambled for the trapdoor.

Dujek dragged the wounded soldier through the doorway, and only then noticed that the man's legs had been left behind, and the trail of blood leading back to the limbs thinned to virtually nothing by the time it reached the threshold. He let the body drop, sagged against the frame.

The K'Chain Che'Malle had cut through the company in the span of a dozen heartbeats, and though the Hunter had lost an arm, it had not slowed as it thumped westward – in search of another company of hapless Malazans.

Dujek's elite bodyguard of Untan heavy infantry lay in a chopped ruin in front of the building into which they had pushed the High Fist. As sworn, they'd given their lives in his defence. At the moment, however, Dujek would rather they'd failed – or, better yet, fled.

Locked in battle since dawn with Beklites, Urdomen and Seerdomin, Onearm's Host had more than held its own. And when the first dozen or so K'Chain Che'Malle appeared, Moranth munitions – cussers and burners – destroyed the undead K'ell Hunters. The same fate befell the second wave. By the time the third arrived, the cussers were gone, and soldiers died by the score. The fifth and sixth waves were met only with swords, and battle became slaughter.

Dujek had no idea how many remained among the five thousand Malazans who had been delivered into the city. He did not think a cohesive defence still existed. The battle had become a hunt, plain and simple. A cleansing by the K'Chain Che'Malle of pockets of Malazan resistance.

Until recently, he could still hear sounds of battle – of collapsing walls and perhaps sorcery – from the keep, though perhaps, he now reflected, he had been wrong in that – the storm-cloud that filled the sky to the south was itself thundering, arcs of lightning splitting the sky to lance at the thrashing seas below. Its rage now overwhelmed all other sounds.

A scrabble of boots behind him. Dujek swung about, shortsword in hand.

'High Fist!'
'Which company, soldier?'

'Eleventh, sir,' the woman gasped. 'Captain Hareb sent a squad to look for you, High Fist. I'm what's left.'

'Does Hareb still hold?'

'Aye, sir. We're collecting souvenirs – pieces of K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'And how in Hood's name are you managing that?'

'Twist, sir, he led a final flight in with the last of the munitions – mostly sharpers and crackers, High Fist – but the sappers are rigging buildings along our retreat, dropping tons of brick and stone on the damned lizards – your pardon, sir – on the Hunters.'

'Where is Hareb's company right now, soldier?'

'Not far, High Fist. Follow me.'

*Hareb, that Seven Cities noble-born with the permanent sneer. Gods, I could kiss the man.*

Moving to the head of his legion, Gruntle watched the Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords approach. The woman reined in even as he arrived.

'I greet you, sir,' she said, only the lower half of her face visible beneath the helm's broad, flaring cheek-guards. 'We are about to advance upon the enemy – would you flank us?'

The Daru grimaced. 'No, Shield Anvil.'

She hesitated, then gave a brusque nod and gathered up her reins. 'As you wish, sir. No dishonour in refusing a suicidal engagement.'

'You misunderstand,' Gruntle interrupted her. 'My legion leads, you follow in our wake – as close as you can. We'll drive across that stone bridge and head straight for the gate. Granted, it looks damned solid, but we might still batter it down.'

'We are seeking to relieve Dujek Onearm, agreed, Mortal Sword?'

'Aye.' *And we both know we will fail.*

They turned at the sound of horns, the sudden staccato of Malazan drums.

The standard-bearer – sorcery swirling from the man like flecks of gold – seemed to have taken command, calling together the company officers. Along the line, shields were readied, locked overlapping. Pikes, twice the height of a man, wavered like wind-tugged reeds above the ranks of soldiery – an uncharacteristic unsteadiness that Gruntle found disturbing.

Artanthos had despatched a rider who rode towards the Daru and the Shield Anvil at a gallop.

The Malazan reined in. 'Sirs! The High Mage Tayschrenn would know your intentions!'

Gruntle bared his teeth. 'Tayschrenn, is it? Let's hear his, first.'

'Dujek, sirs. These K'Chain Che'Malle must be broken, the gate breached, an assault on the defenders—'

'And what of the High Mage himself?' the Shield Anvil enquired.

'They're mages on the walls, sir. Tayschrenn will endeavour to deny their involvement. Orfantal and his Tiste Andii will seek to assist us in our attack upon the K'Chain Che'Malle, as will the shouldermen of the White Faces.'

'Inform the High Mage,' the Shield Anvil said, 'that Trake's Legion will initiate the charge, supported by my
company.'

The soldier saluted and rode back towards the Malazan line.

Gruntle turned to study his followers. He wondered again at the effect that the Lord of Summer's gift had had upon these grim-faced Capans. Like D'ivers . . . only in reverse. From many, to one – and such power! They had crossed the land swift as a flowing shadow. Gruntle had found himself looking out upon the world with a tiger's eyes – no, not simply a tiger, a creature immortal, boundless in strength, a mass of muscle and bone within which was the Legion. His Legion. A will, fused, terrifyingly focused.

And now they would become that beast once again. This time, to enter battle.

His god seemed to possess a particular hatred for these K'Chain Che'Malle, as if Treach had a score to settle. The cold killer was giving way to bloodlust – a realization that left Gruntle vaguely troubled.

His gaze flicked to the hilltop – to see Caladan Brood, Korlat slowly straightening beside him. Distance was irrelevant – she was covered in blood, and he could feel the sickly pain that flowed and ebbed, then flowed again within her.

*Brood's warren suffers, and if that's the case, then so too must.* . . He swung round, back to where Artanthos – High Mage Tayschrenn – stood before the Malazan companies. *Ah, I see the price he pays.* . . ‘Shield Anvil.’

‘Sir?’

"Ware the mages on the city wall."

'We await you, sir.'

Gruntle nodded.

A moment later, the Mortal Sword and his Legion were one, bones and muscle merging, identities – entire lives – swept under a deluge of cold, animal rage.

A tawny swirl, surging, flowing forward.

Ahead, K'Chain Che'Malle raised weapons. And stood their ground.

*Again. We have done this before – no, not us. Our Lord. Tearing dead flesh . . . the spray of blood . . . blood ... oh, Hood—*

Kurald Galain, the darkness within the soul, flowing out' ward, filling her limbs, sweeping round to swallow her feelings – the comfort of oblivion. Korlat stood, her back to the three lifeless figures on the hilltop that still lay where they fell. Stood, silent, the power of her warren – flickering, dimming to surges of pain – reaching out, seeking her kin.

Caladan Brood, hammer unlimbered in his hands, was beside her. He was speaking, his rumbling voice as distant as thunder on the sea's horizon. 'Late afternoon. No earlier. It will be over long before then ... one way or another. Korlat, please listen to me. You must seek your Lord – that storm-cloud, does Moon's Spawn hide within it? He said he would come. At the precise moment. He said he would strike...'

Korlat no longer heard him.

Orfantal was veering, there before the now marching Malazan forces, black, blossoming outward, wings spreading, sinuous neck lifting – a thudding pulsation of sorcery and the dragon was in the air, climbing—

Condors winged out from the keep, a dozen of the demonic creatures, each linked by a writhing chain of chaotic magic.

On the plain below, the beast that was the Mortal Sword and Trake's Legion seemed to flow in and out of her vision, blurred, deadly motion – and struck the line of K'Chain Che'Malle.
Sorcery stained the air around the impact in blood-spattered sheets as within the savage maelstrom blades flashed. A K'ell Hunter reeled away and toppled, its bones shattered. The huge tiger twisted from side to side as swords descended, tore into its flanks. Where each blade struck, human figures fell away from the beast, limbs severed, torsos cut through, heads crushed.

Sorcery was building along the top of the city wall.

Korlat saw Artanthos – Tayschrenn – step forward then, to answer it.

A golden wave appeared suddenly behind the K'Chain Che'Malle, rose for a moment, building, then tumbled forward. The ground it rolled over on its way to the wall burned with fierce zeal, then the wave lifted, climbed towards the Pannion mages.

This – this is what was launched against Moon's Spawn. This is what my Lord struggled against. Alone, in the face of such power—

The ground trembled beneath her boots as the wave crashed into the top of the wall to the west of the gate. Blinding – this is High Telas, the Warren of Fire – child of Tellann—

Chaotic magic exploded from the conflagration like shrapnel. The raging fire then dispersed.

The top third of the city wall, from near the gate and westward for at least forty paces, was simply gone. And with it, at least a dozen Pannion mages.

On the killing field, Trake's Legion was now surrounded by K'Chain Che'Malle, who were a match for the enormous beast's lightning speed. K'ell Hunters were falling, but the tiger was being, literally, cut to pieces.

The Grey Swords, all mounted, were attempting to open an avenue for it on the other side. Long, strangely barbed lances were being driven into Hunters from behind, fouling their steps as they wheeled to lash out at the enemy harrying them. Lassos spun in the air, snapped tight around necks, limbs—

A grey wave of sorcery raced out from the mages on the wall east of the gate, swept over the heads of those battling on the killing field, clambered through the air like some multilimbed beast – to strike Artanthos.

Coruscating fire met the assault, and both sorceries seemed to devour each other. When they vanished, Artanthos was on his knees. Soldiers ran towards him from the Malazan lines.

He is done. Too soon—

'Korlat!'

The bellow shook her. Blinking, she turned to Brood. 'What?'

'Call your Lord, Korlat! Call him!'


'Korlat! Look to that damned storm-cloud!'

She twisted her head. Beyond the city, rising skyward in a churning, towering column, the storm-cloud was tearing itself apart even as it rose – rose, shreds spinning away, sunlight shafting through—


Call him? Despair ripped through her. She heard her own dull reply, 'Anomander Rake is no more, Warlord.' He is dead. He must be—

'Then help your damned brother, woman! He is assailed—'

She looked up, saw Orfantal high above, harried by specks. Sorcery lanced at the black dragon like darts.

Brother . . . Korlat looked back down, at the Malazan ranks that had now closed with the K'Chain Che'Malle.
Darkness shrouded them – Kurald Galain’s whisper. A whisper . . . and no more than a whisper—

‘Korlat!’

‘Move away from me, Warlord. I shall now veer ... and join my brother.’

‘When you two are done with those condors, will you—’

She turned away from the killing field. ‘This battle is lost, Caladan Brood. I fly to save Orfantal.’ Without awaiting a reply, she strode down the slope, unfolding the power within her as she did so. Draconian blood, cold as ice in her veins, a promise of murder. Brutal, unwavering hunger.

Wings, into tine. sky.

Wedge-shaped head tilted, fixed on the condors circling her brother. Her talons twitched, then stretched in anticipation.

Caladan Brood stood on the very edge of the slope, the hammer in his hands. K’Chain Che’Malle had pulled away from the assault upon Trake’s Legion – the giant tiger was dying, surrounded on all sides by flashing blades – and were now wading through the Malazan press, slaying soldiers by the score. Others pursued the Grey Swords, whose ranks had been scattered by the far too quick Hunters.

Barghast had closed from both flanks, to add their spilled blood to the slaughter.

Slowly, the warlord swung about and surveyed the hilltop behind him. Three bodies. Four Malazan soldiers who had carried an unconscious Kruppe to the summit and were now laying the Daru down.

Brood’s eyes held on Kruppe, wondering at the man’s sudden, inexplicable collapse, then he turned.

The T’lan Imass, in their tens of thousands, still kneeled, motionless, before Itkovian, who had himself sunk down, a mortal reflection of them. Whatever was happening there had taken them all far away, to a place from which it seemed there would be no return – not, in any case, until it was far too late.

No choice.

Burn . . . forgive me . . .

Caladan Brood faced the city once more. Eyes on the masses warring on the killing field below, the warlord slowly raised his hammer—

—then froze.

They came to yet another hallway filled with the dead and dying. Picker scowled. ‘Mistress, how many in this Seguleh army you told us about?’

‘Three, my dear. Clearly, we are on the right path—’

‘The right path for what, Lady Envy?’

The woman turned. ‘Hmm, an interesting point. The Seguleh are no doubt eagerly lobbying for an audience with the Seer, but who’s to say the Seer has Toc the Younger with him? Indeed, is it not more likely that our friend lies in chains somewhere far below?’

Blend spoke from beside Picker. ‘There looks to be a landing of some sort at the far end. Could be stairs . . . ’

‘Sharp-eyed,’ Lady Envy murmured in appreciation. ‘Baaljagg, dear pup, will you lead the way?’

The huge wolf slipped past noiselessly, somehow managing to stay silent even as it clambered over the bodies down the length of the corridor. At the far end, it halted, swung its long-snouted head back, eyes like
smouldering coals.

'Ah, the all-clear,' Lady Envy sighed, softly clapping her hands. 'Come along, then, you grim-faced Malazans.'

As they approached, Blend plucked at Picker's sleeve. 'Lieutenant,' she whispered, 'there's fighting up ahead ...'

They reached the landing. Dead Urdomen lay heaped, their bodies sprawled on steps that led upward. A second flight of stone stairs, leading down, showed only the flow of thickening blood from the landing.

Blend edged forward to crouch before the descending steps. 'There's tracks here in the blood,' she said, 'three sets ... the first one, uh, bony, followed by someone in moccasins – a woman, I'd say—'

'In moccasins?' Lady Envy wondered, brows lifting. 'How peculiar. The bony ones are likely to be either Tool or Lanas Tog. Now who might be following either of them? Such mystery! And the last set?'

Blend shrugged. 'Worn boots. A man's.'

The sound of fighting that Blend had detected earlier was audible to everyone now – from somewhere up the flight of stairs, distant, possibly at the uppermost floor, which was at least a half-dozen levels above them.

Baaljagg had limped to stand beside Blend. The wolf lowered its head, nose testing the footprints leading down.

A moment later the animal was a grey flash, racing downward and out of sight.

'Well!' Lady Envy said. 'The issue seems decided, wouldn't you say? The ailing pup has a certain . . . feeling for Toc the Younger. An affinity, to be more precise.'

'Your pardon,' Picker snapped, 'but what in Hood's name are you going on about? One more cryptic statement from this lady and I'll brain her.

'That was rude. None the less, I will acknowledge that the matter is a secret but not one of my own, so I shall freely speak of it.'

'Oh good,' one of the soldiers behind Picker muttered, 'gossip.'

Lady Envy wheeled. 'Who said that?'

No-one spoke.

'I abhor gossip, I will have you all know. Now, shall I tell you the tale of two ancient gods, who each in turn found mortal flesh – or, rather, somewhat mortal flesh in the case of Baaljagg, but all too mortal flesh in the case of dear Toc the Younger?'

Picker stared at the woman, and was about to speak when one of her soldiers cursed loud and with feeling – and blades clashed—

—shouts—

A score Urdomen had just arrived from behind the squads, and the hallway was suddenly filled with vicious, close-in fighting.

Picker snapped out a hand and caught Blend's blood-stiffened cloak, pulled. As the lieutenant dragged free her sword, she hissed: 'Head down the stairs, lass! We'll follow once we clear this up.' She shoved Blend towards the stairs, then spun.

'Will this take long?' Lady Envy asked, her voice somehow cutting through the tumult to echo in Picker's ears as she pushed into the press. The Urdomen were better armoured, fresher, and had had surprise on their side. Picker saw Bucklund reel, half his head cut away. 'No,' she grated, as two more Bridgeburners crumpled,
Detoran had moved to point as the four Bridgeburners headed down the corridor. Mallet strode five paces behind the big Napan woman, Spindle trotting at his heels, followed by Antsy, with Trotts a dozen paces back as rearguard. Thus far, they’d found naught but bodies – Pannion bodies – cut down one and all by blades.

'Someone's a holy terror,' Spindle muttered behind the healer.

‘They could hear fighting, but the echoes were bouncing, making it difficult to determine the direction.

Detoran drew up and raised a hand, then waved Mallet forward.

‘Stairs ahead,’ she grunted. ‘Going down.’

‘Clear,’ the healer observed.

‘For now.’

Antsy joined them. ‘What's the hold-up? We gotta keep moving.’

‘We know, Sergeant,’ Mallet said, then he swung back to the Napan. ‘I'll have to do. Lead us down, Detoran.’

More corpses littered the stone steps, the blood making purchase uncertain.

They descended past two landings unchallenged. Halfway down the next flight, at a switchback in the stairs, Mallet heard the Napan grunt, and weapons suddenly rang.

A wordless shout from behind twisted into a Barghast warcry.

‘Dammit!’ Mallet snapped. Fighting above and below – they were in trouble. ‘Spin, back up Antsy and Trotts! I'll lend Det a hand!’

‘Aye, sir!’

The healer plunged down a half-dozen steps to the bend. Detoran had already pushed her attackers back to a landing. The healer saw, beyond the Napan, at least six Seerdomin, heavy, short-handled double-bladed axes in their gauntleted hands. Detoran, a shortsword in her left hand, broadsword in her right, had just cut down the warrior in front of her. Without hesitating, she stepped over the dying Seerdomin, reaching the landing.

The Seerdomin rushed her.

There was no way to get past the Napan. Swearing, Mallet sheathed his shortsword and unlimbered his crossbow. A quarrel already rested in the slot, held in place by a loop of leather that the healer now pulled clear. Ignoring the bellows and singing iron, he hooked the clawfoot over the braided string and cinched it back.

Up beyond the bend in the staircase, Trotts had begun chanting, broken only by an ominous shriek from Antsy. Fresh blood thinned with bile was streaming down the steps.

Mallet moved back to find a clear shot over Detoran.

The Napan had thrust her shortsword up into a Seerdomin's head from below. The blade jammed between the mandibles. Instead of pulling, Detoran pushed, sending the victim and weapon flying back to foul the two warriors beyond. With the broadsword in her right hand extended, she was keeping another Seerdomin at bay. He was swinging his shorter weapons at the blade in an effort to bat it aside so he could close, but Detoran made her heavy blade dance and weave as if it was a duellist's rapier.

Mallet's attention fixed on the two recovering Seerdomin. A third warrior was pulling the fallen Seerdomin away. The healer snapped the crossbow up and depressed the trigger. The weapon bucked in his hands.
One of the recovering Seerdomin shrieked, a quarrel buried to its leather fins in his chest. He sagged back.

A tumbling body knocked Mallet from his feet as he was about to reload. Cursing, the healer fell back against a side wall and made to kick the corpse away with his boots as he fumbled for a quarrel, then he saw that it was Antsy. Not yet dead, though his chest was sheathed in blood. From the sounds above, Trotts was pushing his way back up the stairs.

He twisted round at a shout from Detoran. She had lunged with her broadsword, breaking her timing to dip her blade round a desperate parry, then sliding the edge up and under the Seerdomin's helm, ripping open the side of the man's neck – even as his other axe stashed a wild arc, straight for Detoran's head.

The Napan threw her left shoulder into its path.

Chain snapped, blood sprayed. The axe-blade cut clear, carrying with it most of the muscle of Detoran's shoulder.

She reeled. Then, blood spurting, righted herself and rushed the remaining two Seerdomin.

The nearest one threw one of his axes.

The Napan chopped it aside then swung a backhand slash that the man barely managed to block. Detoran closed, dropping her sword and jamming her fingers into the helm's eye-slit. The momentum of her rush carried her round the man, twisting his head to follow.

Mallet heard an audible pop of vertebrae, even as he finished loading his crossbow. He raised it—

The last Seerdomin's axes flashed.

Detoran's right arm, stretched out with the fingers still snagged in the visor, was severed halfway between shoulder and elbow.

The second axe drove deep between her shoulder-blades, throwing her forward to slap face first against the landing's wall.

The Seerdomin moved forward to tug the second axe free.

Mallet's quarrel vanished into the man's right arm-pit. He buckled, then collapsed in a clatter of armour.

The healer, setting another quarrel into the slot, clambered to where Detoran still leaned, upright, face first against the wall. The rush of blood from her wounds had slowed to turgid streams.

He did not need to reach out to touch the Napan to know that she was dead.

Boots thumped on the stairs and the healer swung round to see Spindle stumbling onto the landing. He'd taken a blow against his pot-helm, snapping the brow-band and its rivets on one side. Blood painted that side of his face. His eyes were wild.

'A score of 'em up there, Mallet! Trotts is holding them off—'

'The damned idiot!' The healer finished loading his crossbow and scrambled to the stairs, pausing briefly to examine Antsy. 'Find yourself a new helm, Spin, then follow!'

'What about Antsy?'

'He'll live a while longer. Hurry, damn you!'

The staircase was crowded with fresh bodies, all the way up to the next landing.

Mallet arrived in time to find himself caught in a descending rush – Seerdomin and, in their midst, a snarling Trotts, tumbling in a thrashing wall of flesh straight down onto the healer. A blade – the Barghast's – plunged through Mallet's shoulder, then whipped back out as they one and all fell onto the hard stone steps. Axe-blades,
daggers, gauntlets, helms and greaves made the human avalanche a vicious shock of pain that did not end even when they were brought to a flailing halt at the bend in the stairwell.

Trotts was the first one to extricate himself, stabbing down with his shortsword, kicking and stamping with his boots. Cursing, Mallet dragged himself clear of the Barghast's frenzy, fire lancing from the wound in his shoulder.

Moments later, there was only the sound of gasping breaths in the stairwell.

The healer twisted round, found a wall at his back, and slowly pushed himself upright – to glare up at Trotts. 'You stabbed me, you bastard!'

Even as he said it, his words fell away as he looked at the Barghast. The huge warrior had taken more wounds than Mallet had thought possible. He had been chopped to pieces. Yet he did not even so much as waver as he grinned down at the healer. 'Stabbed you, did I? Good.'

Mallet grimaced. 'I see your point, you blue-toothed cattle-dog. Why should you get all the fun?'

'Aye. Where's Antsy and Det and Spin?'

'Landing below. Det's dead. We'll have to carry Antsy. From the sound, Spin's still looking for a new helm.'

'They'll all be too big,' Trotts growled. 'We need to find the kitchen – a cup.'

Mallet pushed himself from the wall. 'Good idea. Let's get going, then.'

'I'll take point, now – cooks are dangerous.'

The Barghast, streaming blood, moved past the healer.

'Trotts.'

He paused. 'Aye?'

'Spin said a score.'

'Aye.'

'All dead?'

'Maybe half. The rest ran away.'

'You scared them off, did you?'

'Spin's hairshirt, is my guess. Come on, Healer.'

Toc's head lolled, the scene rising and falling as the T'lan Imass carried him down the torchlit corridor. Occasionally, Tool stepped over a body or two.

*My brother. He called me that.*

*I have no brother.*

*Only a mother.*

*And a god. Seer, where are you? Will you not come for me, now? The wolf dies. You have won. Free me, Lord of All. Free me to walk through Hood's Gate.*

They reached an arched doorway, the door lying shattered on this side. Wood still nailed to bronze bands shifted unsteadily underfoot as Tool crossed it. A large, domed chamber, twenty paces across, was before them. It had once been filled with strange mechanisms – machines used by torturers – but these had all been smashed
into ruin, flung to the sides to lean like broken-boned beasts against the walls.

*Victims of rage . . . was this Tool's work? This undead, emotionless . . . thing?*

A sudden clang of blades from the arched doorway opposite.

The T'lan Imass stopped. 'I shall have to set you down, now.'

*Down. Yes. It's time.*

Toc twisted his head as Tool slowly lowered him to the flagstones. A figure stood in the doorway on the other side of the chamber. Masked, white enamel, twin-scarred. A sword in each hand. *Oh, I know you, do I not?*

The figure said nothing and simply waited until Tool had stepped away from Toc. The battered T'lan Imass drew the two-handed flint sword from his shoulder sling, then spoke, 'Mok, Third among the Seguleh, when you are done with me, would you take Toc the Younger from this place?'

Lying on his side, Toc watched as the masked warrior tilted his head in acknowledgement.

*Mok, you damned fool. You are about to kill my friend . . . my brother.*

Blurred motion, two warriors closing too fast for Toc's lone eye to follow. Iron sang with stone. Sparks shooting through the gloom to light the broken instruments of torture surrounding them, in racing flashes of revelation – shadows dancing in the wood and metal tangle, and, to Toc, it was as if all the accumulated pain that these mechanisms had absorbed in their lifetimes was suddenly freed.

*By the sparks.*

*By the two warriors ... and all that sheathed their hidden souls.*

*Freed, writhing, dancing, spider-bitten – mad, frantic in answer...*

*In answer . . .*

Somewhere within him – as the battle continued on, the masked warrior driving the T'lan Imass back, back – the wolf stirred.

*Trapped. In this bent but unbroken mechanism, this torturing cage of bone ...* He saw, close, the shattered frame of ... something. A beam, massive, its end capped in black, bruised bronze. Where bits were smeared – flesh, flesh and hair.

*Cage.*

Toc the Younger drew his mangled legs under him, planted a pustuled, malformed elbow on the flagstones, felt flesh tear as he twisted round, pivoted, dragged his legs up to kneel – then, hands, frozen into fists, pushing down on the stone. Lifting, tilting back to settle weight on hips that ground and seemed to crumble beneath tendon and thin muscle.

He set his hands down once more, drew the knobbled things that had once been his feet under him, knees lifting.

*Balance . . . now. And will.*

Trembling, slick with sweat beneath the tattered remnants of his shapeless tunic, Toc slowly rose upright. His head spun, blackness threatening, but he held on.

*Kruppe gasped, lifting her, pulling at her arm. 'You must touch, lass. This world – it was made for you – do you understand? A gift – there are things that must be freed.'*

*Freed.*
Yes, she understood that word. She longed for it, worshipped it, knelt, head bowed, before its altar. Freed. Yes, that made sense.

Like these memories of ice, raining, raining down upon us.

Freed . . . to feed the earth—
—deliverance, of meaning, of emotion, history's gift – the land underfoot, the layers, so many layers—
To feed the earth.

What place is this?

'Reach, dearest Mhybe, Kruppe begs you! Touch—'

She raised a trembling hand—

Upright.

To see Tool reeling beneath blows, the flint sword fending slower with each flashing blade that reached for him.


The cage, the wolf stirring, the wolf seeking to draw breath – unable—

He lurched towards the beam and its upthrust, bronze-capped end.

One step, then toppling.

Forward, lifting his arms high – clear – the beam's end seeming to rise to meet him. Meet his chest – the ribs – bones shattering in an explosion of pain—

To touch—

The cage!

Broken!

Freed!

The wolf drew breath.

And howled.

The hammer held high in Brood's hands, trembling, iron shaking—

As a god's howl ripped the air, a howl climbing, a call—

Answered.

On the killing field, T'lan Ay rising from the ground, the beasts blurring forward in a silent, grey wave, cutting through K'Chain Che'Malle – tearing the undead reptiles down, rending – the giant, armoured reptiles buckling before the onslaught.

Other K'ell Hunters wheeling, racing for the gate – wolves pursuing.

Far overhead, condors breaking away from their deadly dance with two black dragons, speeding back
towards the keep, Korlat and Orfantal following, and behind them, tens of thousands of Great Ravens—
—and above the keep, something was happening—

Holding the Mhybe, now unconscious, in his arms, Kruppe staggered back as Togg tore itself free of the shattered cage, the god's howl blistering the air.

The deluge of hail ceased. Abrupt. The sky darkened.

A pressure, a force, ancient and bestial. Growing.

Togg, huge, one-eyed, white, silver-tipped fur – howling -

The wolf-god, emerging with the force of heaving stone, his cry seeming to span the sky.

A cry that was answered.

On all sides.

Paran ducked even lower to a sudden descent of gloom, cold, a weight overwhelming the captain.

Beside him, Quick Ben groaned, then hissed. 'This is it, friend. Kurald Galain. I can use this – get us over this wall – we have to see—'

See what? Gods, I'm being crushed!

The pressure dimmed suddenly. Hands gripped his harness, dragged him up, metal scraping, leather catching, up and over the low wall to thump down on the other side.

The darkness continued its preternatural fall, dulling the sun to a grey, fitfully wavering disc.

Condors overhead, screaming—

—and in those screams, raw terror—

Paran twisted round, looked upon the scene on the parapet. Thirty paces away, on the far edge, crouching, was a figure the captain knew instinctively to be the Seer. Human flesh and skin had sloughed away, revealing a Jaghut, naked, surrounded in misty clouds of ice crystals. Clutched in the Seer's hands, an egg the size of a cusser. At his side, huge and misshapen, a K'Chain Che'Malle – no. The Matron. What flowed from her left Paran horrified and filled with pity. She was mindless, her soul stripped, filled with a pain he knew she could not even feel – the only mercy that remained.

Two heavily armoured K'ell Hunters had been guarding their mother, but were now moving forward, weapons rising, thumping across the roof as, at a stairwell fifteen paces to Paran's left, two figures appeared. Masked, painted from head to toe in blood, each wielding two swords, clambering free of a passageway strewn with the bodies of Urdomen and Seerdomin.

'Hood take us!' Quick Ben swore. 'Those are Seguleh!'

But Paran's attention had already left them, was oblivious of the battle as the K'ell Hunters closed with the Seguleh. The storm-cloud that had towered overhead for so long was still climbing, shredding apart, almost lost in darkness. Something, he realized with a chill, was coming.

'Captain! Follow me!'

Quick Ben was edging along the low wall, following its curve towards the harbourside.

Paran scrambled after the wizard. They halted where they had a full view of the harbour and the bay.

Far out in the bay, the horizon's line of ice was exploding all along its length, in white, spewing clouds.
The waters of the harbour had grown glass-smooth beneath the dark, now motionless air. The web of ropes spanning it – with its shacks and dangling lines and withered corpses – suddenly trembled.

‘In Hood's name what’s—’

‘Shh! Oh, Abyss! Watch!’

And he did.

The glass-smooth waters of the harbour ... shivered ... swelled . . . bulged.

Then, impossibly, fled on all sides.

Black, enormous – something – rising from the depths.

Seas thrashed, a ring of foam racing outward. A sudden push of cold wind hammered the parapet, made the structure sway, then tremble.

Rock, ragged, scarred – a Hood-damned mountain! – rising from the harbour, lifting the vast net with it.

And the mountain grew larger, rose higher, darkness bleeding from it in radiating waves.

‘They've unveiled Kurald Galain!' Quick Ben shouted through the roaring wind. 'All of them!'

Paran stared.

Moon's Spawn.

Rising.

Rake hid it—

—oh, Abyss below, did Rake hide it!

Rising, water descending down its battered sides in tumbling falls, into mist that flowed as the edifice climbed ever higher.

The Cut. Ortnal's Cut – that chasm—

‘Look!’ Quick Ben hissed. ‘Those cracks...’

And now he saw the cost of Rake's gambit. Huge fissures scarred the face of Moon's Spawn, fissures from which water still poured in undiminished volume.

Rising.

Two-thirds now clear of the churned seas.

Slowly spinning, bringing into view, high on one side, a ledge—

Where stood a lone figure.

Memories . . . gone. In their wake, tens of thousands of souls. Silent.

‘To me, then, I will take your pain, now.'

‘You are mortal.’

‘I am mortal.’

‘You cannot carry our pain.’
'I can.'

'You cannot deliver it—'

'I shall.'

'Itkovian—'

'Your pain, T'lan Imass. Now.'

It rose before him, a wave of immeasurable height, rose, towering, then plunged towards him.

And they saw, one and all.

They saw Itkovian's welcoming smile.

Moon's Spawn rose, shrouded in darkness, beyond the city. Caladan Brood stared. Cascading clouds of mist, streams of water falling, fading. Dragons, now, wheeling outward, black, one crimson, waves of Kurald Galain, lashing out, incinerating the demonic condors.

Moon's Spawn, leaning – a massive chunk of midnight stone sloughing from one side, rocking the entire edifice – leaning, sliding, forward, towards the keep—

On the killing field below, scattered remnants of soldiers – Malazan, Barghast, Grey Swords, Gruntle and the handful of followers that were all that remained of his legion – had one and all crossed the stone bridge and were converging on the shattered north gate. Unimpeded. The wall east of the gate was empty of mages, of anyone – stripped clean.

Fires lit the city beyond the wall. The sky was filling with Black Moranth, Great Ravens – Kurald Galain spreading out, down, onto Coral—

A true unveiling. All of the Tiste Andii, joined in ritual magic – the world has never known this – in all the millennia since their arrival – never known this. Burn's heart, what will come of this unveiling?

He continued staring, overcome with a vast, soul-numbing helplessness.

The power flowed towards Korlat. Her eyes flashed as she and her brother swept on the cold, familiar currents of Kurald Galain, towards Moon's Spawn.

Oh, it was dying – she could see that. Dying, but not yet completed its dreadful, deadly task.

She watched it moving, drawing closer to the keep's parapet – to where, she could now see, stood the Seer – the Jaghut, clutching the Matron's Finnest, staring upward, frozen, as the black, towering mountain inexorably approached.

Darkness, come to this world. To this place, this city.

Darkness, that would never dissipate.

Coral. Black, black Coral...

It took no more than a half-dozen heartbeats before Lady Envy realized – as she watched the Bridgeburners crumble before the Urdomen attack – that she had misunderstood Picker's last comment. Not confidence, not even bravado. Rather, a comment rife with fatalism, no doubt typical of these soldiers, but entirely new to Lady Envy.

As comprehension struck her, she acted. A small gesture with one hand.
Sufficient to rupture the flesh of the Urdomen warriors.

They crumpled en masse.

But the damage had already been done.

Two Bridgeburners remained standing, and both bore wounds.

She watched as they began checking their fallen comrades, finally gathering around one, pulling him clear. Only one among those fallen, then, who still breathed.

Heavy boots down the hallway, fast approaching.

Lady Envy scowled, raised her hand again—

'Wait!' Picker screamed. 'That's Mallet! Spin! Over here, you bastards!'

Behind the first two who had appeared – Mallet and Spin, she presumed – staggered two more soldiers in the garb of the Bridgeburners. All were terribly wounded – the Barghast in particular, whose armour was nothing more than fragments and whose body was a mass of cuts and gaping holes. Even as she watched, he staggered, sank to his knees, teeth bared in a smeared grin.

And died.

'Mallet!'

The large man in the lead spun round, reeled at the sudden motion – and Lady Envy noted that he had taken a sword thrust that had gone right through him, just below the right shoulder. He stumbled back towards the Barghast.

'It is too late for him, I am afraid,' Lady Envy called out. 'And you, Healer – Mallet – you are done with your warren and you know it. Gather to me, then, and I shall oblige. As for you, Picker, a more honest answer to my question earlier would have resulted in a far less horrible episode.'

Wiping blood from her eyes, Picker simply stared.

'Ah, well,' Lady Envy sighed, 'perhaps it is best that you have no recollection of that sardonic quip. Come forward all of you – oh!'

She swung about suddenly, as sorcery descended – Kurald Galain – overwhelming in its power.

'Down those stairs!' she cried. 'We must work clear of this! Quickly!'

Four dragging one, the surviving Bridgeburners followed Lady Envy.

Splinters of bone struck the wall. Tool staggered back, crashing against the stone, sword falling from his hands, ringing on the flagstones.

Mok raised both weapons—

—and flew to one side, through the air, spinning, weapons sailing from his hands – to collide with a wall, then slide in a heap among shattered wood and metal.

Tool raised his head.

A huge black panther, lips peeled back in a silent snarl, slowly padded towards the unconscious Seguleh.

'No, sister.'

The Soletaken hesitated, then glanced back.
No. Leave him.'

The panther swung round, sembled.

Yet the rage remained in Kilava's eyes as she strode towards Tool. 'You were defeated! You! The First Sword!' 

Tool slowly lowered himself to collect his notched sword. 'Aye.'

'He is a mortal man!' 

'Go to the Abyss, Kilava.' He straightened, back scraping as he continued leaning against the wall.

'Let me kill him. Now. Then once more you shall have no worthy challenger.' 

'Oh, sister,' Tool sighed. 'Do you not realize? Our time – it has passed. We must relinquish our place in this world. Mok – that man you so casually struck from behind – he is the Third. The Second and the First are his masters with swords. Do you understand me, Kilava? Leave him . . . leave them all.' 

He slowly turned until he could see Toc the Younger.

The body, speared through on a shaft of wood, did not move.

'The ancient wolf-god is free,' Kilava said, following his gaze. 'Can you not hear it?'

'No. I cannot.'

'That howl now fills another realm, the sound of birth. A realm ... brought into existence by the Summoner. As for what now gives it life, something else, something else entire.'

A scrape from the doorway.

Both swung their heads.

Another T'lan Imass stood beneath the arch. Impaled with swords, cold-hammered copper sheathing canines. 'Where is she?'

Tool tilted his head. 'Who do you seek, kin?'

'You are Onos T'oolan.' The attention then shifted to Kilava. 'And you are his sister, the One who Defied—' 

Kilava's lip curled in contempt. 'And so I remain.'

'Onos T'oolan, First Sword, where is the Summoner?'

'I do not know. Who are you?'

'Lanas Tog. I must find the Summoner.'

Tool pushed himself from the wall. 'Then we shall seek her together, Lanas Tog.'

'Fools,' Kilava spat.

The patter of claws behind Lanas Tog – she wheeled, then backed away.

Baaljagg limped into the chamber. Ignoring everyone but Toc the Younger, the wolf approached the body, whimpered.

'He is free,' Tool said to Baaljagg. 'Your mate.'

'She is not deaf to that howl,' Kilava muttered. 'Togg has passed into the Warren of Tellann. Then ... to a place beyond. Brother, take that path, since you are so determined to find the Summoner. They converge, one and all.'
'Come with us.'
Kilava turned away. 'No.'
'Sister. Come with us.'
She spun, face dark. 'No! I've come for the Seer. Do you understand me? I've come—'
Tool's gaze fell to Toc's broken corpse. 'For redemption. Yes. I understand. Find him, then.'
'I shall! Now that I've saved you, I am free to do as I please.'
Tool nodded. 'And when you are done, sister, seek me out once more.'
'And why should I?'
'Kilava. Blood-kin. Seek me out.'
She was silent for a long moment, then she gave a curt nod.
Lanas Tog strode to Tool's side. 'Lead me, then, First Sword.'
The two T'lan Imass fell to dust, then that, too, vanished.
Kilava was alone in the chamber.
Barring an unconscious Seguleh.
And an ay now lying beside a corpse.

She hesitated, took a step towards Mok's inert form, then sighed, wheeled about and approached Baaljagg.

'You grieve for this mortal,' she whispered, reaching down to rest her hand on the beast's lowered head. 'For him, you hold back on what you so long for – your reunion with your lost mate. Was this man truly worthy of such loyalty? No, answer not – that is plain enough in your eyes.

'And so I will tell you something, Baaljagg, that you clearly fail to realize. This mortal's soul – it rides Togg's own – and your mate would deliver it, but not to Hood's Gate. Go, then, pursue that trail. Here, I shall open the way.'

She straightened, gestured.

The Warren of Tellann opened. The chamber's musty air was swept away. A sweet smell of wet tundra, acrid mosses and softened lichen flowed in on a soft, warm breeze.

The ay bound through the portal.
Kilava closed it after the beast.
Then walked from the chamber.

A moment later, Blend stepped from the shadows. She strode to where Mok lay amidst broken wood and twisted metal, looked down on the unconscious figure. Oh, that mask. So . . . tempting—

Startled shouts from the corridor behind her, the sound of soldiers scattering, then heartfelt curses.

'—a damned panther!'

'Kilava,' Lady Envy replied. 'I have crossed paths with her before. Rude, indeed, to push us all aside in such contemptuous fashion.'

Blend turned as the troop arrived.
Lady Envy paused, veiled eyes flicking from Mok to Toc the Younger. 'Oh,' she said in a low voice, 'my dear lad ... Would that you had remained in our company.'


Blend closed her eyes.

'Well, that settles it, then,' Lady Envy said. 'We return to the keep's roof. Swiftly, before Kilava robs me of my vengeance against the Seer.'

'You can return to the roof,' Picker growled. 'We're leaving.'

_Leaving, oh, my love . . ._

Lady Envy crossed her arms. 'I exhaust myself healing you ungracious soldiers, and this is your answer? I want company!'

Mallet and Spindle moved to retrieve Toc's body.

Picker slumped against a wall, studied Lady Envy with red-shot eyes. 'Our thanks for the healing,' she muttered. 'But we need to rejoin Onearm's Host.'

'And what if still more Pannion soldiers are lurking about?'

'Then we join our slain brothers and sisters. What of it?'

'Oh, you're all the same!'

With that, and a flurry of white robes, Lady Envy stormed from the chamber.

Blend drew closer to Picker, quietly said, 'There's a hint of fresh air ... coming from the doorway beyond.'

The lieutenant nodded. 'Lead on.'

Canted to one side, shrouded in black mist, the ruptured basalt groaning like a living thing, Moon's Spawn drew ever closer to the keep's parapet.

Beneath the vast, overwhelming weight of Kurald Galain, the Seer crouched in his madness, head tilted to stare up at the edifice, the Finnest cradled with desperate possessiveness in his arms. Off to one side, the Matron seemed to be trying to claw her way through the tiles beneath her. The pressure was unrelenting.

The two Seguleh had not reached the rooftop unscathed, and the K'ell Hunters were proving more than their match. Both masked warriors had been driven back over the low ringwall, leaving trails of blood. Even so, Paran had never before seen such a display of skill. The swords were a blur, seemingly everywhere at once, and the K'ell Hunters were being hacked to shreds even as they pressed on. The captain had thought to help the two strangers, but had concluded that he'd prove more a hindrance.

Paran glanced back at the sky to the north.

Dragons, diving towards the city, waves of power lashing down to thunder in the streets, against buildings, darkness billowing.

_Great Ravens, wheeling, voicing triumphant cries._

'Uh, it's not going to clear ...'

The captain frowned at Quick Ben's strange statement. _Clear? What's not_ – he snapped his head round, back to Moon's Spawn. _Oh._

The base of the floating mountain was directly opposite, sliding ever closer. _So close_ – towering, filling the sky.
'I thought Rake would at least come down in person for this,' the wizard went on. 'Instead, he's elected something ... uh, less subtle.'

*Like obliterating this entire keep and everyone in it. 'Quick Ben—'*

'Aye, we'd better make our move.'

A huge black panther flowed from the stairwell, paused, lambent eyes taking in the scene on the rooftop, then fixing on the Seer.

Quick Ben was suddenly on his feet. 'No!' he shouted to the beast. 'Wait!'

The panther's huge head swung to the wizard, eyes blazing, lips peeling back.

'I don't think it wants to wait.'

Tail lashing, the panther drew a step closer to the cowering Seer – whose back was to them all—

'Damn!' Quick Ben hissed. 'Time's now, Talamandas!'

*Who?*

Moon's Spawn struck the parapet roof's wall with a grinding, grating crunch. The inexorable wall of stone ploughed forward—

The Matron screamed—

Wet, streaming basalt pinned the K'Chain Che'Malle where she lay, then seemed to gather her in. Blood sprayed, bones snapped, Moon's Spawn's apex edging across the rooftop, leaving in its wake chewed tiles and smears of blood and flesh.

The Seer shrieked, back-pedalled – directly towards the panther, which suddenly coiled—

Moon's Spawn sank suddenly, dropping a man's height, punching through the roof.

Tiles dipped beneath Paran, bricks buckling on all sides – the world swayed.

Quick Ben struck. Sorcery tumbling out, hammering into the panther's flank – sending it flying, claws skittering—

'Follow me!' the wizard screamed, lunging forward.

Paran, struggling to maintain his balance, reached and grasped the wizard's rain-cape, was pulled along. So it's now – to cheat them all. Gods forgive us.

The Seer spun to them – 'What?'

'Talamandas!' Quick Ben roared as they closed with the Seer, the wizard throwing himself onto the Jaghut-Warren opening round them—

—and away.

Portal closing – then flaring as the panther plunged through it in pursuit.

Moon's Spawn settled further, and the parapet burst apart, bricks snapping out to all sides. The two Seguleh darted back from the K'ell Hunters, leapt the low wall behind which Paran and Quick Ben had hidden, and raced for the far end of the roof. Behind them, where the Seer had crouched, a massive chunk of basalt split away from the apex in a gush of saltwater, plunged down to bury the two K'ell Hunters, down, through floor after floor, into the bowels of the keep.
Gruntle staggered, shoulder striking a wall, leaving a red stain as he slowly slid to a crouch. Before him, bent over in exhaustion or pain, kneeling, or standing, blank-faced and ashen, were eight Capan women. Three little more than children, two others with grey in their tangled, sweat-matted hair, their weapons hanging from trembling hands. All he had left.

His Lestari officer was gone, dead, what was left of his body somewhere out in the killing field beyond the wall.

Gruntle lowered his swords, leaned his head back against the dusty stone facing, and closed his eyes.

He could hear fighting to the west. The Grey Swords had ridden in that direction, searching for Dujek. The Black Moranth had returned to the sky above the westernmost third of the city, and seemed to be concentrated in one particular area, plunging in small groups down into streets as if participating in a desperate defence. The snap of sharpers echoed.

Closer at hand, directly opposite Gruntle and what was left of his legion, a cusser had struck a large tenement. The building was moments from collapsing, raging with flames. Bodies of Pannion soldiers lay amidst rubble in the street.

And, slowly tearing its way through the keep, Moon's Spawn, bleeding its darkness out into the city, the path of its destruction a chorus of demolition.

His eyes remained closed.

Boots kicked through broken masonry, then one nudged Gruntle's thigh.

'Lazy pig!'

The Mortal Sword sighed. 'Stonny—'

'This fight ain't over.'

He opened his eyes, stared up at her. 'It is. Coral's fallen – ha, no, it's falling. And isn't the victory sweet. Where have you been?'

The dusty, sweat-streaked woman shrugged, glanced down at the rapier in her hand. 'Here and there. Did what I could, which wasn't much. The Mott Irregulars are here, did you know that? How in Hood's name did they manage that? Damn if they weren't there, inside the gate, when me and the Grey Swords showed up – and we thought we were first.'

'Stonny—'

The preternatural darkness deepened suddenly.

Moon's Spawn had drawn clear of the keep in a final toppling of walls. Still canted, still raining water and chunks of black rock, it drifted closer, a few men's heights above the city's buildings, filling the sky – now almost above them.

On the high ledge, no-one remained visible. Great Ravens were swinging close to the Moon's sides, then wheeling away again with loud, echoing shrieks.

'Abyss take us,' Stonny whispered, 'that thing looks like it could fall at any moment. Just drop. Straight down – or in pieces. It's finished, Gruntle. Finished.'

He could not disagree. The edifice looked ready to break apart.

Salty rain soaked his upturned face, mist from the mountain looming directly overhead. It was, all at once, as dark as an overcast night, and if not for the reflection from the fires spotting the city, Moon's Spawn would have been virtually invisible. Gods, I wish it was.

The sound of fighting to the west fell away, strangely sudden.
They heard horse hooves pounding the cobbles. A moment later, riding into the glare of the burning buildings opposite, the Destriant of the Grey Swords.

She saw them, slowed her canter and swung her warhorse round to approach, then halt.

'We have found the High Fist, sirs. He lives, as well as at least eight hundred of his soldiers. The city is taken. I return, now, to our staging area beyond the killing field. Will you accompany me, sirs? There will be a gathering . . .'

Of survivors. He looked around once more. The T'lan Ay were gone. Without those undead wolves, the K'Chain Che'Malle would have killed everyone outside the city. Perhaps they, too, are gathering around that hill. And what of Itkovian! That damned fool. Does he still kneel before the T'lan Imass? Does he still live? Gruntle sighed, slowly pushed himself upright. His gaze fell once more on his few remaining followers. All this, just to get fifty paces inside the gate. 'Aye, Destriant, we'll follow.'

Wings spread wide, flowing across power-ridden air, Korlat sailed in a slow bank around Moon's Spawn. Blood-matted feathers and bits of flesh still clung to her claws. At the end, the demonic condors had died easily – proof enough that the Seer had either fled or had been killed. Perhaps her Lord had descended, had drawn Dragnipur to take the Jaghut's soul. She would discover the truth soon enough.

Head twisting, she glanced at her brother flying beside her, guarding her flank. Orfantal bore wounds, yet did not waver, his power and will still formidable weapons should any surprises rise up to challenge them.

None did.

Their path took them out towards the sea, east of Coral, and within sight of the ocean. Late afternoon's light still commanded the distance.

And she saw, half a league from shore, four ships of war, sails out, flying the colours of the Malazan Imperial Navy as they skirted the periphery of dying ice floes.

Artanthos – Tayschrenn . . . oh, the plans within plans, the games of deceit and misdirection ...

Our history, my lost love, our history destroyed us all.

Swinging around yet further, until they approached Coral once more, angling down and away from Moon's Spawn's slow path as it continued drifting northward. Below, the shattered gate. Figures, torchlight.

Her eyes found Caladan Brood, soldiers of the Grey Swords, Barghast and others.

Orfantal spoke within her mind. 'Go down, sister. I will guard the skies. I, our Soletaken kin, and Silanah. Look, Crone descends. Join her.'

I would guard you, Brother—

'The enemy is destroyed, Korlat. What you would guard, staying with me, is the heart within you. You would fend it from pain. From loss. Sister, he deserves more. Go down, now. To grieve is the gift of the living – a gift so many of our kin have long lost. Do not retreat. Descend, Korlat, to the mortal realm.'

Korlat crooked her wings, spiralled earthward. Brother, thank you.

Shesembl as she landed in the modest concourse onto which the north gate opened. Her arrival had forced soldiers to scatter, if only momentarily. Tiste Andii once more, suddenly weak from the wound that Brood had managed to heal but superficially, she stumbled slightly as she made her way to where the Warlord waited just inside the gate. Crone had reported something to him and now rose once more into the darkness.

She had never seen Brood look so . . . defeated. The notion of victory seemed . . . irrevocable, in the face of such personal loss. For us all.

As she drew nearer, a man walked up to the warlord. Lean, slope-shouldered, his long, pale hair a tangled
mess that sat strangely high on his head.

Korlat watched the man salute, heard him say, 'High Marshal Stump, sir. Mott Irregulars. About that order—'

'What order?' Brood snapped.

The man's smile revealed long, white teeth. 'Never mind. We were there, you see—'

'Where?'

'Uh, this side of the wall, east of the gate, sir, and there was mages up top. The Bole brothers didn't like that, so they roughed them up some. Ain't none breathing any more. Anyway, what do you want us to do now?'

Caladan Brood stared at the man, expressionless, then he shook his head. 'I have not a clue, High Marshal Stump.'

The man from Mott nodded. 'Well, we could put out some fires.'

'Go to it, then.'

'Yes sir.'

Korlat, who had held back during the exchange, now stepped forward as the High Marshal ambled off.

Brood was staring after the man.

'Warlord?'

'We'd left them behind, I'd thought,' he muttered. 'But then . . . they were in the city. They were on the other side of the K'Chain Che'Malle – through the gate or over the wall, taking out mages. Now, how did they ...'

'Warlord, there are Malazan ships. Approaching.'

Brood slowly nodded. 'So Artanthos informed me, before he travelled by warren to the deck of the command ship. There is an imperial delegation aboard, an ambassador, a legate, a governor—'

'All three?'

'No, just one. Lots of titles, depending on the negotiations to follow.'

Korlat drew a deep breath. *Hold back on the pain, on the loss – just a short while longer. 'With Onearm's Host so badly ... damaged ... the Malazans won't be bargaining from a position of strength.'*

Brood's eyes narrowed on her. 'Korlat,' he said softly, 'as far as I am concerned, the Malazans have earned all they might ask for. If they want it, Coral is theirs.'

Korlat sighed. 'Warlord, the unveiling of Kurald Galain ... is a permanent manifestation. The city now lies as much within the Tiste Andii warren as within this world.'

'Aye, meaning the negotiations are properly between Rake and the Malazans. Not me. Tell me, will your Lord claim Coral? Moon's Spawn ...'

There was no need to continue. The city within the mountain of rock still held, trapped in its deepest chambers, massive volumes of water, weight that could not be withstood for much longer. Moon's Spawn was dying. It would, she knew, have to be abandoned. *A place, our home for so long. Will I grieve? I know not.*

'I have not spoken with Anomander Rake, Warlord. I cannot anticipate his disposition.' She turned away, began walking towards the gate.

Brood called after her.

*Not yet.*
She continued on, beneath the gate's arch, her eyes fixing on the hilltop beyond the shattered corpses carpeting the killing field. Where I will find him. All that is left. His face, gift of memories, now grown cold. I saw the life flee his eyes. That moment of death, of dying. Withdrawing, away from those eyes, withdrawing, back and away. Leaving, leaving me.

Her steps slowed, the pain of loss threatening to overwhelm her.

Dear Mother Dark, do you look down upon me, now? Do you see me, your child? Do you smile, to see me so broken? I have, after all, repeated your fatal errors of old. Yielding my heart, succumbing to the foolish dream – Light's dance, you longed for that embrace, didn't you?

And were betrayed.

You left us, Mother . . . to eternal silence.

Yet . . .

Mother Dark, with this unveiling, I feel you close. Was it grief that sent you away, sent you so far from your children? When, in our deadly, young way – our appalling insensitivity – we cursed you. Added another layer to your pain.

These steps . . . you walked them once.

How can you help but smile?

Rain struck her brow, stung the ragged, open gash of her wound. She halted, looked up, to see Moon's Spawn directly overhead ... weeping down upon her ... 

... and upon the field of corpses surrounding her, and, beyond and to the right, upon thousands of kneeling T'lan Imass. The dead, the abandoned, a wash of deepening colours, as if in the rain the scene, so softly saturated, was growing more solid, more real. No longer the faded tableau of a Tiste Andii's regard. Life, drawn short, to sharpen every detail, flush every colour, to make every moment an ache.

And she could hold back no longer. Whiskeyjack. My love.

Moments later, her own tears joined the salt-laden water running down her face.

In the gate's gloom, Caladan Brood stared out, across the stone bridge, over the mangled plain to where Korlat stood halfway to the hill, surrounded by corpses and shattered K'Chain Che'Malle. Watched as her head tilted back, face slowly lifting to the grey shroud of the rain. The black mountain, fissures widening, groans issuing from the dying edifice, seemed to pause directly over her. A heart, once of stone, made mortal once more.

This image – what he now saw – he knew, with bleak certainty, would never leave him.

Silverfox had walked for what seemed a long time, heedless of direction, insensate to all that surrounded her, until distant movement caught her attention. She now stood on the barren tundra, beneath solid white overcast, and watched the approach of the Rhivi spirits.

A small band, pitifully small, less than forty individuals, insignificant in the distance, almost swallowed by the immense landscape, the sky, this damp air with its unforgiving chill that had settled into her bones like the blood of failure.

Events had occurred. Elsewhere in this nascent realm. She could sense that much – the hail, deluge of memories, born from she knew not where. And though they had struck her with the same indiscriminate randomness as they struck the ground on all sides, she had felt but the faintest hint of all that they had contained.

If a gift, then a bitter one.
If a curse, then so too is life itself a curse. For there were lives within that frozen rain. Entire lives, sent down to strike the flesh of this world, to seep down, to thaw the soil with its fecundity.

But it has nothing to do with me.

None of this. All that I sought to fashion . . . destroyed. This dreamworld was itself a memory. Ghostworld of Tellann, remembrance of my own world, from long, long ago. Remembrances, taken from the Bonecaster who was there in my refashioning, taken from the Rhivi spirits, the First Clan, taken from K’rul, from Kruppe. Taken from the slumbering land itself – Burn’s own flesh.

I myself . . . possessed nothing. I simply stole.

To fashion a world for my mother, a world where she could be young once more, where she could live out a normal life, growing old through the normal span of seasons.

All that I stole from her, I would give back.

Bitterness filled Silverfox. It had begun with that first barrow, outside Pale. This belief in the righteousness, the efficacy, of theft. Justified by the worthiest of ends.

But ownership bereft of propriety was a lie. All that she hoarded was in turn stripped of value. Memories, dreams, lives.

Gone to dust.

The hapless band of Rhivi spirits drew closer, cautiously, hesitating.

Yes. I understand. What demands will I make of you now? How many more empty promises will I voice? I had a people for you, a people who had long since lost their own gods, their own spirits to whom they had once avowed allegiance, were less than the dust they could make of themselves. A people.

For you.

Lost.

What a lesson for four bound souls – no matchmaker, we four.

She did not know what to tell them – these modest, timid spirits.

‘Bonecaster, we greet you.’

Silverfox blinked her eyes clear. ‘Elder Spirit. I have—’

‘Have you seen?’

She saw then, in all their faces, a kind of wonder. And frowned in reply.

‘Bonecaster,’ the foremost Rhivi continued, ‘we have found something. Not far from here – do you know of what we speak?’

She shook her head.

‘There are thrones, Bonecaster. Two thrones. In a long hut of bones and hide.’


The elder shrugged, then offered her a soft smile. ‘They await, Bonecaster. We can feel the truth of that. Soon. Soon, will come this warren’s true masters.’

‘True masters!’ Anger flared in Silverfox. ‘This realm – it was for you! Who dares seek to usurp—’

‘No,’ the spirit’s quiet denial cut through her, swept the breath from her lungs. ‘Not for us. Bonecaster, we are
not powerful enough to command such a world as this. It has grown too vast, too powerful. Do not fear – we do not wish to leave, and we will endeavour to treat with the new masters. I believe they will permit us to remain. Perhaps indeed we will find ourselves pleased to serve them.'

'No! No! Not how it was supposed to be!

'Bonecaster, there is no need for such strong feelings within you. The shaping continues. The fulfilment of your desires is still possible – perhaps not in the manner you originally intended ...'

She no longer heard him. Despair was sundering her soul. As I stole . . . so it has been stolen from me. There is no injustice here, no crime. Accept the truth.

Nightchill's strength of will.

Tattersail's empathy.

Bellurdan's loyalty.

A Rhivi child's wonder.

None were enough. None could of themselves – or together – absolve what has been done, the choices made, the denials voiced.

Leave them. Leave them to this, to all of this, and all that is to come. Silverfox turned away. 'Find her, then. Go.'

'Will you not walk with us? Your gift to her—'

'Go.'

My gift to her. My gift to you. They are all as one. Grand failures, defeats born from the flaws within me. I will not stand witness to my own shame – I cannot. I have not the courage for that.

I'm sorry.

She walked away.

Brief flower. Seed to stalk to deadly blossom, all in the span of a single day. Bright-burning poison, destroying all who came too close.

An abomination.

The Rhivi spirits – a small band, men, women, children and elders, wearing hides and furs, their round faces burnished by sun and wind – watched Silverfox leave them. The elder who had spoken with her did not move until she slipped out of sight beneath the rim of a worn beach ridge, then he ran the back of four spread fingers across his eyes in a gesture of sad departing, and said, 'Build a fire. Prepare the ranag's shoulder blade. We have walked this land enough to see the map within.'

'Once more,' an old woman sighed.

The elder shrugged. 'The Bonecaster commanded that we find her mother.'

'She will simply flee us again. As she did the ay. Like a hare—'

'None the less. The Bonecaster has commanded. We shall lay the blade upon the flames. We shall see the map find its shape.'

'And why should it be true this time?'

The elder slowly lowered himself to press a hand down on the soft mosses. 'Why? Open your senses, doubting one. This land ...' he smiled, 'now lives.'
Running.

Free!

Riding the soul of a god, within the muscles of a fierce, ancient beast. Riding a soul—

— suddenly singing with joy. Mosses and lichen beneath the paws, spray of old rain water to streak the leg-fur. Smell of rich, fertile life – a world—

Running. Pain already a fading memory, vague recollections of a cage of bone, growing pressure, ever more shallow breaths.

Throwing head back, loosing a thunderous howl that trembled the sky.

Distant answers.

Which drew closer.

Shapes, grey, brown and black flashes of movement on the tundra, streaming over ridges, sweeping down into shallow valleys, broad moraines. Ay. Kin. The children of Baaljagg – of Fanderay – ghost memories that were the souls of the T’lan Ay. Baaljagg had not released them, had held to them, within herself, within her dreams – in an ageless world into which an Elder God had breathed eternal life.

Ay.

Their god had challenged the heavens with his bestial voice, and now they came to him.

And . . . another.

Togg slowed, head lifting – the ay all around him now, clan after clan, long-legged tundra wolves, swirling

She was here. She had come.

She had found him.

Running. Coming nearer. Shoulder to shoulder with Baaljagg, with the ay who had carried her wounded, lost soul for so long. Baaljagg, coming to rejoin her kin – the kin of her dreams.

Emotions. Beyond measure—

Then, Fanderay was padding at his side.

Their beast-minds touched. A moment. Nothing else. Nothing more was needed.

Together, shoulders brushing—

Two ancient wolves. God and goddess.

He looked upon them, without knowing who he, himself, was; nor even where he might be, that he might so witness this reunion. Looked, and, for these two, knew nothing but gentle joy. Running.

Ahead awaited their thrones.

The Mhybe's head snapped up, her body stiffening, writhing in an attempt to break his grip. Small as he was, his strength defeated her.

'Wolves, lass. We've nothing to fear.'
Nothing to fear. Lies. They have hunted me. Again and again. Pursuing me across this empty land. And now, listen, they come once more. And this Daru who drags me, he has not even so much as a knife.

'Something ahead,' Kruppe gasped, shifting his awkward embrace as he staggered under her weight. 'Easier,' he panted, 'when you were but a hag! Now, but you found the will, you could throw me down – nay! You could carry me!'

*Will. Need I only find the will? To break from this grip? To flee?* 

Flee where?

'Lass, hear Kruppe's words! He begs you! This – this world – Kruppe's dream no longer! Do you understand? It must pass from me. It must be passed on!'

They were stumbling up a gentle slope.

Wolves howled behind them, fast approaching.

Leave me.

'Dearest Mhybe, so aptly named! You are the vessel in truth, now! Within you – take this dream from me. Allow it to fill your spirit. Kruppe must pass it on to you – do you understand?'

Will.

She twisted suddenly, threw an elbow into Kruppe's stomach. He gasped, doubled over. She pulled herself free as he fell, leapt to her feet—

Behind them, tens of thousands of wolves. Charging towards her. And, leading them, two gigantic beasts that radiated blinding power.

The Mhybe cried out, spun.

A shallow depression before her. A long, low hut of arched bones, hides, bound with hemp rope, the entrance yawning wide.

And, standing in a clump before the hut, a band of Rhivi.

The Mhybe staggered towards them.

Wolves were suddenly all around, flowing in a wild, chaotic circle around the hut. Ignoring the Rhivi. Ignoring her.

Groaning, Kruppe levered himself, after a couple of tries, to his feet. Weaving, he joined her. She stared at him without comprehension.

He drew a faded handkerchief from his sleeve and daubed the sweat from his brow. 'Any lower with that elbow, dear ...'

'What? What is happening?'

Kruppe paused, looked around. 'They are within, then.'

'Who?'

'Why, Togg and Fanderay, of course. Come to claim the Beast Throne. Or, in this case, Thrones. Not that, should we enter the hut, we will see two wolves perched on chairs, of course. Presence alone asserts possession, no doubt. Kruppe's imagination tempts other, shall we say, prosaic images, but best avoid those, yes? Now, lass, permit Kruppe to edge back. Those who approach you now – well, this is the passing of a dream, from one to the other, and into the background noble Kruppe must now go.'

She swung round.
A Rhivi elder faced her, face creasing in a sad smile. 'We asked her to come with us,' he said.

The Mhybe frowned. 'Asked who?'

'Your daughter. This world – it is for you. Indeed, it exists within you. With this world, your daughter asks for forgiveness.'

'S-she made this—'

'There were many participants, each and all driven by the injustice that befell you. There was... desperation, the day your daughter was... created. The one known as Kruppe. The Elder God, K'rul. The one named Pran Chole. And yourself. And, when she gathered us within her, ourselves as well. Silverfox sought to answer yet more – the tragedy that are the T'lan Imass and the T'lan Ay. It may be,' he added, one hand making a faint gesture of bereavement, 'that what her heart sought has proved too vast—'

'Where is she? Where is my daughter?'

The elder shook his head. 'Despair has taken her. Away.'

The Mhybe fell silent. I was hunted. You were hunting me. And the ay. She looked down, slowly raised her youthful limbs. Is this real, then? She slowly turned about, looked across to meet Kruppe's eyes.

The Daru smiled.

The old woman . . .

'Will I awaken?'

Kruppe shook his head. 'That woman now sleeps eternal, lass. Warded, guarded. Your daughter spoke with Hood. Reached an agreement, yes? She believes, having lost the T'lan Imass, that she has broken it. Yet, one cannot but think that there are facets to this ... resolution. Kruppe remains confident.'

An agreement. Freedom for the T'lan Imass. An end. Their souls . . . delivered to Hood.

Spirits below – she has lost them? Lost the T'lan Imass? 'Hood will not abide—'

'Ahh, but won't he? Whysay not, dear? If the Lord of Death is without patience, then Kruppe can dance on Coll's pointy head! Which he most assuredly cannot. You shall not return to that ancient body.'

The Mhybe glanced back at the Rhivi spirits. 'Will I age here? Will I eventually . . .'

The elder shrugged. 'I do not know, but I suspect not. You are the vessel. The Mhybe.'

The Mhybe . . . Oh, Silverfox. Daughter. Why are you not here? Why can I not look now into your eyes. The begging for forgiveness goes both ways. She drew a deep breath, tasted the sweet life filling the cool, moist air. So easily, then, to take this world into myself. She removed the first copper bracelet, held it out to the Rhivi.

'This is yours, I believe.'

The elder smiled. 'Did its power serve you well?'

She nodded. 'Without measure ...'

A presence filled her mind. 'Mhybe.'

Togg, a rumbling power, the will of winter itself.

'We reside within this realm, realm of the Beast Thrones, but you are its mistress. There is one within me. A mortal spirit. Cherished spirit. I would release him. We would release him. From this realm. Do you give us—'

Yes. Release him.
Benediction. Godless, he could not give it. Not in its truest form.

But he had not comprehended the vast capacity within him, within a mortal soul, to take within itself the suffering of tens of thousands, the multitudes who had lived with loss and pain for almost three hundred thousand years.

He saw faces, countless faces. Desiccated, eyes nothing more than shadowed pits. Dry, torn skin. He saw bone glimmering from between layers of root-like tendons and muscles. He saw hands, chipped, splintered, empty now – yet the ghost of swords lingered there still.

He was on his knees, looking out upon their ranks, and it was raining, a wavering deluge accompanied by reverberating groans, splintering cracks filling the darkness above.

He looked upon them, and they were motionless, heads bowed.

Yet he could see their faces. Each face. Every face.

_I have your pain._

Heads slowly lifted.

He sensed them, sensed the sudden lightness permeating them. _I have done all I am able to do. Yes, it was not enough, I know. Yet. I have taken your suffering—_

“You have taken our suffering, mortal.”

Into myself—

“We do not understand how.”

And so I will now leave you—

“We do not understand . . . why.”

_For all that my flesh cannot encompass—_

“We cannot answer the gift you have given.”

_I will take with me._

‘Please, mortal—’

_Somehow._

_The reason. Please. That you would so bless us—’_

_I am the ._

‘Mortal?’

_Your pardon, sirs. You wish to know of me. I am ... a mortal, as you say. A man, born three decades ago in the city of Erin. My family name, before I surrendered it to Fener’s Reve, was Otanthalian. My father was a hard, just man. My mother smiled but once in all the years I knew her. The moment when I departed. Still, it is the smile I remember. I think now that my father embraced in order to possess. That she was a prisoner. I think, now, that her smile answered my escape. I think now that in my leaving, I took something of her with me. Something worthy of being set free._

_Fener’s Reve. In the Reve ... I wonder, did I simply find for myself another prison?_

“She is free within you, mortal.”

_That would be ... a good thing._
‘We would not lie to you, Itkovian Otanthalian. She is free. And smiles still. You have told us what you were. But we still do not understand—your . . . generosity. Your compassion. And so we ask again. Why have you done this for us?’

Sirs, you speak of compassion. I understand something, now, of compassion. Would you hear?

‘Speak on, mortal.’

We humans do not understand compassion. In each moment of our lives, we betray it. Aye, we know of its worth, yet in knowing we then attach to it a value, we guard the giving of it, believing it must be earned. T’lan Imass. Compassion is priceless in the truest sense of the word. It must be given freely. In abundance.

‘We do not understand, but we will consider long your words.’

There is always more to do, it seems.

‘You do not answer our question—’

No.

‘Why?’

Beneath the rain, as darkness gathered, with every face raised to him, Itkovian closed himself about all that he held within him, closed himself, then fell back.

Back.

Because. I was the Shield Anvil. But now . . .

I am done.

And beneath the Moon’s torrential rain, he died.

On the vast, reborn tundra with its sweet breath of spring, Silverfox looked up.

Standing before her were two T’lan Imass. One speared through with swords. The other so badly battered that it could barely stand.

Beyond them, silent, motionless, the T’lan Ay.

Silverfox made to turn away.

‘No. You shall not.’

Silverfox glared back at the battered warrior who’d spoken. ‘You dare torment me?’ she hissed.

The T’lan Imass seemed to rock in the face of her vehemence, then steadied. ‘I am Onos T’oolan, First Sword. You are the Summoner. You shall listen to me.’

Silverfox said nothing for a long moment, then she nodded. ‘Very well. Speak.’

‘Free the T’lan Ay.’

‘They have denied me—’

‘They are here before you, now. They have come. Their spirits await them. They would be mortal once more, in this world that you have created. Mortal, no longer lost within dreams, Summoner. Mortal. Gift them. Now.’

Gift them . . . ‘And this is what they wish?’

‘Yes. Reach to them, and you will know the truth of that.’
No, no more pain. She raised her arms, drew on the power of Tellann, closed her eyes — for too long have they known chains. For too long have these creatures known the burden of loyalty—

—and released them of the Ritual. An effort demanding so little of herself, she was left feeling appalled. So easy, then, to release. To make free once more.

She opened her eyes. The undead wolves were gone.

Not into oblivion, however. Their souls had been reunited, she knew, with flesh and bone. Extinct no longer. Not here, within this realm and its wolf gods. She was a Bonecaster, after all. Such gifts were hers to give. No, they are not gifts. They are what I was fashioned to do, after all. My purpose. My sole purpose.

Onos T'oolan's bones creaked as he slowly looked around, scanning the now empty barrens surrounding them. His shoulders seemed to slump. 'Summoner. Thank you. The ancient wrong is righted.'

Silverfox studied the First Sword. 'What else do you wish of me?'

'She who stands beside me is Lanas Tog. She will lead you back to the T'lan Imass. Words must be exchanged.'

'Very well.'

Onos T'oolan made no move.

Silverfox frowned. 'What are we waiting for, then?'

He was motionless a moment longer, then he reached up and slowly drew his flint sword. 'For me,' he rasped, raising the sword—

— then releasing it, to fall to the ground at his feet.

She frowned down at the weapon, wondering at the significance of the gesture — from the warrior who was called the First Sword.

Slowly, as comprehension filled her, her eyes widened.

What, after all, I was fashioned to do . . .

'The time has come.'

Coll started. He had been dozing. 'What? What time?'

Murillio rushed over to the Mhybe.

The Knight of Death continued, 'She is ready for interment. My Lord has avowed his eternal protection.'

The Elder God, K'rul, was studying the huge, undead warrior. 'I remain bemused. No – astonished. Since when has Hood become a generous god?'

The Knight slowly faced K'rul. 'My Lord is ever generous.'

'She's still alive,' Murillio pronounced, straightening to place himself between the Mhybe and the Knight of Death. 'The time has not come.'

'This is not a burial,' K'rul said to him. 'The Mhybe now sleeps, and will sleep for ever more. She sleeps, to dream. And within her dream, Murillio, lives an entire world.'

'Like Burn?' Coll asked.

The Elder God smiled in answer.
'Wait a moment!' Murillio snapped. 'Just how many sleeping old women are there?'

'She must be laid to rest,' the Knight of Death pronounced.

Coll stepped forward, settled a hand on Murillio's shoulder. 'Come on, let's make sure she's comfortable down there – furs, blankets ...'

Murillio seemed to shiver under Coll's hand. 'After all this?' He wiped at his eyes. 'We just ... leave her? Here, in a tomb?'

'Help me with the bedding, my friend,' Coll said.

'There is no need,' the Knight said. 'She will feel nothing.'

'That's not the point,' Coll sighed. He was about to say something more, then he saw that Rath'Fanderay and Rath'Togg had both removed their masks. Pallid, wrinkled faces, eyes closed, streaming with tears. 'What's wrong with them?' he demanded.

'Their gods have finally found each other, Coll. Within the Mhybe's realm, home now to the Beast Thrones. You do not witness sorrow, but joy.'

After a moment, Coll grunted. 'Let's get to work, Murillio. Then we can go home.'

'I still want to know about these old women dreaming up worlds like this!'

The warren flared, the three figures emerging from it spilling onto dusty grey earth in a tangle.

Paran rolled clear of Quick Ben and the Seer as sorcery roiled around the two grappling men. As the captain drew his sword, he heard the Jaghut shriek. Black webs raced, wrapped tight about the thrashing Seer.

Gasping, Quick Ben kicked himself away, the Finnest in his hands.

Crouched on the Jaghut's chest was a tiny figure of twigs and knotted grasses, cackling with glee.

'Who in Hood's name—'

A massive black shape exploded from the portal with a hissing snarl. Paran cried out, wheeled, sword swinging in a desperate horizontal slash.

Which bit muscle then bone.

Something – a paw – hammered Paran's chest, throwing him from his feet.

'Stop – you damned cat!'

Quick Ben's frantic shout was punctuated by a sorcerous detonation that made the panther scream in pain.

'On your feet, Paran!' the wizard gasped. 'I've nothing left.'

On my feet? Gods, I feel broken into a thousand pieces, and the man wants me on my feet. Somehow, he pushed himself upright, tottering as he faced the beast once more.

It crouched six paces away, tail thrashing, coal-lit eyes fixed on his own. It bared its fangs in a silent snarl.

From somewhere within the captain emerged an answering growl. Deeper than a human throat could manage. A brutal strength flowed into him, stealing from him all awareness of his own body – except that now, he realized, he was – somehow – on eye-level with the gigantic panther.

He heard Quick Ben's ragged whisper behind him: 'Abyss below!'

The cat, ears laid back flat, was clearly hesitating.
What in Hood's name is it seeing?

'Bonecaster!' Quick Ben snapped. 'Hold. Look around you – see where we are! We're not your enemies – we
seek what you seek. Here. Right now.'

The panther drew back another step, and Paran saw it tensing for a charge.

'Vengeance is not enough!' the wizard cried.

The cat flinched. A moment later, Paran saw its muscles relax, then the entire beast blurred, changed shape –
and a small, dark, heavy-boned woman stood before them. On her right shoulder was a deep gash, the blood
freely flowing down to paint her arm, dripping from her fingertips to the dusty ground. Black, extraordinarily
beautiful eyes regarded him.

Paran slowly sighed, felt something subside within him – and he could sense his own body once more, limbs
trembling, sword-grip slick in his hand.

'Who are you?' she asked.

The captain shrugged.

Her gaze dismissed him, lifted past him. 'Morn,' she said.

Paran slowly turned.

He felt the rent like a physical blow against his heart. A welt in the air, almost within reach of the ragged
roof of an abandoned tower. A wound, bleeding pain – *such pain . . . an eternity – gods below, there is a soul
within it. A child. Trapped. Sealing the wound. I remember that child – the child of my dreams ...*

Quick Ben had regained his feet, stood looking down on the magically imprisoned Seer, the sticksnare
crouched on the man's chest.

The Jaghut, unhuman eyes filled with terror, stared back up at him.

The wizard smiled. 'You and I, Seer. We are going to come to an arrangement.' He still held the Finnest and
now slowly raised it. 'The Matron's power ... resides within this egg. Correct? A power unable to sense itself,
yet alive none the less. Torn from the body that once housed it, presumably it feels no pain. It simply exists,
here in this Finnest, for anyone to use it. Anyone at all.'

'No,' the Jaghut rasped, eyes widening with fear. 'The Finnest is aspected to me. To me alone. You foolish—'

'Enough of the insults, Seer. Do you want to hear my proposal? Or will Paran and I simply step back and
leave you to this Bonecaster's tender talons?'

The dark-haired woman approached them. 'What do you plan, Wizard?'

Quick Ben glanced back at her. 'An arrangement, Bonecaster, where everyone wins.'

She sneered. 'No-one wins. Ever. Leave him to me now.'

'The T'lan Vow is that important to you? I think not. You are flesh and blood—you did not participate in that
ritual.'

'I am not bound to any vow,' she replied. 'I act now for my brother.'

'Your brother?' Paran asked, sheathing his sword and joining them.

'Onos T'oolan. Who knew a mortal, and called him kin.'

'I imagine such an honour is ... rare,' Paran acknowledged, 'but what has that to do with the Seer?'

She looked down at the bound Jaghut. 'To answer the death of Toc the Younger, brother to Onos T'oolan, I
must kill you, Seer.'

Paran stared, disbelieving the name he had just heard.

The Jaghut's response was a grim unsheathing of his lower tusks. Then he said, 'You should have killed us
the first time. Yes, I remember you. Your lies.'

'Toc the Younger?' Quick Ben asked. 'From Onearm's Host? But—'

'He was lost,' Paran said. 'Thrown into a chaotic warren by Hairlock.'

The wizard was scowling. 'To land in the Seer's lap? That hardly seems—'

'He appeared here,' the woman cut in. 'At Morn. The Seer interrupted his journey north to rejoin his people, a
journey that, for a time, he shared with Onos Toolan. The Seer tortured the mortal, destroyed him.'

'Toc's dead?' Paran asked, his mind feeling rocked in every direction.

'I saw his body, yes. And now, I will deliver unto this Jaghut pain to match.'

'Have you not already done so?' the Jaghut hissed.

The Bonecaster's face tightened.

'Wait,' Quick Ben said, looking now to both her and Paran. 'Listen to me. Please. I knew Toc as well, and I
grieve for the loss. But it changes nothing, not here, not now.' He turned once more back to the Seer. 'She is
still in there, you know.'

The Jaghut flinched, eyes widening.

'Didn't you understand that? The Matron could only take one. You.'

'No—'

'Your sister is still there. Her soul seals that wound. It's the way warrens heal themselves, to keep from
bleeding into each other. The first time, it was the Matron – the K'Chain Che'Malle. Time's come, Seer, to send
her back. Hood knows what that Finnest will do – once you release it, once you send it into that rent—'

The Jaghut managed a ghastly smile. 'To free my sister? To what? You fool. You blind, stupid fool. Ask the
Bonecaster – how long would we survive in this world? The T'lan Imaass will hunt us in earnest now. I free my
Mother, carrying us, slipping in the mud—' He shifted his head a fraction, 'And oh how I remember you,
Bonecaster! You sent us into that wound – you—'

'I was mistaken,' the woman said. 'I thought – I believed – it was a portal into Omtose Phellack.'

'Liar! You may be flesh and blood, but in your hatred for the Jaghut you are no different from your undead
kin. No, you'd discovered a more horrible fate for us.'

'No. I believed I was saving you.'

'And you never knew the truth? You never realized?'

Paran watched the woman's expression close, her eyes flattening. 'I saw no way of undoing what I had done.'

'Coward!' the Jaghut shrieked.

'Enough of all this,' Quick Ben cut in. 'We can fix it now. Return the Matron to the wound, Seer. Retrieve
your sister.'

'Why? Why should I? To see us both cut down by the T'lan Imaass?'
'He is right,' the woman said. 'Even so, Jaghut, better that than an eternity of pain, such as your sister is now suffering.'

'I need only wait. One day,' the Seer hissed, 'some fool will come upon this site, will probe, will reach into the portal—'

'And will make the exchange? Freeing your sister.'

'Yes! Beyond the sight or knowledge of the T'lan Imass! Beyond—'

'A small child,' Quick Ben said. 'Alone. In a wasteland. I have a better idea.'

The Jaghut bared his teeth in a silent snarl.

The wizard slowly crouched down beside the Seer. 'Omtose Phellack. Your warren is under siege, isn't it? The T'lan Imass long ago breached it. And now, whenever it is unveiled, they know about it. They know where, and they come ...'

The Jaghut simply glared.

Quick Ben sighed. 'The thing is, Seer, I have found a place for it. A place that can remain ... hidden. Beyond the ability of the T'lan Imass to detect. Omtose Phellack can survive, Seer, in its fullest power. Survive, and heal.'

'Lies.'

The sticksnare on his chest spoke, 'Listen to this wizard, Jaghut. He offers a mercy you do not deserve.'

Paran cleared his throat, said, 'Seer. Were you aware that you have been manipulated? Your power – it wasn't Omtose Phellack, was it?'

'I used,' the Jaghut grated, 'what I could find.'

'The Warren of Chaos, yes. Wherein is trapped a wounded god. The Chained One, a creature of immense power, a creature in pain, who seeks only the destruction of this world, of every warren – including Omtose Phellack. He is indifferent to your desires, Seer, and he has been using you. Worse, the venom of his soul – he's been speaking ... through you. Thriving on pain and suffering ... through you. Since when were Jaghut interested only in destruction? Not even the Tyrants ruled with such cruelty as you have. Tell me, Seer, do you still feel as twisted inside? Do you still delight in thoughts of delivering pain?'

The Jaghut was silent for a long moment.

'Gods, Quick Ben, I hope you're right. I hope the madness of this Seer was not his own. That it's now gone – torn away—'

'I feel,' the Jaghut rasped, 'empty. Still, why should I believe you?'

Paran studied the Jaghut, then said, 'Release him, Quick.'

'Now, wait—'

'Let him go. You can't negotiate with a prisoner and expect him to believe a thing you're saying. Seer, the place Quick Ben has in mind – no-one – no-one – will be able to manipulate you there. And perhaps more importantly, you will possess the opportunity to make the Chained One pay for his temerity. And, finally, you will have a sister – still a child – who will need to heal. Seer, she will need you.'

'You hold too much to this Jaghut's still retaining a shred of honour, integrity and the capacity for compassion,' the Bonecaster pronounced. 'With all that he has done – whether by his will or not – he will twist that child, as he himself has been twisted.'

Paran shrugged. 'Fortunate for that child, then, that she and her brother will not be entirely alone.'
The Seer's eyes narrowed. 'Not alone?''

'Free him, Quick Ben.'

The wizard sighed, then spoke to the sticksnare crouching on the Jaghut's chest. 'Let him go, Talamandas.'

'We'll likely regret it,' it replied, then clambered off. The sorcerous web flickered, then vanished.

The Seer scrambled to his feet. Then hesitated, eyes on the Finnest in Quick Ben's hands.

'This other place,' he finally whispered, looking to Paran, 'is it far?'

The Jaghut child, a girl of but a handful of years, wandered from the wounded warren as if lost, her small hands folded together on her lap in a manner she must have learned from her long-dead mother. A small detail, but it granted her a heart-breaking dignity that started tears in Paran's eyes.

'What will she remember?' Kilava whispered.

'Hopefully, nothing,' Quick Ben replied. 'Talamandas and I will, uh, work on that.'

A soft sound from the Seer drew Paran's attention. The Jaghut stood, trembling, unhuman eyes fixed on the approaching child – who had now seen them, yet was clearly seeking someone else, her steps slowing.

'Go to her,' Paran told the Seer.

'She remembers ... a brother—'

'So now she finds an uncle.'

Still he hesitated. 'We Jaghut are not ... not known for compassion among our blood-tied, our kin—'

Paran grimaced. 'And we humans are? You're not the only one who finds such things a struggle. There's much you have to repair, Pannion, starting with what is within yourself, with what you've done. In that, let the child – your sister – be your guide. Go, damn you – you need each other.'

He staggered forward, then hesitated once more and swung back to meet Paran's eyes. 'Human, what I have done – to your friend, to Toc the Younger – I now regret.' His gaze shifted to Kilava. 'You said you have kin, Bonecaster. A brother.'

She shook her head, as if anticipating his question. 'He is T'lan Imass. Of the Ritual.'

'It seems, then, that, like me, you have a great distance to travel.'

She cocked her head. 'Travel?'

'This path to redemption, Bonecaster. Know that I cannot forgive you. Not yet.'

'Nor I you.'

He nodded. 'We both have learning ahead of us.' With that, he turned once more. Back straightening, he strode to his sister.

She knew her own kind, and had not yet been shorn of her love, her need, for kin. And, before Pannion began lifting his hands towards her, she opened her arms to him.

The vast cavern's rippled, curved walls streamed watery mud. Paran stared up at the nearest diamond-studded giant with its massive arms raised to the ceiling. It seemed to be dissolving before his eyes. The infection in Burn's flesh was all too apparent as inflamed streaks, radiating away from a place almost directly above them.

The giant was not alone – the entire length of the cavern, in each direction for as far as the eye could see,
revealed more of the huge, childlike servants. If they were aware of the arrival of newcomers, they showed no
sign.

‘She sleeps,’ Kilava murmured, ‘to dream.’

Quick Ben shot her a look, but said nothing. The wizard seemed to be waiting for something.

Paran glanced down at the sticksnare, Talamandas. ‘You were Barghast once, weren’t you?’

‘I still am, Master of the Deck. My newborn gods are within me.’

Actually, there’s more of Hood’s presence within you than your Barghast gods. But the captain simply
nodded. ‘You were the reason why Quick Ben could use his warrens.’

‘Aye, but I am much more than that.’

‘No doubt.’

‘Here she comes,’ Quick Ben announced with relief.

Paran turned to see a figure approaching down the long, winding tunnel. Ancient, wrapped in rags, hobbling
on two canes.

‘Welcome!’ Quick Ben called out. ‘I wasn’t sure—’

‘The young lack faith, and you, Desert Snake, are no exception!’ She leaned on a single cane and fumbled in
the folds of her cloak for a moment, then withdrew a small stone. ‘You left me this, yes? Your summons was
heard, Wizard. Now, where are these fell Jaghut? Ah – and a Bonecaster Soletaken, too. My, such
extraordinary company – what a tale it must be, that has seen you all brought together! No, don’t tell it to me,
I’m not that interested.’ She halted in front of the Seer and studied the child in his arms for a moment before
lifting her sharp gaze. ‘I’m an old woman,’ she hissed. ‘Chosen by the Sleeping Goddess, to assist you in the
care of your sister. But first, you must unveil your warren. With cold, you shall fight this infection. With cold,
you shall slow the dissolution, harden this legion of servants. Omtose Phellack, Jaghut. Free it. Here. Burn will
now embrace you.’

Paran grimaced. ‘That’s a poor choice of words.’

The ancient witch cackled. ‘But words he will understand, yes?’

‘Not unless you plan on killing him.’

‘Don’t be pedantic, soldier. Jaghut, your warren.’

The Seer nodded, unveiled Omtose Phellack.

The air was suddenly bitter cold, rime and frost misting the air.

Quick Ben was grinning. ‘Chilly enough for you, witch?’

She cackled again. ‘I knew you were no fool, Desert Snake.’

‘Truth to tell, I’ll have to thank Picker for giving me the idea. The night I crossed paths with the Crippled
God. That, and your hints about the cold.’

The witch twisted to glare at Kilava. ‘Bonecaster,’ she snapped. ‘Heed my words well – this warren is not to
be assailed by you or your kin. You are to tell no-one of this, the final manifestation of Omtose Phellack.’

‘I understand you, Witch. I begin, here, my own path to redemption, it seems. I have defied my own kin
enough times to suffer few pangs doing so once more.’ She turned to Quick Ben. ‘And now, Wizard, I would
leave. Will you guide us from this place?’

‘No, better the Master of the Deck lead us out – that way, there’ll be no trail.’
Paran blinked. "Me?"
'Fashion a card, Captain. In your mind.'
'A card? Of what?'
The wizard shrugged. 'Think of something.'

Soldiers had drawn the three bodies to one side, covered them with standard-issue rain-capes. Gruntle saw Korlat standing near them, her back to him.

The Daru stood near the side closest to the trader road, beyond which, he could see, lay Itkovian. Motionless, forlorn in the distance.

The T'lan Imass were gone.

The surviving Grey Swords were slowly approaching Itkovian, on foot with the exception of one-eyed Anaster, who sat on his dray horse, seemingly unaffected by anything, including the massive floating mountain that loomed over the north ridge, throwing a deep shroud upon the parkland forest.

On the hilltop, facing the dark city, stood Caladan Brood, flanked by Humbrall Taur on his right, Hetan and Cafal on his left.

Gruntle could see, emerging in a ragged line from the north gate, Dujek's surviving army. There were so few left. Rhivi wagons were being driven into Coral, their beds cleared for the coming burden of bodies. Dusk was less than a bell away – the night ahead would be a long one.

A troop of Malazan officers, led by Dujek, had reached the base of the hill. Among them, a Seerdomin representing the now surrendered forces of the Domin.

Gruntle moved closer to where Brood and the Barghast waited.

The High Fist had heard the news – Gruntle could see it in his slumped shoulders, the way he repeatedly drew his lone hand down the length of his aged face, the spirit of the man so plainly, unutterably broken.

A warren opened to Brood's right. Emerging from it were a half-dozen Malazans, led by Artanthos. Bright, unsullied uniforms beneath grave expressions.

'Mortal Sword?'
Gruntle turned at the voice. One of the older women in his legion stood before him. 'Yes?'
'We would raise the Child's Standard, Mortal Sword.'
'Not here.'
'Sir?'
Gruntle pointed down to the killing field. 'There, among our fallen.'
'Sir, that is within the darkness.'
He nodded. 'So it is. Raise it there.'
'Aye, sir.'
'And no more of the titles or honorifics. The name's Gruntle. I'm a caravan guard, temporarily unemployed.'
'Sir, you are the Mortal Sword of Trake.'
His eyes narrowed on her.
Her gaze flicked away, down to the killing field. 'A title purchased in blood, sir.'

Gruntle winced, looked away, and was silent for a long moment. Then he nodded. 'All right. But I'm not a soldier. I hate war. I hate killing. And I never want to see another battlefield ever again.

To that, she simply shrugged and set off to rejoin her meagre squad.

Gruntle returned his attention to the gathering of dignitaries.

Artanthos – Tayschrenn – was making introductions. Ambassador Aragan – a tall, battle-scarred man who seemed to be suffering from a headache – here to speak on behalf of Empress Laseen, regarding the governance of Black Coral. A handful of hangers-on.

Brood replied that the formal negotiations would have to await the arrival of Anomander Rake, who was expected shortly.

Gruntle's gaze returned to Dujek, who had just arrived with his officers. The High Fist's eyes were fixed on Korlat at the far end, and on the three covered bodies lying in the grasses. The rain still falling, the stench of burning heavy in the air, a shroud descending.

Aye, this day ends in ashes and rain.

In ashes and rain.

Running, memory's echo of glory and joy. He rode the sensation, the flight from pain, from prisons of bone, from massive arms damp and scaled, from a place without wind, without light, without warmth.

From chilled meat. Pale, boiled. Black, charred. From numbed, misshapen fingers pushing the morsels into a mouth that, as he chewed, filled with his own blood. From hard, cold stone with its patina of human grease.

Flesh fouled, the stench of smeared excrement—

Running—


He opened his lone eye.

Toc looked around. He sat on a broad-backed horse. Grey-clad soldiers surrounded him, studying him from beneath war-worn helms.

I – I am . . . whole.

Hale.

I—

An armoured woman stepped forward. 'Would you leave your god, now, sir?'


My god?

Running. Freed. The beast.

The wolf.

Togg.
My namesake . . .

'He has delivered you, sir, yet would make no demands. We know that your soul has run with the wolf-gods. But you are once more in the mortal realm. The body you now find yourself in was blessed. It is now yours. Still, sir, you must choose. Would you leave your gods?'

Toc studied his own arms, the muscles of his thighs. Long-fingered hands. He reached up, probed his face. A fresh scar, taking the same eye. No matter. He'd grown used to that. A young body – younger than he had been.

He looked down at the woman, then at the ring of soldiers. 'No,' he said.

The soldiers lowered themselves to one knee, heads bowing. The woman smiled. 'Your company welcomes you, Mortal Sword of Togg and Fanderay.'

Mortal Sword.

Then, I shall run once more . . .

In the Warren of Tellann, Lanas Tog led Silverfox to the edge of a broad valley. Filling it, the gathered clans of the T'lan Imass. Standing, motionless—

Yet different.

Unburdened?

Pain and regret filled her. I have failed you all . . . in so many ways . . .

Pran Chole strode forward. The undead Bonecaster tilted his head in greeting. 'Summoner.'

Silverfox realized she was trembling. 'Can you forgive me, Pran Chole?'

'Forgive? There is nothing to forgive, Summoner.'

'I'd never intended to deny your wish for very long – only until, until ...'

'We understand. You need not weep. Not for us, nor for yourself.'

'I – I will free you now, as I have done the T'lan Ay – I will end your Vow, Pran Chole, to free you ... through Hood's Gate, as you wished.'

'No, Summoner.'

She stared, shocked silent.

'We have heard Lanas Tog, the warrior at your side. There are kin, Summoner, who are being destroyed on a continent far to the south. They cannot escape their war. We would travel there. We would save our brothers and sisters.

'Summoner, once this task is completed, we will return to you. Seeking the oblivion that awaits us.'

'Pran Chole ...' Her voice broke. 'You would remain in your torment...'

'We must save our kin, Summoner, if we are so able. Within the Vow, our power remains. It will be needed.'

She slowly drew herself up, stilled her grief, her trembling. 'Then I will join you, Pran Chole. We. Nightchill, Tattersail, Bellurdan, and Silverfox.'

The Bonecaster was silent for a long moment, then he said, 'We are honoured, Summoner.'

Silverfox hesitated, then said, 'You are ... changed. What has Itkovian done?'
A sea of bone-helmed heads bowed at mention of that name, and seeing that stole the breath from her lungs. By the Abyss, what has that man done?

Pran Chole was long in replying. ‘Cast your eyes about you, Summoner. At the life now in this realm. Reach out and sense the power, here in the earth.’

She frowned. ‘I do not understand. This realm is now home to the Beast Thrones. There are Rhivi spirits here ... two wolf-gods ...’

Pran Chole nodded. ‘And more. You have, perhaps unwitting, created a realm where the Vow of Tellann unravels. T’lan Ay... now mortal once more – that gesture was easier than you had expected, was it not? Summoner, Itkovian freed our souls and found, in this realm you created, a place. For us.’

‘You have been ... redeemed!’

‘Redeemed? No, Summoner. Only you are capable of that. The T’lan Imass have been awakened. Our memories – they live once more, in the earth beneath our feet. And they are what we will return to, the day you release us. Bonecaster – we expected nothing but oblivion, upon that release. We could not have imagined that an alternative was possible.’

‘And now?’ she whispered.

Pran Chole cocked his head. ‘It surpasses us ... what one mortal man so willingly embraced.’ He swung about to make his way back down to the ranks, then paused and looked back at her. ‘Summoner.’

‘Yes.’

‘One task awaits us ... before we begin the long journey . . .’

Picker sat on a smoke-stained foundation stone, eyes dulled with exhaustion, and watched the Rhivi move through the rubble, seeking still more bodies. There were Pannion soldiers about, unarmed – seemingly the only citizens left in the city were either dead or gnawed down to little more than bones.

The Bridgeburners who had died within the keep had already left on a wagon – Picker and her meagre squad had retrieved most of them on the way out, even as the structure began to come down around them. A handful of other bodies had been found and recovered through sorcery, by the Tiste Andii, some of whom still lingered in the area, as if awaiting something, or someone. The only two no-one had yet found were Quick Ben and Paran, and Picker suspected it was because they weren't there.

Torchrs lit the area, feeble in their battling the unnatural darkness that shrouded the city. The air stank of smoke and mortar dust. Distant cries of pain rose every now and then, like haunting memories.

We were brittle. Destroyed months ago, outside Pale, it's just taken this long for the few of us left to realize it. Hedge, Trotts, Detoran. Corpses who kept saluting—

Blend spoke beside her. ‘I told the Rhivi on our wagon to wait inside the north gate.’

Our wagon. The wagon carrying the dead Bridgeburners.

First in.

Last out.

For the last time.

A flash of light from the keep's rubble, a warren opening, through which figures emerged. A scarred hound – a cattle-dog, it looked like – followed by Lady Envy, and two Seguleh dragging a third masked warrior between them.

‘Well,’ Blend murmured, ‘that about does it, doesn't it?’
Picker was unsure what Blend meant, did not pursue it.

Lady Envy had seen them. 'Lieutenant dear! What a relief to see you well. Could you believe the audacity of that white-haired, sword-stuffed—'

'Would you be referring to me?' a deep voice asked.

Through the gloom stepped Anomander Rake. 'Had I known you were within the keep, Lady Envy, I would have brought Moon's Spawn all the way down.'

'Oh, what a thing to say!'

'What are you doing here?' the Son of Darkness growled.

'Oh, this and that, my love. And aren't you looking very martial this afternoon — it's still afternoon, isn't it? Hard to tell here.'

'Oh,' Blend whispered, 'there's history between those two.'

'Really,' Picker quietly drawled, 'and how could you tell? Damned lady — not a scuff on that telaba. Now there's a different world from mine. Yet there we stood, side by side, in that hallway.

Anomander Rake was eyeing the woman standing before him. 'What do you want, Envy?'

'Why, I have travelled half a continent, you ungrateful man, to deliver to you words of most vital import.'

'Let's hear them, then.'

Lady Envy blinked, looked around. 'Here, my love? Wouldn't you rather somewhere more ... private?'

'No. I have things to do. Out with it.'

She crossed her arms. 'Then I will, though the gods know why I bother bravely retaining this generous mood of mine—'

'Envy.'

'Very well. Hear me, then, Wielder of Dragnipur. My dear father, Draconus, plots to escape the chains within the sword. How do I know? Blood whispers, Anomander.'

The Lord of Moon's Spawn grunted. 'I am surprised he's taken this long. Well, what of it?'

Envy's eyes went wide. 'Is this bravado madness? In case you've forgotten, we worked damned hard to slay him the first time!'

Picker glanced over at Blend, saw the woman standing slack-jawed as she stared at Rake and Envy.

'I don't recall you doing much,' Anomander Rake was saying, 'at the time. You stood by and watched the battle—'

'Precisely! And what do you think my father thought of that?'

The Lord of Moon's Spawn shrugged. 'He knew enough not to ask for your help, Envy. In any case, I heed your warning, but there is scant little I can do about it, at least until Draconus actually manages to free himself.'

The woman's dark eyes narrowed. 'Tell me, my dear, what – if anything – do you know of the Master of the Deck?'

Rake's brows rose. 'Ganoes Paran? The mortal who walked within Dragnipur? The one who sent the two Hounds of Shadow into Kurlad Galain's gate?'

Envy stamped her foot. 'You are insufferable!'
The Tiste Andii Lord turned away. 'We've spoken enough, Envy.'

'They will seek a way to break the sword!'

'Aye, they might.'

'Your very life totters on the whim of a mortal man!'

Anomander Rake paused, glanced back at her. 'I'd best step careful, then, hadn't I?' A moment later, he continued on, into the loose crowd of Tiste Andii.

Hissing in exasperation, Envy set off in pursuit.

Blend slowly faced Picker. 'Ganoes Paran? The captain?'

'Mull on it some other time,' Picker replied. 'Either way, in the end, it's nothing to do with us.' She slowly straightened. 'Gather 'em up, Blend. We're for the north gate.'

'Aye, sir. Shouldn't take long.'

'I'll be at the arch.'

'Lieutenant? Picker?'

'What?'

'You did what you could.'

'Wasn't good enough, was it?' Without waiting for a reply, Picker set off. Tiste Andii parted to either side to let her pass. She neared the blackened arch.

'A moment.'

Picker turned to see Anomander Rake approach.

Picker's eyes involuntarily shied from the Tiste Andii's hard, unhuman gaze.

'I would walk with you,' he said.

Unsettled by the attention, she glanced back at Lady Envy, who was now busy examining the unconscious Seguleh warrior. You're a brave woman, Lady – you didn't even flinch.

The Son of Darkness must have followed her gaze, for he sighed. 'I've no interest in resuming that particular conversation, Lieutenant. And should she decide to awaken that Seguleh – and given her present mood she just might – well, I'm not inclined to resume that old argument, either. I assume you and your squad are marching to the command position north of the city.'

Were we? I hadn't thought that far. She nodded.

'May I join you, then?'

Gods below! Picker drew a deep breath, then said, 'We're not pleasant company at the moment, Lord.'

'No indeed. Yet you are worthy company.'

She met his eyes at that, wondering.

He grimaced, then said, 'I regret my late arrival. Nor was I aware that there were Malazan soldiers within the keep.'

'It wouldn't have mattered, Lord,' Picker said, managing a shrug. 'From what I've heard, Dujek's companies weren't spared any for not being in the keep.'
Anomander Rake glanced away for a moment, eyes tightening. 'A sad conclusion to the alliance.'

The remaining Bridgeburners had drawn close, listening in silence. Picker was suddenly aware of them, of the words they had heard in this exchange, and the things left unsaid. 'That alliance,' she said, 'was solid as far as we were concerned.' We. Us. The ones now standing before you.

Perhaps he understood. 'Then I would walk with my allies, Lieutenant, one more time.'

'We would be honoured, sir.'

'To the command position north of the city.'

'Aye, sir.'

The Lord of the Tiste Andii sighed. 'There is a fallen soldier to whom I would ... pay my respects . . .'

Aye, the saddest news we've heard yet this day. 'As will we all, Lord.'

Rake stayed at her side as she walked, the five surviving soldiers of the Bridgeburners falling in behind them.

She came to his side, her eyes, like his, on the figures gathering on the hilltop around them. 'Do you know what I wish?'

Gruntle shook his head. 'No, Stonny, what do you wish?'

'That Harllo was here.'

'Aye.'

'I'd settle for just his body, though. He belongs here, with these other fallen. Not under a small pile of stones in the middle of nowhere.'

Harllo, were you the first death in this war? Did our ragged troop represent the first allies to join the cause?

'Do you remember the bridge?' Stonny asked. 'All busted down, Harllo fishing from the foundation stones. We saw Moon's Spawn, didn't we? South horizon, drifting east. And now, here we are, in that damn thing's shadow.'

Caladan Brood and Dujek were approaching Korlat, who had remained standing over the three covered bodies. Two steps behind them, Tayschrenn, the sorcerous patina of youth gone from him.

There was an unnatural hush in the dark air, through which their voices easily carried.

Dujek had stepped past Korlat to kneel before the three fallen Malazans. 'Who was here?' he grated, hand reaching up to rub at his own face. 'Who saw what happened?'

'Myself,' Korlat replied without inflection. 'And Tayschrenn. The moment Silverfox appeared, Kallor struck the two of us down first, ensuring that we would be incapable of reacting. I do not think he anticipated that Whiskeyjack and the two marines would step into his path. They delayed him long enough for Tayschrenn to recover. Kallor was forced to flee to his new master – the Crippled God.'

'Whiskeyjack crossed swords with Kallor?' Dujek drew the rain-cape away from Whiskeyjack's body, silently studied his friend. 'This shattered leg – was it responsible ...'

Gruntle saw Korlat – who still stood behind Dujek – hesitate, then she said, 'No, High Fist. It broke after the mortal blow.'

After a long moment, Dujek shook his head. 'We kept telling him to have it properly healed. "Later," he'd say. Always "later". Are you certain, Korlat? That it broke after?'
'Yes, High Fist.'

Dujek frowned, eyes fixed on the dead soldier before him. 'Whiskeyjack was a superb swordsman ... used to spar with Dassem Ultor and it'd take a while for Dassem to get past his guard.' He glanced back over his shoulder, at Korlat, then at Tayschrenn. 'And with the two marines on his flanks. . . how long, High Mage, until you recovered?'

Tayschrenn grimaced, shot Korlat a glance, then said, 'Only moments, Dujek. Moments ... too late.'

'High Fist,' Korlat said, 'Kallor's prowess with the blade ... he is a formidable warrior.'

Gruntle could see the frown on Dujek's face deepening.

Stonny muttered under her breath, 'This doesn't sound right. That broken leg must've come first.'

He reached out and gripped her arm, then shook his head. No, Korlat must have a reason for this. This . . . deceit.

Stonny's eyes narrowed, but she fell silent.

With a rough sigh, Dujek straightened. 'I have lost a friend,' he said.

For some reason, the raw simplicity of that statement struck through to Gruntle's heart. He felt an answering stab of pain, of grief, within him.

Harllo . . . my friend.

Itkovian . . .

Gruntle turned away, blinking rapidly.

Anomander Rake had arrived, the Great Raven Crone flapping desultorily from his path. Beside the Son of Darkness, Picker. Gruntle saw other Bridgeburners behind them: Blend, Mallet, Antsy, Spindle, Bluepearl. Armour in tatters, old blood crusting them, and all the life gone from their eyes.

On the slopes, now, were gathered the survivors of Onearm's Host. Gruntle judged less than a thousand. Beyond them, Barghast and Rhivi, Tiste Andii and the rest of Brood's army. Silent, standing to honour the fallen.

The healer, Mallet, strode straight to where Whiskeyjack's body lay.

Gruntle saw the healer's eyes study the wounds, saw the truth strike home. The large man staggered back a step, arms wrapping around himself, and seemed to inwardly collapse. Dujek closed on him in time to take his weight, ease him into a sitting position on the ground.

Some wounds never heal, and that man has just taken such a wounding. Would that Dujek had left Whiskeyjack hidden beneath the rain-cape . . .

Anomander Rake was at Korlat's side. He said nothing for a long time, then he turned away. 'Korlat, how will you answer this?'

She replied tonelessly, 'Orfantal makes ready, Lord. We will hunt Kallor down, my brother and I.'

Rake nodded. 'When you do, leave him alive. He has earned Dragnipur.'

'We shall, Lord.'

The Son of Darkness then faced the others. 'High Fist Dujek. High Mage Tayschrenn. Moon's Spawn is dying, and so has been abandoned by my people. It shall be sent eastward, over the ocean – the power within it is failing, and so it will soon settle beneath the waves. I ask that these three fallen Malazans – slain by a betrayer delivered here by myself and Caladan Brood – these three Malazans, be interred in Moon's Spawn. It
is, I believe, a worthy sarcophagus.'

No-one spoke.

Rake then looked at Picker. 'And I ask that the dead among the Bridgeburners be interred there, as well.'

'Is there room for all our fallen?' Picker asked.

'Alas, no. Most of the chambers within are flooded.'

Picker drew a deep breath, then glanced at Dujek.

The High Fist seemed incapable of making a decision. 'Has anyone seen Captain Paran?'

No-one replied.

'Very well. As to the disposition of the fallen Bridgeburners, the decision is yours, Lieutenant Picker.'

'They were always curious about what was inside Moon's Spawn,' she said, managing a wry grin. 'I think that would please them.'

In the supply camp haphazardly assembled in the parkland north of the killing field, at one edge, the seven hundred and twenty-two Mott Irregulars were slowly gathering, each one carrying burlap sacks stuffed with loot taken from the city.

Leaning against a tree was a massive table, flipped over to reveal the painted underside. The legs had snapped off some time in the past, but that had simply made it easier to transport.

The painted image had been glowing for some time before anyone noticed, and a substantial crowd had gathered to stare at it by the time the warren within the image opened, and out stepped Paran and Quick Ben, followed by a short, robustly muscled woman with black hair.

All three were sheathed in frost, which began to fade immediately as the warren closed behind them.

One of the Mott Irregulars stepped forward. 'Greetings. I am High Marshal Jib Bole, and something's confusing me.'

Paran, still shivering from Omtose Phellack's brutally cold air, stared at the man for a moment, then shrugged. 'And what's that, High Marshal?'

Jib Bole scratched his head. 'Well, that's a table, not a door...'

A short while later, as Paran and Quick Ben made their way through the dusk towards the killing field, the wizard softly laughed.

The captain glanced over at him. 'What?'

'Backwoods humour, Paran. Comes with talking with the scariest mages we've ever faced.'

'Mages?'

'Well, maybe that's the wrong name for them. Warlocks might be better. Swamp-snuffling warlocks. With bits of bark in their hair. Get them into a forest and you won't find them unless they want you to. Those Bole brothers, they're the worst of the lot, though I've heard that there's a lone sister among them who you wouldn't want to meet, ever.'

Paran shook his head.

Kilava had departed their company immediately after their arrival. She had offered the two men a simple word of thanks, which Paran sensed was in itself an extraordinary lowering of her guard, then had slipped into
The gloom of the forest.

The captain and the wizard reached the trader track and could see it straightening and climbing towards the ridge that faced the killing field and the city beyond. Moon's Spawn hung almost directly above them, shedding misty rain. A few fires still lit Coral, but it seemed that the darkness that was Kurald Galain was somehow smothering them.

He could not push the recent events from his mind. He was unused to being the hand of ... *redemption*. The deliverance of the Jaghut child from the wounded portal of Morn had left him numb.

*So long ago, now . . . outside Pale. I'd felt her, felt this child, trapped in her eternal pain, unable to comprehend what she had done to deserve what was happening to her. She had thought she was going to find her mother — so Kilava had told her. She had been holding her brother's hand—*

And then it had all been torn away.

*Suddenly alone.*

*Knowing only pain.*

*For thousands of years.*

Quick Ben and Talamandas had done something to the child, had worked their sorcery to take from her all memory of what had happened. Paran had sensed Hood's direct involvement in that – only a god could manage such a thing, not a simple blocking of memories, but an absolute taking away, a cleansing of the slate.

Thus. The child had lost her brother. Had found an uncle instead.

*But not a kindly one. The Seer carries his own wounds, after all . . .*

And now Burn's realm had found new denizens. Was now home to an ancient warren.

'Memories,' Quick Ben had said, 'of ice. There is heat within this chaotic poison — heat enough to destroy these servants. I needed to find a way to slow the infection, to weaken the poison.'

'I'd warned the Crippled God, you know. Told him I was stepping into his path. We've knocked him back, you know . . .'

Paran smiled to himself at the recollection. The ego of gods was as nothing to Quick Ben's. Even so, the wizard had earned the right to some fierce satisfaction, hadn't he? They had stolen the Seer from under Anomander Rake's nose. They had seen an ancient wrong righted, and were fortunate enough to have Kilava present, to partake of the redemption. They had removed the threat of the Seer from this continent. And, finally, through the preservation of Omtose Phellack, they had slowed the Crippled God's infection to a turgid crawl.

*And we gave a child her life back.*

'Captain,' Quick Ben murmured, a hand reaching up to touch his shoulder.

Ahead, beyond the last of the trees, a mass of figures, covering the slopes of a broad, flat-topped hill. Torches like wavering stars.

'I don't like the feel of this,' the wizard muttered.

When the darkness dissipated, the bodies were gone, those on the hilltop and those on the bed of the wagon that Picker and her soldiers had guided onto the side of the road below. There had been nothing elaborate to the interment. The disposition of the fallen within the massive, floating edifice was left to the Tiste Andii, to Anomander Rake himself.

Gruntle turned and looked up to study Moon's Spawn. Leaning drunkenly, it drifted seaward, blotting the brightening stars that had begun painting the land silver. The night's natural darkness would soon swallow it
As Moon's Spawn drew its shadow after it, there was revealed, on the ridge on the other side of the trader road, a small gathering of soldiers, positioned in a half-circle around a modest bier and a pile of stones.

It was a moment before Gruntle understood what he was seeing. He reached out and drew Stonny closer to him. 'Come on,' he whispered.

She did not protest as he led her from the hill, down the slope, through silent, ghostly ranks that parted to let them pass. Over the road, across the shallow ditch, then onto the slope leading to the ridge.

Where the remaining hundred or so Grey Swords stood to honour the man who had once been Fener's Shield Anvil.

Someone was following at a distance behind Gruntle and Stonny, but neither turned to see who it was.

They reached the small gathering.

Uniforms had been scrubbed clean, weapons polished. Gruntle saw, in the midst of the mostly Capan women and gaunt Tenescowri recruits, Anaster, still astride his horse. The Mortal Sword's feline eyes thinned on the strange, one-eyed young man. No, he is not as he was. No longer . . . empty. What has he become, that he now feels like my . . . rival?

The Destriant stood closest to the still form on the bier, and seemed to be studying Itkovian's death-pale face. On the other side of the bier a shallow pit had been excavated, earth heaped on one side, boulders on the other. A modest grave awaited Itkovian. Finally, the Capan woman turned.

'We mark the death of this man, whose spirit travels to no god. He has walked through Hood's Gate, and that is all. Through. To stand alone. He will not relinquish his burden, for he remains in death as he was in life. Itkovian, Shield Anvil of Fener's Reve. Remember him.'

As she made to gesture for the interment to begin, someone stepped round Gruntle and Stonny, and approached the Destriant.

A Malazan soldier, holding a cloth-wrapped object under one arm. In halting Daru, he said, 'Please, Destriant, I seek to honour Itkovian...'

'As you wish.'

'I would do ... something else, as well.'

She cocked her head. 'Sir?'

The Malazan removed the cloth to reveal Itkovian's helm. 'I – I did not wish to take advantage of him. Yet – he insisted that he fared better in the exchange. Untrue, Destriant. You can see that. Anyone can. See the helm he wears – it was mine. I would take it back. He should be wearing his own. This one ...'

The Destriant swung round, looked down at the body once more, said nothing for a long moment, then she shook her head. 'No, Sir, Itkovian would refuse your request. Your gift pleased him, sir. None the less, if you have now decided that the helmet you gave to him is indeed of greater value, then he would not hesitate in returning it to ...' She was turning as she spoke, and, her gaze travelling to the now weeping soldier, then past to something beyond them all, her words trailed away to silence.

Gruntle saw the young woman's eyes slowly widen.

The Grey Swords' Shield Anvil suddenly pivoted in a soft clatter of armour, then, a moment later, the other soldiers followed suit.

As did Gruntle and Stonny.

The lone Malazan had been but the first. Beneath the silver starlight, every surviving soldier of Dujek's Host
had marched to position themselves at the base of the ridge's slope, forming ranks. Flanked by Tiste Andii, Rhivi, Barghast, Black Moranth – a vast sweep of figures, standing silent—

—and then Gruntle's scan continued eastward, down to the killing field, and there, once more, were the T'lan Imass, and they too were coming forward.

Silverfox stood off to the far side, watching.

The Grey Swords, stunned into silence, slowly parted as the first of the T'lan Imass reached the ridge.

A Bonecaster came first, holding in one hand a battered seashell hanging from a leather thong. The undead creature halted and said to the Destriant, 'For the gift this mortal has given us, we shall each offer one in turn. Together, they shall become his barrow, and it shall be unassailable. If you refuse us this, we will defy you.'

The Destriant shook her head. 'No, sir,' she whispered. 'There will be no refusal.'

The Bonecaster walked up to Itkovian, laid the shell down on the man's chest.

Gruntle sighed. Ah, Itkovian, it seems you have made yet more friends.

The solemn procession of modest gifts – at times nothing more than a polished stone, carefully set down on the growing pile covering the body – continued through the night, the stars completing their great wheel in the sky until fading at last to dawn's light.

When the Malazan soldier added Itkovian's helmet to the barrow, a second wave began, as soldier after soldier ascended the slope to leave the man a gift. Sigils, diadems, rings, daggers.

Through it all, Gruntle and Stonny stood to one side, watching. As did the Grey Swords.

With the last soldiers leaving the hill, Gruntle stirred. He stared at the massive, glittering barrow, seeing the faint emanation of Tellann sorcery that would keep it intact – every object in its place, immovable – then reached up with his left hand. A soft click, and the torcs fell free.

Sorry, Treach. Learn to live with the loss.

We do.

The gloom remained, suffusing the entire city of Coral, as the sun edged clear over the seas to the east. Paran stood with Quick Ben. They had both watched the procession, but had not moved from their position on the hill. They had watched Dujek join the silent line of gift-givers, one soldier honouring another.

The captain felt diminished by his inability to follow suit. In his mind, the death of Whiskeyjack had left him too broken to move. He and Quick Ben had arrived too late, had been unable to stand with the others in formal acknowledgement – Paran had not believed that so simple a ritual possessed such importance within himself. He had attended funerals before – even as a child in Unta, there had been solemn processions where he walked with his sisters, his mother and father, to eventually stand before a crypt in the necropolis, as some elder statesman's wrapped corpse was delivered into the hands of his ancestors. Ceremonies through which he had fidgeted, feeling nothing of grief for a man he had never met. Funerals had seemed pointless. Hood had already taken the soul, after all. Weeping before an empty body had seemed a waste of time.

His mother, his father. He had not been there for either funeral, had believed himself sufficiently comforted by the knowledge that Tavore would have ensured noble ceremony, proper respect.

Here, the soldiers had kept ceremony to a minimum. Simply standing at attention, motionless, each alone with their thoughts, their feelings. Yet bound together none the less. The binding that was shared grief.

And he and Quick Ben had missed it, had come too late. Whiskeyjack's body was gone. And Ganoes Paran was bereft, his heart a vast cavern, dark, echoing with emotions he would not, could not show.

He and the wizard, silent, stared at Moon's Spawn as it drifted ever farther eastward, out over the sea, now a
third of a league distant. It rode low in the air, and some time soon – perhaps a month from now – it would touch the waves, somewhere in the ocean, and then, as water rushed once more into the fissures, filling the chambers within, Moon’s Spawn would sink. Down, beneath the insensate seas ...

No-one approached them.

Finally, the wizard turned. ‘Captain.’

‘What is it, Quick Ben?’

‘Moon’s Spawn. Draw it.’

Paran frowned, then his breath caught. He hesitated, then crouched down, hand reaching to wipe smooth a small span of earth. With his index finger he etched a round-cornered rectangle, then, within it, a rough but recognizable outline. He studied his work for a moment, then looked up at Quick Ben and nodded.

The wizard took a handful of Paran’s cloak in one hand, said, ‘Lead us through.’

Right. Now how do I do that? Study the card, Paran – no, that alone will land us on its damned surface, a short but no doubt thoroughly fatal fall to the waves below. A chamber, Picker said. Rake’s throne room. Think darkness. Kurald Galain, a place unlit, silent, a place with cloth-wrapped corpses . . .

Eyes closed, Paran stepped forward, dragging Quick Ben with him.

His boot landed on stone.

He opened his eyes, saw nothing but inky blackness, but the air smelled ... different. He moved forward another step, heard Quick Ben’s sigh behind him. The wizard muttered something and a fitful globe of light appeared above them.

A high-ceilinged chamber, perhaps twenty paces wide and more than forty paces long. They had arrived at what seemed the formal entrance – behind them, beyond an arched threshold, was a hallway. Ahead, at the far end of the chamber, a raised dais.

The huge, high-backed chair that had once commanded that dais had been pushed to one side, two of its legs on a lower step, the throne leaning. On the centre of the dais three black-wood sarcophagi now resided.

Along the length of the approach, to either side, were additional sarcophagi, upright, on which black-webbed sorcery played.

Quick Ben hissed softly through his teeth. ‘Ware the looter who penetrates this place.’

Paran studied the sorcery’s soft dance over the unadorned sarcophagi. ‘Wards?’ he asked.

‘That, and a lot more, Captain. But we need not be worried. The Bridgeburners are within these ones flanking the approach. Oh, and one Black Moranth.’ He pointed to a sarcophagus that, to Paran’s eyes, looked no different from all the others. ‘Twist. The poison in his arm took him a bell before the first wave of Dujek’s companies.’ Quick Ben slowly walked towards another sarcophagus. ‘In here . . . what was left of Hedge. Not much. The bastard blew him-self up with a cusser.’ The wizard stopped to stand before the coffin. ‘Picker described it well, Hedge. And I will tell Fiddler. Next time I see him.’ He was silent a moment longer, then he turned to Paran with a grin. ‘I can picture him, his soul, crouching at the base of Hood’s Gate, driving a cracker between the stones ...’

Paran smiled, but it was a struggle. He set off towards the dais. The wizard followed.

Quick Ben spoke names in a soft voice as they proceeded. ‘Shank ... Toes ... Detoran ... Aimless ... Runter ... Mulch ... Bucklund ... Story ... Liss ... Dasalle ... Trotts – uh, I would’ve thought the Barghast ... no, I suppose not. He was as much a Bridgeburner as the rest of us. Behind that lid, Paran, he’s still grinning ...’

As they walked, Quick Ben spoke aloud every name of those they passed. Thirty-odd Bridgeburners, Paran’s fallen command.
They reached the dais.

And could go no further. Sorcery commanded the entire platform, a softly coruscating web of Kurald Galain.

‘Rake's own hand,’ the wizard murmured. 'These ... spells. He worked alone.'

Paran nodded. He had heard the same from Picker, but he understood Quick Ben's need to talk, to fill the chamber with his echoing voice.

'It was his leg, you know. Gave out at the wrong moment. Probably a lunge ... meaning he had Kallor. Had him dead. He would never have extended himself so fully otherwise. That damned leg. Shattered in that garden in Darujhistan. A marble pillar, toppling... and Whiskeyjack was just standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

'From then ... to this.'

And now, Picker and the others are watching Mallet. Every moment, someone's hovering close. The healer might try to fall on his knife at any time . . . given the chance. Ah, Mallet, he kept pushing you away. 'Another time, I've too much on my mind right now. Nothing more than a dull ache. When this is done, we'll get to it, then.' It wasn't your fault, Mallet. Soldiers die.

He watched Quick Ben remove a small pebble from his pouch and lay it on the floor in front of the dais. 'I may want to visit later,' he said, offering Paran a faint, sad smile. 'Me and Kalam ...'

Oh, Wizard . . .

Paran lifted his gaze to the three sarcophagi. He did not know which one held whom. For some reason, that didn't matter much. Whiskeyjack and two marines – they were there for Tattersail, at the last.

Always an even exchange, sorceress.

'I am ready to leave them, now, Captain.'

Paran nodded.

They turned and slowly retraced their steps.

Reaching the arched entrance, they stopped.

Quick Ben glanced into the hallway. 'They left everything, you know.'

'What? Who?'

'Rake. The Tiste Andii. Left their possessions. Everything.'

'Why would they do that? They are to settle in Black Coral, aren't they? The city's been stripped clean ...'

Quick Ben shrugged. 'Tiste Andii,' he said, in a tone that silently added: we'll never know.

A vague portal took shape before them.

The wizard grunted. 'You've certainly a particular style with these things, Captain.'

Yes, the style of awkward ignorance. 'Step through, Wizard.'

He watched Quick Ben vanish within the portal. Then Paran turned, one last time, to look upon the chamber. The globe of light was fast dimming.

Whiskeyjack, for all that you have taught me, I thank you. Bridgeburners, I wish I could have done better by you. Especially at the end. At the very least, I could have died with you.

All right, it's probably far too late. But I bless you, one and all.
With that, he turned back, stepped through the portal.

In the silent chamber, the light faded, the globe flickering, then finally vanishing.

But a new glow had come to the chamber. Faint, seeming to dance with the black web on the sarcophagi.

A dance of mystery.

The carriage of bone clattered its way down the trader road, Emancipor flicking the traces across the broad, midnight backs of the oxen.

Gruntle, halfway across the road, stopped, waited.

The manservant scowled, reluctantly halted the carriage. He thumped one fist on the wall behind him, the reptilian skin reverberating like a war drum.

A door opened and Bauchelain climbed out, followed by Korbal Broach.

Bauchelain strode to stand opposite Gruntle, but his flat grey eyes were focused on the dark city beyond. 'Extraordinary,' he breathed. 'This – this is a place I could call home.'

Gruntle's laugh was harsh. 'You think so? There are Tiste Andii there, now. More, it is now a part of the Malazan Empire. Do you believe that either will tolerate your friend's hobbies?'

'He's right,' Korbal Broach whined from beside the carriage. 'I won't have any fun there.'

Bauchelain smiled. 'Ah, but Korbal, think of all the fresh corpses. And look to this field below. K'Chain Che'Malle, already conveniently dismembered – manageable portions, if you will. Enough material, dear colleague, to build an entire estate.'

Gruntle watched Korbal Broach suddenly smile.

_Gods, spare me the sight of that – never again, please._

'Now, barbed Captain,' Bauchelain said, 'kindly remove yourself from our path. But first, if you would be so kind, a question for you.'

'What?'

'I have but recently received a note. Terrible penmanship, and worse, written on bark. It would seem that a certain Jib Bole and his brothers wish to pay me a visit. Are you, by any chance, knowledgeable of these good sirs? If so, perhaps some advice on the proper etiquette of hosting them . . .'

Gruntle smiled. 'Wear your best, Bauchelain.'

'Ah. Thank you, Captain. And now, if you would ...'

With a wave, Gruntle resumed crossing the road.

_The Grey Swords had established a temporary encampment fifty paces east of the massive, glittering barrow that had already acquired the name of Itkovian's Gift. Ragged bands of Tenescowri, emaciated and sickly, had emerged from Black Coral, and from the woodlands, and were all congregating around the camp. Word of Anaster's . . . rebirth had spread, and with it the promise of salvation._

_Recruitment. Those Tenescowri could never go back to what they had once been. They, too, need to be reborn. The stranger within Anaster – this new Mortal Sword of Togg and Fanderay – has much to do . . ._

_Time had come for Gruntle to take the man's measure. He'll likely prove a better Mortal Sword than I am. Likely smug, sanctimonious up there on that damned ugly horse. Aye, I'm ready to hate the bastard, I admit it._

Gruntle approached Anaster, who was guiding his horse through the decrepit camp of Tenescowri. Stick-
limbed figures were reaching up on all sides, touching him, his horse. Trailing a half-dozen paces behind walked the Destriant, and Gruntle could feel healing sorcery swirling out from her – the embrace of the Wolf's Reve had begun.

Anaster finally rode clear of the camp. His lone eye noted Gruntle and the man reined in, waited for the Daru.

He spoke before Gruntle had a chance to do the same, 'You're Gruntle, Trake's Mortal Sword. The Destriant has told me about you. I'm glad you've come.' Anaster glanced back at the Tenescowri, who hung back, within their encampment, as if its edge was some kind of invisible, impassable barrier, then the young man dismounted. 'The Shield Anvil insisted I remain visible,' he grunted, wincing as he stretched his legs. 'Much more of this and I'll start walking like a Wickan.'

'You said you are glad that I've come,' Gruntle rumbled. 'Why?'

'Well, you're a Mortal Sword, right? They're calling me one, too. I guess, uh, well. What does that mean, anyway?'

'You don't know?'

'No. Do you?'

Gruntle said nothing for a long moment, then he grinned. 'Not really.'

The tension left Anaster in a heartfelt sigh. He stepped close. 'Listen. Before this – uh, before I arrived in this body, I was a scout in the Malazan army. And as far as I was concerned, temples were where poor people paid to keep the priests' wine cellars well stocked. I don't want followers. That Destriant back there, the Shield Anvil – gods, what a hard woman! They're piling expectations on me – I'm feeling like that man Itkovian is feeling right now, not that he's feeling anything, I suppose. Hood, just mentioning his name breaks my heart and I never even knew him.'

'I did, Anaster. Relax, lad – about everything. Did you think I asked to be Trake's Mortal Sword? I was a caravan guard, and a miserable one and I was happy with it—'

'You were happy being miserable?'

'Damned right I was.'

Anaster suddenly smiled. 'I stumbled on a small cask of ale – it's back in the camp of the Grey Swords. We should go for a walk, Gruntle.'

'Under the trees, aye. I'll find Stonny – a friend. You'll like her, I think.'

'A woman? I like her already. I'll get the ale, meet you back here.'

'A sound plan, Anaster. Oh, and don't tell the Destriant or the Shield Anvil—'

'I won't, even if they torture me ...' His voice fell away, and Gruntle saw the young man grow paler than usual. Then he shook his head. 'See you soon, friend.'

'Aye.' Friend ... Yes, I think so.

He watched Anaster swing back onto the horse – the man he had been knew how to ride.

No, not the man he had been. The man he is. Gruntle watched him riding away for a moment longer, then turned back to find Stonny.

Steam or smoke still drifted from the four Trygalle Trade Guild carriages waiting at the base of the hill. Quick Ben had gone ahead to speak with the train's master – an opulently dressed, overweight man whose bone-deep exhaustion was discernible from fifty paces away.
Paran, waiting with the Bridgeburners for Dujek on the crest of the hill, watched the wizard and the Trygalle mage engaging in a lengthy conversation the result of which seemed to leave Quick Ben bemused. The Daru, Kruppe, then joined them, and the discussion resumed once more. Heatedly.

'What's all that about?' Picker wondered beside the captain.

Paran shook his head. 'I have no idea, Lieutenant.'

'Sir.'

Something in her tone brought him round. 'Yes?'

'You shouldn't have left me in command – I messed it up, bad, sir.'

He saw the raw pain in her eyes, continued to meet them despite a sudden desire to look away. 'Not you, Lieutenant. The command was mine, after all. I abandoned all of you.'

She shook her head. 'Quick's told us what you two did, Captain. You went where you had to, sir. It was well played. It'd seemed to us that there was no victory to be found, in any of this, but now we know that's not true – and that means more than you might realize.'

'Lieutenant, you walked out of that keep with survivors. No-one could have done better.'

'I agree,' a new voice growled.

Dujek's appearance shocked both soldiers to silence. The man seemed to have aged ten years in the span of a single day and night. He was bent, the hand of his lone arm trembling. 'Lieutenant, call the Bridgeburners over. I would speak to you all.'

Picker turned and gestured the five soldiers closer.

'Good,' the High Fist grunted. 'Now, hear me. There's half a wagon of back pay being loaded onto one of those Trygalle carriages below. Back pay for the company known as the Bridgeburners. Full complement. Enough to buy each of you an estate and a life of well-earned idyll. The Trygalle will take you to Darujhistan – I don't recommend you head back to the Empire. As far as Tayschrenn and Fist Aragan and I are concerned, not one Bridgeburner walked out of that keep. No, say not a single word, soldiers – Whiskeyjack wanted this for you. Hood, he wanted it for himself, too. Respect that.

'Besides, you've one more mission, and it takes you to Darujhistan. The Trygalle has delivered someone. He's presently in the care of the High Alchemist, Baruk. The man's not well – he needs you, I think. Malazans. Soldiers. Do what you can for him when you're there, and when you decide that you can't do anything more, then walk away.'

Dujek paused, eyed them, then nodded and said, 'That's all, Bridgeburners. The Trygalle are waiting for you. Captain, remain a moment – I would a private word with you. Oh, Picker, send High Mage Quick Ben up here, will you?'

Picker blinked. 'High Mage?'

Dujek grimaced. 'That bastard can't hide any longer. Tayschrenn's insisted.'

'Yes, sir.'

Paran watched the small troop head down the hill.

Dujek drew a palsied hand across his face, turned away. 'Walk with me, Paran.'

Paran did. 'That was well done, sir.'

'No, it wasn't, Ganoes, but it was all I could do. I don't want the last of the Bridgeburners to die on some field of battle, or in some nameless city that's fighting hard to stay free. I'm taking what's left of my Host to Seven
Cities, to reinforce Adjunct Tavore's retributive army. You are welcome—'

'No, sir. I'd rather not.'

Dujek nodded, as if he had expected that. 'There's a dozen or so columns for you, near the carriages below. Go with your company, then, with my blessing. I'll have you counted among the casualties.'

'Thank you, High Fist. I don't think I was ever cut out to be a soldier.'

'Not another word of that, Captain. Think what you like about yourself, but we will continue seeing you as you are – a noble man.'

'Noble—'

'Not that kind of noble, Ganoes. This is the kind that's earned, the only kind that means anything. Because, in this day and age, it's damned rare.'

'Well, sir, there I'll respectfully disagree with you. If there's but one experience I will carry with me of my time in this campaign, High Fist, it is that of being humbled, again and again, by those around me.'

'Go join your fellow Bridgeburners, Ganoes Paran.'

'Yes, sir. Goodbye, High Fist.'

'Goodbye.'

As Paran made his way down the slope, he stumbled momentarily, then righted himself. *My fellow Bridgeburners, he said . . , well, the achievement is shortlived, but even so. I made it.*

Ignoring the grim-faced soldiers on all sides, Toc – Anaster – reined in beside the small tent the Grey Swords had given him. *Aye, I remember Anaster, and this may be his body, but that's all. He slipped from the saddle and entered it.*

He hunted until he found the cask, hid it within a leather sack and slung that over a shoulder, then hurried back outside.

As he drew himself into the saddle once more, a man stepped up to him.

Toc frowned down at him. This was no Tenescowri, nor a Grey Sword. If anything, he looked, from his faded, tattered leathers and furs, to be Barghast.

Covered in scars – more scars of battle than Toc had ever seen on a single person before. Despite this, there was a comfort, there in his face – a gentleman's face, no more than twenty years of age, the features pronounced, heavy-boned, framed in long black hair devoid of any fetishes or braids. His eyes were a soft brown as he looked up at Toc.

Toc had never met this man before. 'Hello. Is there something you wish?' he asked, impatient to be away.

The man shook his head. 'I only sought to look upon you, to see that you were well.'

*He believes me to be Anaster. A friend of old, perhaps – not one of his lieutenants, though – I would have remembered this one. Well, I'll not disappoint him. Thank you. I am.*

'This pleases me.' The man smiled, reached up and laid a hand on Toc's leg. 'I will go, now, brother. Know that I hold you in my memory.' Still smiling, he turned and strode away, passing through the midst of curious Grey Swords, heading north towards the forest.

Toc stared after him. *Something . . . something about that walk . . .*
'Mortal Sword—'

The Shield Anvil was approaching.

Toc gathered the reins. 'Not now,' he called out. 'Later.' He swung his horse round. 'All right, you wretched hag, let's see how you gallop, shall we?' He drove his heels into the beast's flanks.

His sister awaited him at the edge of the forest. 'You are done?' she asked him.

'I am.'

They continued on, under the trees. 'I have missed you, brother.'

'And I you.'

'You have no sword ...'

'Indeed, I have not. Do you think I will need one?'

She leaned close to him. 'Now more than before, I would think.'

'Perhaps you are right. We must needs find a quarry.'

'The Barghast Range. A flint the colour of blood – I will invest it, of course, to prevent its shattering.'

'As you did once before, sister.'

'Long ago.'

'Aye, so very long ago.'

Under the impassive gaze of the two brothers, Lady Envy relinquished the sorcery that kept Mok from returning to consciousness. She watched as the Third slowly regained awareness, the eyes within the mask dulled with pain. 'There, now,' she murmured. 'You have suffered of late, haven't you?'

Mok struggled to sit upright, his gaze hardening upon finding his brothers.

Lady Envy straightened and glanced over at Senu and Thurule with an appraising eye. After a moment, she sighed. 'Indeed, they are a sight. They suffered in your absence, Third. Then again,' she noted brightly, 'you've not fared much better! I must inform you, Mok, that your mask has cracked.'

The Seguleh reached up, probed tentatively, finding then following the hairline fissure running two-thirds of the length on the left side.

Lady Envy continued, 'In fact, I reluctantly admit, none of our fa?ades has survived ... unfractured. If you can imagine it, Anomander Rake – the Seventh – has unceremoniously banished us from the city.'

Mok climbed unsteadily to his feet, looked around.

'Yes,' Lady Envy said, 'we find ourselves in the very same forest we spent days trudging through. Your punitive exercise is concluded, perhaps satisfactorily, perhaps not. The Pannion Domin is no more, alas. Time's come, my three grim servants, to begin the journey home.'

Mok examined his weapons, then faced her. 'No. We shall demand an audience with the Seventh—'

'Oh, you foolish man! He'll not see you! Worse, you'll have to carve your way through a few hundred Tiste Andii to get to him – and no, they won't cross blades with you. They will simply annihilate you with sorcery. They're a perfunctory people, the Children of Mother Dark. Now, I have decided to escort the three of you home. Isn't that generous of me?'
Mok regarded her, the silence stretching.

Lady Envy offered him a sweet smile.

On their long journey north, the White Face Barghast broke up into clans, then family bands, ranging far and wide as was their wont. Hetan walked with Cafal, lagging behind their father and his closest followers and angling some distance eastward.

The sun was warm on their heads and shoulders, the air fresh with the gentle surf brushing the shore two hundred paces to their right.

It was midday when she and her brother spotted the two travellers ahead. Close kin, Hetan judged as they drew nearer. Neither one particularly tall, but robust, both black-haired, walking very slowly side by side closer to the coastline.

They looked to be Barghast, but of a tribe or clan unknown to either Hetan or Cafal. A short while later they came alongside the two strangers.

Hetan’s eyes focused on the man, studied the extraordinary scars crisscrossing his flesh. ‘We greet you, strangers!’ she called out.

Both turned, clearly surprised that they had company.

Hetan now looked upon the man’s face. That the woman beside him was his sister could be no more obvious.

Good. ‘You!’ she called to the man, ‘what is your name?’

The man’s smile made her heart catch. ‘Onos Toolan.’

Hetan strode closer, offering a wink to the dark-haired woman, then settling her eyes once more on the man called Onos Toolan. ‘I see more than you imagine,’ she said in a low voice.

The young warrior cocked his head. ‘You do?’

‘Aye, and what I see tells me you’ve not bedded a woman in a long time.’

The man’s eyes widened – oh, such lovely eyes, a lover’s eyes – ‘Indeed,’ he said, his smile broadening.

Oh yes, my lover’s eyes . . .
EPILOGUE

Paran shoved the door open. Shouldering his heavy, gold-filled pack, he stepped into the antechamber beyond.

'Raest! Where are you?'

The armour-clad Jaghut emerged from somewhere to halt before Paran, said nothing.

'That's right,' Paran muttered, 'I've decided to take up residence here.'

Raest's voice was a cold rasp, 'You have.'

'Aye. Three weeks in that damned inn was enough, believe me. So, here I am, courage worked up, ready to settle into the dreaded, infamous Finnest House – and I see your skills as housekeeper leave much to be desired.'

'These two bodies on the threshold – what will you do with them?'

Paran shrugged. 'I haven't decided yet. Something, I suppose. But, for now, I want to drop this gold off – so I can sleep easy for a change. They're opening the place up tonight, you know . . .'

The giant warrior replied, 'No, Master of the Deck, I do not.'

'Never mind. I said I'd go. Hood knows, I doubt anybody else in this city will, except maybe Kruppe, Coll and Murillo.'

'Go where, Master of the Deck?'

'Ganoes, please. Or Paran. Where, you ask? Picker's new tavern, that's where.'

'I know nothing of—'

'I know you don't, that's why I'm telling—'

'—nor do I care, Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck.'

'Well, your loss, Raest. As I was saying, Picker's new tavern. Her and her partner's, that is. They've spent half their pay on this insane project.'

'Insane?'

'Yes – you don't know the meaning of insane?'

'I know it all too well, Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck.'

Paran was brought up short by that. He studied the helmed face, seeing only shadows behind the visor's slots. A faint shiver ran through the Malazan. 'Uh, yes. In any case, they purchased the K'rul Temple, belfry and all. Made it into a—'

'A tavern.'

'A temple everyone in the city calls haunted.'

'I imagine,' Raest said, turning away, 'it came cheap, all things considered . . .' 

Paran stared after the armoured Jaghut. 'See you later,' he called.
Faintly came the reply, 'If you insist...'

Emerging from the battered gateway onto the street, Paran almost stumbled over a decrepit, hooded figure sitting awkwardly on the edge of the gutter. A grimy hand lifted from the rags towards the Malazan.

'Kind sir! A coin, please! A single coin!'

'Luckily for you, I can spare more than one, old man.' Paran reached for the leather purse tucked into his belt. He drew out a handful of silvers.

The beggar grunted, dragged himself closer, his legs trailing like dead weights. 'A man of wealth! Listen to me. I have need of a partner, generous sir! I have gold. Councils! Hidden in a cache on the slopes of the Tahlyn Hills! A fortune, sir! We must needs only mount an expedition – it's not far.'

Paran dropped the coins into the old man's hands. 'Buried treasure, friend? No doubt.'

'Sir, the sum is vast, and I would gladly part with half of it – the repayment to your investment will be ten times at the very least.'

'I've no need for more riches.' Paran smiled. He stepped away from the beggar, then paused and added, 'By the way, you probably shouldn't linger overlong at this particular gate. The House does not welcome strangers.'

The old man seemed to shrink in on himself. His head twisted to one side. 'No,' he muttered from beneath his ragged hood, 'not this House.' Then he softly cackled. 'But I know one that does ...'

Shrugging at the beggar's obscure words, Paran turned once more and set off.

Behind him, the beggar broke into a wretched cough.

Picker could not pull her eyes from the man. He sat hunched over, on a chair that had yet to find a table, still clutching in his hands the small rag of tattered cloth on which something had been written. The alchemist had done all he could to return life to what had been a mostly destroyed, desiccated body, and Baruk's talents had been stretched to their limits – there was no doubt of that.

She knew of him, of course. They all did. They all knew, as well, where he had come from.

He spoke not a word. Had not since the resurrection. No physical flaw kept him from finding his voice, Baruk had insisted.

The Imperial Historian had fallen silent. No-one knew why.

She sighed.

The grand opening of K'rul's Bar was a disaster. Tables waited, empty, forlorn in the massive main chamber. Paran, Spindle, Blend, Antsy, Mallet and Bluepearl sat at the one nearest the blazing hearth, barely managing a word among them. Nearby was the only other occupied table, at which sat Kruppe, Murillio and Coll.

And that's it. Gods, we're finished. We should never have listened to Antsy . . .

The front door swung open.

Picker looked over hopefully. But it was only Baruk.

The High Alchemist paused within the antechamber, then slowly made his way forward to where the other Daru sat.

'Dearest friend of honourable Kruppe! Baruk, stalwart champion of Darujhistan, could you ask for better company this night? Here, yes, at this very table! Kruppe was astonishing his companions – and indeed, these grim-faced ex-soldiers next to us – with his extraordinary account of Kruppe and this tavern's namesake,
conspiring to fashion a new world.'

'Is the tale done, then?' Baruk asked as he approached.

'Just, but Kruppe would be delighted to—'

'Excellent. I'll hear it some other time, I suppose.' The High Alchemist glanced over at Duiker, but the Imperial Historian had not so much as even looked up. Head still bowed, eyes fixed on the cloth in his hands. Baruk sighed. 'Picker, have you mulled wine?'

'Aye, sir,' she said. 'Behind you, beside the hearth.'

Antsy reached for the clay jug, rose to pour Baruk a cup.

'All right,' Picker said in a loud voice, walking over. 'So, this is it. Fine. The fire's warm enough, we've drunk enough, and I for one am ready for some stories to be told – no, not you, Kruppe. We've heard yours. Now, Baruk here, and Coll and Murillio for that matter, might be interested in the tale of the final taking of Coral.'

Coll slowly leaned forward. 'So, you'll finally talk, will you? It's about time, Picker.'

'Not me,' she replied. 'Not to start, anyway. Captain? Refill your cup, sir, and weave us a tale.'

The man grimaced, then shook his head. 'I'd like to, Picker.'

'Too close,' Spindle grumbled, nodding and turning away.

'Hood's breath, what a miserable bunch!'

'Sure,' Spindle snapped, 'a story to break our hearts all over again! What's the value in that?'

A rough, broken voice replied, 'There is value.'

Everyone fell silent, turned to Duiker.

The Imperial Historian had looked up, was studying them with dark eyes. 'Value. Yes. I think, much value. But not yours, soldiers. Not yet. Too soon for you. Too soon.'

'Perhaps,' Baruk murmured, 'perhaps you are right in that. We ask too much—'

'Of them. Yes.' The old man looked down once more at the cloth in his hands.

The silence stretched.

Duiker made no move.

Picker began to turn back to her companions – when the man began speaking. 'Very well, permit me, if you will, on this night. To break your hearts once more. This is the story of the Chain of Dogs. Of Coltaine of the Crow Clan, newly come Fist to the 7th Army ...'

This ends the Third Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen
GLOSSARY

PANNION DOMIN TERMINOLOGY:

Pannion Seer: the political and spiritual leader of the Domin

Septarch: ruler of one of seven districts in Domin (also commands armies)

Urdo: commander of elite heavy infantry (Urdomen)

Urdomen: elite heavy infantry, fanatical followers of the Seer

Seerdomin: fanatical bodyguard and assassin sect of the Domin

Betaklites: medium infantry

Beklites: regular infantry (also known as the Hundred Thousand)

Betrullid: light cavalry

Betakullid: medium cavalry

Scalandi: skirmishers

Desandi: sappers

Tenescowri: the peasant army

IN CAPUSTAN

The Grey Swords: a mercenary cult hired to defend against the Pannion Domin

The Mask Council: High Priests of the Fourteen Ascendants represented in Capustan

The Gidrath: soldiers serving the fourteen temples

The Capanthall: Capustan's city garrison, under command of Prince Jelarkan

The Coralessian Company: followers of exiled Prince Arard of Coral

Lestari Guard: refugee Palace Guard from the city of Lest

Capan: name for distinct self-contained neighbourhoods and people in Capustan

Daru Quarter: old town at centre of Capustan

The Thrall: old Daru keep now home to the Mask Council

THE FOURTEEN ASCENDANTS OF CAPUTAN'S MASK COUNCIL

Fener/Tennerock

Trake/Treach
D'rek
Hood
Burn
Togg
Beru
Mowri
Oponn
Soliel and Poliel
Queen of Dreams
Fanderay
Dessembrae
Shadowthrone

PEOPLES AND PLACES

The Rhivi: pastoral nomadic society in central plains of Genabackis

The Barghast: a warrior caste tribe found on various continents:
Ilgres Clan
White Face Clan (including: Senan, Gilk, Ahkrata, Barahn, Nith'rithal)

'Tlan Imass (the Armies of the Diaspora):
Logros, Guardians of the First Throne
Kron, First to the Gathering
Betrule (lost)
Ifayle (lost)
Bentract (lost)
Orshayn (lost)
Kerluhm (lost)

Tiste Andii: an Elder Race

Jaghut: an Elder Race

K'Chain Che'Malle: one of the Four Founding Races, presumed extinct

Moranth: a highly regimented culture, centred in Cloud Forest

Daru: a cultural and linguistic group on Genabackis

Capan: a citizen of Capustan
**Domin/Pannion:** name for a new empire on Genabackis

**Lestari:** a citizen of Lest

**Coralessian:** a citizen of Coral

**Morn:** a ruined, haunted place on the southwest coast of Genabackis

**Coral:** a city in the Pannion Domin

**Lest:** a city in the Pannion Domin

**Capustan:** a city on the north side of the Catlin River

**Darujhistan:** last Free City on Genabackis

**Lamatath Plain:** plains to south of Darujhistan

**Jhagra Til:** T’lan Imass name for now-extinct inland sea

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**THE WORLD OF SORCERY**

**The Warrens:** (the Paths – those Warrens accessible to humans)

- **Denul:** the Path of Healing
- **D’riss:** The Path of Stone
- **Hood’s Path:** the Path of Death
- **Meanas:** The Path of Shadow and Illusion
- **Ruse:** the Path of the Sea
- **Rasham:** The Path of Darkness
- **Serc:** the Path of the Sky
- **Tennes:** the Path of the Land
- **Thyr:** the Path of Light

**The Elder Warrens:**

- **Kurald Galain:** the Tiste Andii Warren of Darkness
- **Kurald Emurlahn:** the Tiste Edur Warren
- **Tellann:** the T'lan Imass Warren
- **Omtose Phellack:** the Jaghut Warren
- **Starvald Demelain:** the Tiam Warren, the First Warren

**THE DECK OF DRAGONS**—**The Fatid (and associated Ascendants)**

**High House Life**

King
Queen (Queen of Dreams)
Champion
Priest
Herald
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Virgin

High House Death
King (Hood)
Queen
Knight (once Dassem Ultor)
Magi
Herald
Soldier
Spinner
Mason
Virgin

High House Light
King
Queen
Champion
Priest
Captain
Soldier
Seamstress
Builder
Maiden

High House Dark
King
Queen
Knight (Son of Darkness)
Magi
Captain
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Wife

**High House Shadow**
King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)
Queen
Assassin (the Rope/Cotillion)
Magi
Hound

**Unaligned**
Oponn (the Jesters of Chance)
Obelisk (Burn)
Crown
Sceptre
Orb
Throne

**ASCENDANTS**
Apsalar, Lady of Thieves
Beru, Lord of Storms
Burn, Lady of the Earth, the Sleeping Goddess
Caladan Brood, the Warlord
Cotillion/The Rope (the Assassin of High House Shadow)
Dessembrae, Lord of Tragedy
D'rek, the Worm of Autumn (sometimes the Queen of Disease, see Poliel)
Fanderay, She-Wolf of Winter
Fener, the Boar (see also Tennerock)
Gedderone, Lady of Spring and Rebirth
Great Ravens, ravens sustained by magic
Hood (King of High House Death)
Jhess, Queen of Weaving
Kallor, the High King
K’rul, Elder God
Mael, Elder God
Mowri, Lady of Beggars, Slaves and Serfs
Nerruse, Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Wind
Oponn, Twin Jesters of Chance
Osserc, Lord of the Sky
Poliel, Mistress of Pestilence
Queen of Dreams (Queen of High House Life)
Shadowthrone/Ammanas (King of High House Shadow)
Shedenul/Soliel, Lady of Health
Soliel, Mistress of Healing
Tennerock/Fener, the Boar of Five Tusks
The Crippled God, King of Chains
The Hounds (of High House Shadow)
Togg (see Fanderay), the Wolf of Winter
Trake/Treach, The Tiger of Summer and Battle
Son of Darkness/Moon’s Lord/Anomander Rake (Knight of High House Dark)
Treach, First Hero
Verge of the Nascent, the 943rd Day of the Search, 1139 Burn's Sleep

Grey, bloated and pocked, the bodies lined the silt-laden shoreline for as far as the eye could see. Heaped like driftwood by the rising water, bobbing and rolling on the edges, the putrifying flesh seethed with black-shelled, ten-legged crabs. The coin-sized creatures had only begun to make inroads on the bounteous feast the warren's sundering had laid before them.

The sea mirrored the low sky's hue. Dull, patched pewter above and below, broken only by the deeper grey of silts and, thirty strokes of the oar distant, the smeared ochre tones of the barely visible upper levels of a city's inundated buildings. The storms had passed, the waters were calm amidst the wreckage of a drowned world.

Short, squat had been the inhabitants. Flat-featured, pale-haired, the hair left long and loose. Their world had been a cold one, given the thick-padded clothing they had worn. But with the sundering, that had changed, cataclysmically. The air was sultry, damp and now foul with the reek of decay.

The sea had been born of a river on another realm. A massive, wide and likely continent-spanning artery of freshwater, heavy with a plain's silts, the murky depths home to huge catfish and wagon-wheel-sized spiders, its shallows crowded with the black-shelled, ten-legged crabs and carnivorous, rootless plants. The river had poured its torrential volume onto this vast, level landscape. Days, then weeks, then months.

Storms, conjured by the volatile clash of tropical air-streams with the resident temperate climate, had driven the flood on beneath shrieking winds, and before the inexorably rising waters came deadly plagues to take those who had not drowned.

Somehow, the rent had closed sometime in the night just past. The river from another realm had been returned to its original path.

The shoreline ahead probably did not deserve the word, but nothing else came to Trull Sengar's mind as he was dragged along its verge. The beach was nothing more than silt, heaped against a huge, cyclopean wall that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. The wall had withstood the flood, though water now streamed down it on the opposite side.

Bodies on his left, a sheer drop of seven, maybe eight man-heights to his right, the top of the wall itself slightly less than thirty paces across; that it held back an entire sea whispered of sorcery. The broad, flat stones underfoot were smeared with mud, but already drying in the heat, dun-coloured insects dancing on its surface, leaping from the path of Trull Sengar and his captors.

Trull still experienced difficulty comprehending that notion. Captors. A word he struggled with. They were his brothers, after all. Kin. Faces he had known all his life, faces he had seen smile, and laugh, and faces – at times – filled with a grief that had mirrored his own. He had stood at their sides through all that had happened, the glorious triumphs, the soul-wrenching losses.

Captors.

There were no smiles, now. No laughter. The expressions of those who held him were fixed and cold.
What we have come to.

The march ended. Hands pushed Trull Sengar down, heedless of his bruises, the cuts and the gouges that still leaked blood. Massive iron rings had been set, for some unknown purpose, by this world's now-dead inhabitants, along the top of the wall, anchored in the heart of the huge stone blocks. The rings were evenly spaced down the wall's length, at each intervals of fifteen or so paces, for as far as Trull could see.

Now, those rings had found a new function.

Chains were wrapped around Trull Sengar, shackles hammered into place around his wrists and ankles. A studded girdle was cinched painfully tight around his midriff, the chains drawn through iron loops and pulled taut to pin him down beside the iron ring. A hinged metal press was affixed to his jaw, his mouth forced open and the plate pushed in and locked in place over his tongue.

The Shorning followed. A dagger inscribed a circle on his forehead, followed by a jagged slash to break that circle, the point pushed deep enough to gouge the bone. Ash was rubbed into the wounds. His long single braid was removed with rough hacks that made a bloody mess of his nape. A thick, cloying unguent was then smeared through his remaining hair, massaged down to the pate. Within a few hours, the rest of his hair would fall away, leaving him permanently bald.

The Shorning was an absolute thing, an irreversible act of severance. He was now outcast. To his brothers, he had ceased to exist. He would not be mourned. His deeds would vanish from memory along with his name. His mother and father would have birthed one less child. This was, for his people, the most dire punishment – worse than execution by far.

Yet, Trull Sengar had committed no crime.

And this is what we have come to.

They stood above him, perhaps only now comprehending what they had done.

A familiar voice broke the silence. 'We will speak of him now, and once we have left this place, he will cease to be our brother.'

'We will speak of him now,' the others intoned, then one added, 'He betrayed you.'

The first voice was cool, revealing nothing of the gloat that Trull Sengar knew would be there, 'You say he betrayed me.'

'He did, Brother.'

'What proof do you have?'

'By his own tongue.'

'Is it just you who claims to have heard such betrayal spoken?'

'No, I too heard it, Brother.'

'And I.'

'And what did our brother say to you all?'

'He said that you had severed your blood from ours.'

'That you now served a hidden master.'

'That your ambition would lead us all to our deaths—'

'Our entire people.'

'He spoke against me, then.'
'He did.'

'By his own tongue, he accused me of betraying our people.'

'He did.'

'And have I? Let us consider this charge. The southlands are aflame. The enemy's armies have fled. The enemy now kneels before us, and beg to be our slaves. From nothing, was forged an empire. And still, our strength grows. Yet. To grow stronger, what must you, my brothers, do?'

'We must search.'

'Aye. And when you find what must be sought?'

'We must deliver. To you, brother.'

'Do you see the need for this?'

'We do.'

'Do you understand the sacrifice I make, for you, for our people, for our future?'

'We do.'

'Yet, even as you searched, this man, our once-brother, spoke against me.'

'He did.'

'Worse, he spoke to defend the new enemies we had found.'

'He did. He called them the Pure Kin, and said we should not kill them.'

'And, had they been in truth Pure Kin, then...'

'They would not have died so easily.'

'Thus.'

'He betrayed you, Brother.'

'He betrayed us all.'

'There was silence. Ah, now you would share out this crime of yours. And they hesitate.'

'He betrayed us all, did he not, brothers?'

'Yes.' The word arrived rough, beneath the breath, mumbled — a chorus of dubious uncertainty.

No one spoke for a long moment, then, savage with barely bridled anger: 'Thus, brothers. And should we not heed this danger? The threat of betrayal, this poison, this plague that seeks to tear our family apart? Will it spread? Will we come here yet again? We must be vigilant, brothers. Within ourselves. With each other.

'Now, we have spoken of him. And now, he is gone.'

'He is gone.'

'He never existed.'

'He never existed.'

'Let us leave this place, then.'

'Yes, let us leave.'
Trull Sengar listened until he could no more hear their boots on the stones, nor feel the tremble of their dwindling steps. He was alone, unable to move, seeing only the mud-smeared stone at the base of the iron ring.

The sea rustled the corpses along the shoreline. Crabs scuttled. Water continued to seep through the mortar, insinuate the cyclopean wall with the voice of muttering ghosts, and flow down to the other side.

Among his people, it was a long-known truth, perhaps the only truth, that Nature fought but one eternal war. One foe. That, further, to understand this was to understand the world. Every world.

\[ \text{Nature has but one enemy.} \]

\[ \text{And that is imbalance.} \]

The wall held the sea.

\[ \text{And there are two meanings to this. My brothers, can you not see the truth of that? Two meanings. The wall holds the sea.} \]

\[ \text{For now.} \]

This was a flood that would not be denied. The deluge had but just begun – something his brothers could not understand, would, perhaps, never understand.

Drowning was common among his people. Drowning was not feared. And so, Trull Sengar would drown. Soon.

And before long, he suspected, his entire people would join him.

His brother had shattered the balance.

\[ \text{And Nature shall not abide.} \]

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For Sergeant Whiskeyjack and his squad of Bridgeburners, and for Tattersail, surviving sorceress of the Second Legion, the aftermath of the siege of Pale should have been a time to pause, to mourn the many dead. But the imperial gaze has fallen upon the ancient citadel of Darujhistan. This, the last of the Free Cities of Genabackis, yet dares to hold out.

However, the empire is not alone in this great game. Sinister, shadowbound forces gather as the gods themselves prepare to play their hand . . .

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Licking its wounds after the events in Darujhistan, the Malazan Empire now faces unrest in Seven Cities. Too soon, the rumblings of disquiet escalate into a fully-fledged uprising as the long-prophesied rebellion, named the Whirlwind, explodes, drawing the entire subcontinent into the bloodiest conflict the Empire has ever known. It seems that as prophecy and ancient sorcery collide, so is chaos come again.

As Coltaine, the charismatic commander of the Malaz 7th Army, fights a valiant, five month-long rear-guard action against the odds in a desperate bid to save the battered remnants of his army and the tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the Whirlwind, so disparate groups of individuals are drawn, in spite of themselves, into this most savage of uprisings. Felisin, Heboric and the silent murderer Baudin are fleeing the horrors of the Otataral mines; Fiddler and the assassin Kalam – once Bridgeburners now outlaws – journey together with Crokus and Apsalar to fulfil their public promise to return Apsalar to her home – and the secret vow to rid the Empire of the evil at its heart. And then come the two ancient wanderers, Mappo and his half-Jaghut companion Icarium, bearers of a devastating secret that is about to break free of its chains . . .

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After decades of internecine warfare, the tribes of the Tiste Edur have at last united under the Warlock King. There is peace – but it has been exacted at a terrible price: a pact made with a hidden power whose motives are at best suspect, at worst deadly.

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The Seven Cities Rebellion has been crushed. One last rebel force remains, holed up in the city of Y’Ghatan under the fanatical command of Leoman of the Flails. The prospect of laying siege to this ancient fortress makes the battle-weary Malaz 14th Army uneasy. For it was here that the Empire’s greatest champion was slain and a tide of Malazan blood spilled. It is a place of foreboding, its smell is of death.

Yet this is but a sideshow. Agents of a far greater conflict have made their opening moves. The Crippled God has been granted a place in the pantheon and a schism threatens. Sides must be chosen. But whatever each god decides, the rules have changed – irrevocably, terrifyingly – and the first blood to be drawn will be in the mortal world ...

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'This is true myth in the making, a drawing upon fantasy to recreate histories and legends as rich as any found within our culture'
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NIGHT OF KNIVES

A novel of the Malazan Empire by Ian C. Esslemont

'Night of Knives marks the first installment of the shared world that we had both envisioned'
Steven Erikson

The small island of Malaz and its city gave the great empire its name, but now it is little more than a sleepy, backwater port. This night, however, things are a little different. This night the city is on edge and a hive of hurried, sometimes violent, activity, its citizens bustle about, barring doors, shuttering windows, avoiding any stranger's stare. Because this night there is to be a convergence, the once-in-a-generation appearance of a Shadow Moon – an occasion that threatens the good people of Malaz with demon hounds and other, darker things ...

It was also prophesied that this night would witness the return of Emperor Kellanved, and there are those prepared to do anything to prevent this happening. As factions within the greater Empire draw up battle lines over the imperial throne, the Shadow Moon summons a far more ancient and potent presence for an all-out assault upon the island. Witnessing these cataclysmic events are Kiska, a young girl who yearns to flee the constraints of the city, and Temper, a grizzled, battle-weary veteran who seeks simply to escape his past. But this night each is to play a part in a conflict that will not only determine the fate of Malaz City, but also of the world beyond...

Drawing on events touched on in the prologue of Steven Erikson's landmark fantasy Gardens of the Moon, Night of Knives is a momentous chapter in the unfolding story of the extraordinarily-imagined world of Malaz.

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House of Chains

A Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON
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- MIDNIGHT TIDES
- MEMORIES OF ICE
- DEADHOUSE GATES
- GARDENS OF THE MOON
- THE BONEHUNTERS
For Mark Paxton MacRae, for the KO punch. This one's all yours, my friend.
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NORTHWEST GENABACKI
CIRCA 1160
(POST MALAZAN
CONQUEST)
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE URYD TRIBE OF THE TEBLOR

Karsa Orlong, a young warrior
Bairoth Gild, a young warrior
Delum Thord, a young warrior
Dayliss, a young woman
Pahlk, Karsa's grandfather
Synyg, Karsa's father

THE ADJUNCTS ARMY

Adjunct Tavore
Fist Gamet/Gimlet
T'amber
Fist Tene Baralta
Fist Blistig
Captain Keneb
Grub, his adopted son
Admiral Nok
Commander Alardis
Nil, a Wickan warlock
Nether, a Wickan witch
Temul, a Wickan of the Crow Clan (survivor of the Chain of Dogs)
Squint, a soldier in the Aren Guard
Pearl, a Claw
Lostara Yil, an officer in the Red Blades
Gall, Warleader of the Khundryl Burned Tears
Imrahl, a warrior of the Khundryl Burned Tears
Topper, the Clawmaster

MARINES OF THE 9th COMPANY, 8th LEGION
Lieutenant Ranal
Sergeant Strings
Sergeant Gesler
Sergeant Borduke
Corporal Tarr
Corporal Stormy
Corporal Hubb
Bottle, a squad mage
Smiles
Koryk, a half-Seti soldier
Cuttle, a sapper
Truth
Pella
Tavos Pond
Sands
Balgrid
Ibb
Maybe
Lutes

**SELECTED HEAVY INFANTRY OF THE 9th COMPANY, 8th LEGION**

Sergeant Mosel
Sergeant Sobelone
Sergeant Tugg
Flashwit
Uru Hela
Bowl
Shortnose

**SELECTED MEDIUM INFANTRY OF THE 9th COMPANY, 8th LEGION**

Sergeant Balm
Sergeant Moak
Sergeant Thorn Tissy
Corporal Deadsmell
Corporal Burnt
Corporal Tulip
Throatslitter
Widdershins
Galt
Lobe
Stacker
Ramp
Able

OTHER SOLDIERS OF THE MALAZAN EMPIRE

Sergeant Cord, 2nd Company, Ashok Regiment
Ebron, 5th squad, mage
Limp, 5th squad
Bell, 5th squad
Corporal Shard, 5th squad
Captain Kindly, 2nd Company
Lieutenant Pores, 2nd Company
Jibb, Ehrlitan Guard
Gullstream, Ehrlitan Guard
Scrawl, Ehrlitan Guard

Master Sergeant Braven Tooth, Malaz City Garrison
Captain Irriz, renegade
Sinn, refugee
Gentur
Mudslinger Hawl

NATHII

Slavemaster Silgar
Damisk
Balantis
Astabb
Borrug

OTHERS ON GENABACRIS

Torvald Nom
Calm
Ganal

SHA'IR'S ARMY OF THE APOCALYPSE

Sha'ik, The Chosen One of the Whirlwind Goddess (once Felisin of House Paran)
Felisin Younger, her adopted daughter
Toblakai
Leoman of the Flails
High Mage L'oric
High Mage Bidithal
High Mage Febryl
Heboric Ghost Hands
Kamist Reloe, Korbolo Dom's mage
Henaras, a sorceress
Fayelle, a sorceress
Mathok, Warleader of the Desert Tribes
T'morol, his bodyguard
Corabb Bhilan Thenu'ulas, an officer in Leoman's company
Scillara, a camp follower
Duryl, a messenger
Ethume, a corporal
Korbolo Dom, a renegade Napan
Kasanal, his hired assassin

OTHERS

Kalam Mekhar, an assassin
Trull Sengar, a Tiste Edur
Onrack, a T'lan Imass
Cutter, an assassin (also known as Crokus)
Apsalar, an assassin
Rellock, Apsalar's father
Cotillion, Patron of Assassins
Traveller
Rood, a Hound of Shadow
Blind, a Hound of Shadow
Darist, a Tiste Andii
Ba'ienrok (Keeper), a hermit
Ibra Gholan, a T'lan Imass Clan Leader
Monok Ochem, a Bonecaster of the Logros T'lan Imass
Haran Epal, a T'lan Imass
Olar Shayn, a T'lan Imass
Greyfrog, a demon familiar
Apt, a matron demon (Aptorian) of Shadow
Azalan, a demon of Shadow
Panek, a child of Shadow
Mebra, a spy in Ehrlitan
Iskaral Pust, a priest of Shadow
Mogora, his D'ivers wife
Cynnigig, a Jaghut
Phyrlis, a Jaghut
Aramala, a Jaghut
Icarium, a Jhag
Mappo Runt, a Trell
Jorrude, a Tiste Liosan Seneschal
Malachar, a Tiste Liosan
Enias, a Tiste Liosan
Orenas, a Tiste Liosan
PROLOGUE

Verge of the Nascent, the 943rd Day of the Search
1159 Burn's Sleep

Grey, bloated and pocked, the bodies lined the silt-laden shoreline for as far as the eye could see. Heaped like driftwood by the rising water, bobbing and rolling on the edges, the putrefying flesh seethed with black-shelled, ten-legged crabs. The coin-sized creatures had scarcely begun to make inroads on the bounteous feast the warren's sundering had laid before them.

The sea mirrored the low sky's hue. Dull, patched pewter above and below, broken only by the deeper grey of silts and, thirty strokes of the oar distant, the smeared ochre tones of the barely visible upper levels of a city's inundated buildings. The storms had passed, the waters were calm amidst the wreckage of a drowned world.

Short, squat had been the inhabitants. Flat-featured, the pale hair left long and loose. Their world had been a cold one, given the thick-padded clothing they had worn. But with the sundering that had changed, cataclysmically. The air was sultry, damp and now foul with the reek of decay.

The sea had been born of a river on another realm. A massive, wide and probably continent-spanning artery of fresh water, heavy with a plain's silts, the murky depths home to huge catfish and wagon-wheel-sized spiders, its shallows crowded with the crabs and carnivorous, rootless plants. The river had poured its torrential volume onto this vast, level landscape. Days, then weeks, then months.

Storms, conjured by the volatile clash of tropical air-streams with the resident temperate climate, had driven the flood on beneath shrieking winds, and before the inexorably rising waters came deadly plagues to take those who had not drowned.

Somehow, the rent had closed sometime in the night just past. The river from another realm had been returned to its original path.

The shoreline ahead probably did not deserve the word, but nothing else came to Trull Sengar's mind as he was dragged along its verge. The beach was nothing more than silt, heaped against a huge wall that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. The wall had withstood the flood, though water now streamed down it on the opposite side.

Bodies on his left, a sheer drop of seven, maybe eight man-heights to his right, the top of the wall itself slightly less than thirty paces across; that it held back an entire sea whispered of sorcery. The broad, flat stones underfoot were smeared with mud, but already drying in the heat, dun-coloured insects dancing on its surface, leaping from the path of Trull Sengar and his captors.

Trull still experienced difficulty comprehending that notion. Captors. A word he struggled with. They were his brothers, after all. Kin. Faces he had known all his life, faces he had seen smile, and laugh, and faces – at times – filled with a grief that had mirrored his own. He had stood at their sides through all that had happened, the glorious triumphs, the soul-wrenching losses.

Captors.

There were no smiles, now. No laughter. The expressions of those who held him were fixed and cold.

What we have come to.

The march ended. Hands pushed Trull Sengar down, heedless of his bruises, the cuts and the gouges that still leaked blood. Massive iron rings had been set, for some unknown purpose, by this world's now-dead
inhabitants, along the top of the wall, anchored in the heart of the huge stone blocks. The rings were evenly spaced down the wall's length, at intervals of fifteen or so paces, for as far as Trull could see.

Now, those rings had found a new function.

Chains were wrapped around Trull Sengar, shackles hammered into place on his wrists and ankles. A studded girdle was cinched painfully tight about his midriff, the chains drawn through iron loops and pulled taut to pin him down beside the iron ring. A hinged metal press was affixed to his jaw, his mouth forced open and the plate pushed in and locked in place over his tongue.

The Shorning followed. A dagger inscribed a circle on his forehead, followed by a jagged slash to break that circle, the point pushed deep enough to gouge the bone. Ash was rubbed into the wounds. His long single braid was removed with rough hacks that made a bloody mess of his nape. A thick, cloying unguent was then smeared through his remaining hair, massaged down to the pate. Within a few hours, the rest of his hair would fall away, leaving him permanently bald.

The Shorning was an absolute thing, an irreversible act of severance. He was now outcast. To his brothers, he had ceased to exist. He would not be mourned. His deeds would vanish from memory along with his name. His mother and father would have birthed one less child. This was, for his people, the most dire punishment—worse than execution by far.

Yet, Trull Sengar had committed no crime.

*And this is what we have come to.*

They stood above him, perhaps only now comprehending what they had done.

A familiar voice broke the silence. 'We will speak of him now, and once we have left this place, he will cease to be our brother.'

'We will speak of him now,' the others intoned, then one added, 'He betrayed you.'

The first voice was cool, revealing nothing of the gloat that Trull Sengar knew would be there. 'You say he betrayed me.'

'He did, brother.'

'What proof do you have?'

'By his own tongue.'

'Is it just you who claims to have heard such betrayal spoken?'

'No, I too heard it, brother.'

'And I.'

'And what did our brother say to you all?'

'He said that you had severed your blood from ours.'

'That you now served a hidden master.'

'That your ambition would lead us all to our deaths—'

'Our entire people.'

'He spoke against me, then.'

'He did.'

'By his own tongue, he accused me of betraying our people.'
'He did.'

'And have I? Let us consider this charge. The southlands are aflame. The enemy's armies have fled. The enemy now kneels before us, and begs to be our slaves. From nothing, was forged an empire. And still our strength grows. Yet. To grow stronger, what must you, my brothers, do?'

'We must search.'

'Aye. And when you find what must be sought?'

'We must deliver. To you, brother.'

'Do you see the need for this?'

'We do.'

'Do you understand the sacrifice I make, for you, for our people, for our future?'

'We do.'

'Yet, even as you searched, this man, our once-brother, spoke against me.'

'He did.'

'Worse, he spoke to defend the new enemies we had found.'

'He did. He called them the Pure Kin, and said we should not kill them.'

'And, had they been in truth Pure Kin, then . . . '

'They would not have died so easily.'

'Thus.'

'He betrayed you, brother.'

'He betrayed us all.'

There was silence. Ah, now you would share out this crime of yours. And they hesitate.

'He betrayed us all, did he not, brothers?'

'Yes.' The word arrived rough, beneath the breath, mumbled – a chorus of dubious uncertainty.

No-one spoke for a long moment, then, savage with barely bridled anger: 'Thus, brothers. And should we not heed this danger? This threat of betrayal, this poison, this plague that seeks to tear our family apart? Will it spread? Will we come here yet again? We must be vigilant, brothers. Within ourselves. With each other. Now, we have spoken of him. And now, he is gone.'

'He is gone.'

'He never existed.'

'He never existed.'

'Let us leave this place, then.'

'Yes, let us leave.'

Trull Sengar listened until he could no more hear their boots on the stones, nor feel the tremble of their dwindling steps. He was alone, unable to move, seeing only the mud-smeared stone at the base of the iron ring.

The sea rustled the corpses along the shoreline. Crabs scuttled. Water continued to seep through the mortar,
insinuate the Cyclopean wall with the voice of muttering ghosts, and flow down on the other side.

Among his people, it was a long-known truth, perhaps the only truth, that Nature fought but one eternal war. One foe. That, further, to understand this was to understand the world. Every world.

\textit{Nature has but one enemy.}

\textit{And that is imbalance.}

The wall held the sea.

\textit{And there are two meanings to this. My brothers, can you not see the truth of that? Two meanings. The wall holds the sea.}

\textit{For now.}

This was a flood that would not be denied. The deluge had but just begun – something his brothers could not understand, would, perhaps, never understand.

Drowning was common among his people. Drowning was not feared. And so, Trull Sengar would drown. Soon.

And before long, he suspected, his entire people would join him.

His brother had shattered the balance.

\textit{And Nature shall not abide.}
BOOK ONE

FACES IN THE ROCK
The slower the river, the redder it runs.

Nathii saying
CHAPTER ONE

Children from a dark house
choose shadowed paths.

Nathii folk saying

The dog had savaged a woman, an old man and a child before the warriors drove it into an abandoned kiln at the edge of the village. The beast had never before displayed an uncertain loyalty. It had guarded the Uryd lands with fierce zeal, one with its kin in its harsh, but just, duties. There were no wounds on its body that might have festered and so allowed the spirit of madness into its veins. Nor was the dog possessed by the foaming sickness. Its position in the village pack had not been challenged. Indeed, there was nothing, nothing at all, to give cause to the sudden turn.

The warriors pinned the animal to the rounded back wall of the clay kiln with spears, stabbing at the snapping, shrieking beast until it was dead. When they withdrew their spears they saw the shafts chewed and slick with spit and blood; they saw iron dented and scored.

Madness, they knew, could remain hidden, buried far beneath the surface, a subtle flavour turning blood into something bitter. The shamans examined the three victims; two had already died of their wounds, but the child still clung to life.

In solemn procession he was carried by his father to the Faces in the Rock, laid down in the glade before the Seven Gods of the Teblor, and left there.

He died a short while later. Alone in his pain before the hard visages carved into the cliff-face.

This was not an unexpected fate. The child, after all, had been too young to pray.

All of this, of course, happened centuries past.

Long before the Seven Gods opened their eyes.

Urugal the Woven's Year
1159 Burn's Sleep

They were glorious tales. Farms in flames, children dragged behind horses for leagues. The trophies of that day, so long ago, cluttered the low walls of his grandfather's longhouse. Scarred skull-pates, frail-looking mandibles. Odd fragments of clothing made of some unknown material, now smoke-blackened and tattered. Small ears nailed to every wooden post that reached up to the thatched roof.

Evidence that Silver Lake was real, that it existed in truth, beyond the forest-clad mountains, down through hidden passes, a week – perhaps two – distant from the lands of the Uryd clan. The way itself was fraught, passing through territories held by the Sunyd and Rathyd clans, a journey that was itself a tale of legendary proportions. Moving silent and unseen through enemy camps, shifting the hearthstones to deliver deepest insult, eluding the hunters and trackers day and night until the borderlands were reached, then crossed – the vista ahead unknown, its riches not even yet dreamed of.

Karsa Orlong lived and breathed his grandfather's tales. They stood like a legion, defiant and fierce, before the pallid, empty legacy of Synyg – Pahlk's son and Karsa's father. Synyg, who had done nothing in his life, who tended his horses in his valley and had not once ventured into hostile lands. Synyg, who was both his father's and his son's greatest shame.

True, Synyg had more than once defended his herd of horses from raiders from other clans, and defended
well, with honourable ferocity and admirable skill. But this was only to be expected from those of Uryd blood. Urugal the Woven was the clan's Face in the Rock, and Urugal was counted among the fiercest of the seven gods. The other clans had reason to fear the Uryd.

Nor had Synyg proved less than masterful in training his only son in the Fighting Dances. Karsa's skill with the bloodwood blade far surpassed his years. He was counted among the finest warriors of the clan. While the Uryd disdained use of the bow, they excelled with spear and atlatl, with the toothed-disc and the black-rope, and Synyg had taught his son an impressive efficiency with these weapons as well.

None the less, such training was to be expected from any father in the Uryd clan. Karsa could find no reason for pride in such things. The Fighting Dances were but preparation, after all. Glory was found in all that followed, in the contests, the raids, in the vicious perpetuation of feuds.

Karsa would not do as his father had done. He would not do ... nothing. No, he would walk his grandfather's path. More closely than anyone might imagine. Too much of the clan's reputation lived only in the past. The Uryd had grown complacent in their position of pre-eminence among the Teblor. Pahlk had muttered that truth more than once, the nights when his bones ached from old wounds and the shame that was his son burned deepest.

A return to the old ways. And I, Karsa Orlong, shall had. Delum Thord is with me. As is Bairoth Gild. All in our first year of scarring. We have counted coup. We have slain enemies. Stolen horses. Shifted the hearthstones of the Kellyd and the Buryd.

And now, with the new moon and in the year of your naming, Urugal, we shall weave our way to Silver Lake. To slay the children who dwell there.

He remained on his knees in the glade, head bowed beneath the Faces in the Rock, knowing that Urugal's visage, high on the cliff-face, mirrored his own savage desire; and that those of the other gods, all with their own clans barring 'Siballe, who was the Unfound, glared down upon Karsa with envy and hate. None of their children knelt before them, after all, to voice such bold vows.

Complacency plagued all the clans of the Teblor, Karsa suspected. The world beyond the mountains dared not encroach, had not attempted to do so in decades. No visitors ventured into Teblor lands. Nor had the Teblor themselves gazed out beyond the borderlands with dark hunger, as they had often done generations past. The last man to have led a raid into foreign territory had been his grandfather. To the shores of Silver Lake, where farms squatted like rotted mushrooms and children scurried like mice. Back then, there had been two farms, a half-dozen outbuildings. Now, Karsa believed, there would be more. Three, even four farms. Even Pahlk's day of slaughter would pale to that delivered by Karsa, Delum and Bairoth.

So I vow, beloved Urugal. And I shall deliver unto you a feast of trophies such as never before blackened the soil of this glade. Enough, perhaps, to free you from the stone itself, so that once more you will stride in our midst, a deliverer of death upon all our enemies.

I, Karsa Orlong, grandson of Pahlk Orlong, so swear. And, should you doubt, Urugal, know that we leave this very night. The journey begins with the descent of this very sun. And, as each day's sun births the sun of the next day, so shall it look down upon three warriors of the Uryd clan, leading their destriers through the passes, down into the unknown lands. And Silver Lake shall, after more than four centuries, once again tremble to the coming of the Teblor.

Karsa slowly lifted his head, eyes travelling up the battered cliff-face, to find the harsh, bestial face of Urugal, there, among its kin. The pitted gaze seemed fixed upon him and Karsa thought he saw avid pleasure in those dark pools. Indeed, he was certain of it, and would describe it as truth to Delum and Bairoth, and to Dayliss, so that she might voice her blessing, for he so wished her blessing, her cold words ... I, Dayliss, yet to find a family's name, bless you, Karsa Orlong, on your dire raid. May you slay a legion of children. May their cries feed your dreams. May their blood give you thirst for more. May flames haunt the path of your life. May you return to me, a thousand deaths upon your soul, and take me as your wife.

She might indeed so bless him. A first yet undeniable expression of her interest in him. Not Bairoth – she but toyed with Bairoth as any young unwedded woman might, for amusement. Her Knife of Night remained
sheathed, of course, for Bairoth lacked cold ambition – a flaw he might deny, yet the truth was plain that he did not lead, only follow, and Dayliss would not settle for that.

No, she would be his, Karsa's, upon his return, the culmination of his triumph that was the raid on Silver Lake. For him, and him alone, Dayliss would unsheathe her Knife of Night.

*May you slay a legion of children. May flames haunt the path of your life.*

Karsa straightened. No wind rustled the leaves of the birch trees encircling the glade. The air was heavy, a lowland air that had climbed its way into the mountains in the wake of the marching sun, and now, with light fading, it was trapped in the glade before the Faces in the Rock. Like a breath of the gods, soon to seep into the rotting soil.

There was no doubt in Karsa's mind that Urugal was present, as close behind the stone skin of his face as he had ever been. Drawn by the power of Karsa's vow, by the promise of a return to glory. So too hovered the other gods. Beroke Soft Voice, Kahlb the Silent Hunter, Thenik the Shattered, Halad Rack Bearer, Imroth the Cruel and 'Siballe the Unfound, all awakened once more and eager for blood.

*And I have but just begun on this path. Newly arrived to my eightieth year of life, finally a warrior in truth. I have heard the oldest words, the whispers, of the One, who will unite the Teblor, who will bind the clans one and all and lead them into the lowlands and so begin the War of the People. These whispers, they are the voice of promise, and that voice is mine.*

Hidden birds announced the coming of dusk. It was time to leave. Delum and Bairoth awaited him in the village. And Dayliss, silent yet holding to the words she would speak to him.

*Bairoth will be furious.*

The pocket of warm air in the glade lingered long after Karsa Orlong's departure. The soft, boggy soil was slow to yield the imprint of his knees, his moccasined feet, and the sun's deepening glare continued to paint the harsh features of the gods even as shadows filled the glade itself.

Seven figures rose from the ground, skin wrinkled and stained dark brown over withered muscles and heavy bones, hair red as ochre and dripping stagnant, black water. Some were missing limbs, others stood on splintered, shattered or mangled legs. One lacked a lower jaw while another's left cheekbone and brow were crushed flat, obliterating the eye-socket. Each of the seven, broken in some way. Imperfect. Flawed.

Somewhere behind the wall of rock was a sealed cavern that had been their tomb for a span of centuries, a shortlived imprisonment as it turned out. None had expected their resurrection. Too shattered to remain with their kin, they had been left behind, as was the custom of their kind. Failure's sentence was abandonment, an eternity of immobility. When failure was honourable, their sentient remnants would be placed open to the sky, to vistas, to the outside world, so that they might find peace in watching the passing of eons. But, for these seven, failure had not been honourable. Thus, the darkness of a tomb had been their sentence. They had felt no bitterness at that.

That dark gift came later, from outside their unlit prison, and with it, opportunity.

All that was required was the breaking of a vow, and the swearing of fealty to another. The reward: rebirth, and freedom.

Their kin had marked this place of internment, with carved faces each a likeness, mocking the vista with blank, blind eyes. They had spoken their names to close the ritual of binding, names that lingered in this place with a power sufficient to twist the minds of the shamans of the people who had found refuge in these mountains, and on the plateau with the ancient name of Laederon.

The seven were silent and motionless in the glade as the dusk deepened. Six were waiting for one to speak, yet that one was in no hurry. Freedom was raw exultation and, even limited as it was to this glade, the emotion persisted still. It would not be long, now, until that freedom would break free of its last chains – the truncated
range of vision from the eye-sockets carved into the rock. Service to the new master promised travel, an entire
world to rediscover and countless deaths to deliver.

Urual, whose name meant Mossy Bone and who was known to the Teblor as Urugal, finally spoke. 'He will
suffice.'

Sin'b'alle – Lichen For Moss – who was ‘Siballe the Unfound, did not hide the scepticism in her voice. 'You
place too much faith in these fallen Teblor. Teblor. They know naught, even their true name.'

'Be glad that they do not,' said Ber'ok, his voice a rough rasp through a crushed throat. Neck twisted and head
leaning to one side, he was forced to turn his entire body to stare at the rock-face. 'In any case, you have your
own children, Sin'b'alle, who are the bearers of the truth. For the others, lost history is best left lost, for our
purposes. Their ignorance is our greatest weapon.'

'Dead Ash Tree speaks the truth,' Urual said. 'We could not have so twisted their faith were they cognizant of
their legacy.'

Sin'b'alle shrugged disdainfully. 'The one named Pahlk also ... sufficed. In your opinion, Urual. A worthy
prospect to lead my children, it seemed. Yet he failed.'

'Our fault, not his,' Haran'alle growled. 'We were impatient, too confident of our efficacy. Sundering the Vow
stole much of our power—'

'Yet what has our new master given of his, Antler From Summer?' Thek 1st demanded. 'Naught but a trickle.'

'And what do you expect?' Urual enquired in a quiet tone. 'He recovers from his ordeals as we do from ours.'

Emroth spoke, her voice like silk. 'So you believe, Mossy Bone, that this grandson of Pahlk will carve for us
our path to freedom.

'I do.'

'And if we are disappointed yet again?'

'Then we begin anew. Bairoth's child in Dayliss's womb.'

Emroth hissed. 'Another century of waiting! Damn these long-lived Teblor!'

'A century is as nothing—'

'As nothing, yet as everything, Mossy Bone! And you know precisely what I mean.'

Urual studied the woman, who was aptly named Fanged Skeleton, recalling her Soletaken proclivities, and
its hunger that had so clearly led to their failure so long ago. 'The year of my name has returned,' he said.
'Among us all, who has led a clan of the Teblor as far along our path as I have? You, Fanged Skeleton? Lichen
For Moss? Spear Leg?'

No-one spoke.

Then finally Dead Ash Tree made a sound that might have been a soft laugh. 'We are as Red Moss, silent.
The way will be opened. So our new master has promised. He finds his power. Urual's chosen warrior already
possesses a score of souls in his slayer's train. Teblor souls at that. Recall, also, that Pahlk journeyed alone. Yet
Karsa shall have two formidable warriors flanking him. Should he die, there is always Bairoth, or Delum.'

'Bairoth is too clever,' Emroth snarled. 'He takes after Pahlk's son, his uncle. Worse, his ambition is only for
himself. He feigns to follow Karsa, yet has his hand on Karsa's back.'

'And mine on his,' Urual murmured. 'Night is almost upon us. We must return to our tomb.' The ancient
warrior turned. 'Fanged Skeleton, remain close to the child in Dayliss's womb.'

'She feeds from my breast even now,' Emroth asserted.
'A girl-child?'

'In flesh only. What I make within is neither a girl, nor a child.'

'Good.'

The seven figures returned to the earth as the first stars of night blinked awake in the sky overhead. Blinked awake, and looked down upon a glade where no gods dwelt. Where no gods had ever dwelt.

The village was situated on the stony bank of Laderii River, a mountain-fed, torrential flow of bitter-cold water that cut a valley through the conifer forest on its way down to some distant sea. The houses were built with boulder foundations and rough-hewn cedar walls, the roofs thick-matted, humped and overgrown with moss. Along the bank rose latticed frames thick with strips of drying fish. Beyond a fringe of woods, clearings had been cut to provide pasture for horses.

Mist-dimmed firelight flickered through the trees as Karsa reached his father's house, passing the dozen horses standing silent and motionless in the glade. Their only threat came from raiders, for these beasts were bred killers and the mountain wolves had long since learned to avoid the huge animals. Occasionally a rust-collared bear would venture down from its mountain haunt, but this usually coincided with salmon runs and the creatures showed little interest in challenging the horses, the village's dogs, or its fearless warriors.

Synyg was in the training kraal, grooming Havok, his prized destrier. Karsa could feel the animal's heat as he approached, though it was little more than a black mass in the darkness. 'Red Eye still wanders loose,' Karsa growled. 'You will do nothing for your son?'

His father continued grooming Havok. 'Red Eye is too young for such a journey, as I have said before—'

'Yet he is mine, and so I shall ride him.'

'No. He lacks independence, and has not yet ridden with the mounts of Bairoth and Delum. You will lodge a thorn in his nerves.'

'So I am to walk?'

'I give you Havok, my son. He has been softly run this night and still wears the bridle. Go collect your gear, before he cools too much.'

Karsa said nothing. He was in truth astonished. He swung about and made his way to the house. His father had slung his pack from a ridgepole near the doorway to keep it dry. His bloodwood sword hung in its harness beside it, newly oiled, the Uryd warcrest freshly painted on the broad blade. Karsa drew the weapon down and strapped the harness in place, the sword's leather-wrapped two-handed grip jutting over his left shoulder. The pack would ride Havok's shoulders, affixed to the stirrup-rig, though Karsa's knees would take most of the weight.

Teblor horse-trappings did not include a rider's seat; a warrior rode against flesh, stirrups high, the bulk of his weight directly behind the mount's shoulders. Lowlander trophies included saddles, which revealed, when positioned on the smaller lowlander horses, a clear shifting of weight to the back. But a true destrier needed its hindquarters free of extra weight, to ensure the swiftness of its kicks. More, a warrior must needs protect his mount's neck and head, with sword and, if necessary, vambraced forearms.

Karsa returned to where his father and Havok waited.

'Bairoth and Delum await you at the ford,' Synyg said.

'Dayliss?'

Karsa could see nothing of his father's expression as he replied tonelessly, 'Dayliss voiced her blessing to Bairoth after you'd set out for the Faces in the Rock.'
'She blessed Bairoth?'

'She did.'

'It seems I misjudged her,' Karsa said, struggling against an unfamiliar stricture that tightened his voice.

'Easy to do, for she is a woman.'

'And you, Father? Will you give me your blessing?'

Synyg handed Karsa the lone rein and turned away. 'Pahlk has already done so. Be satisfied with that.'

'Pahlk is not my father!'

Synyg paused in the darkness, seemed to consider, then said, 'No, he is not.'

'Then will you bless me?'

'What would you have me bless, son? The Seven Gods who are a lie? The glory that is empty? Will I be pleased in your slaying of children? In the trophies you will tie to your belt? My father, Pahlk, would polish bright his own youth, for he is of that age. What were his words of blessing, Karsa? That you surpass his achievements? I imagine not. Consider his words carefully, and I expect you will find that they served him more than you.'

"'Pahlk, Finder of the Path that you shall follow, blesses your journey." Such were his words.'

Synyg was silent for a moment, and when he spoke his son could hear the grim smile though he could not see it. 'As I said.'

'Mother would have blessed me,' Karsa snapped.

'As a mother must. But her heart would have been heavy. Go, then, son. Your companions await you.'

With a snarl, Karsa swung himself onto the destrier's broad back. Havok swung his head about at the unfamiliar seating, then snorted.

Synyg spoke from the gloom. 'He dislikes carrying anger. Calm yourself, son.'

'A warhorse afraid of anger is next to useless. Havok shall have to learn who rides him now.' At that, Karsa drew a leg back and with a flick of the single rein swung the destrier smartly round. A gesture with his rein hand sent the horse forward onto the trail.

Four blood-posts, each marking one of Karsa's sacrificed siblings, lined the path leading to the village. Unlike others, Synyg had left the carved posts undorned; he had only gone so far as to cut the glyphs naming his three sons and one daughter given to the Faces in the Rock, followed by a splash of kin blood which had not lasted much beyond the first rain. Instead of braids winding up the man-high posts to a feathered and gut-knotted headdress at the peak, only vines entwined the weathered wood, and the blunted top was smeared with bird droppings.

Karsa knew the memory of his siblings deserved more, and he resolved to carry their names close to his lips at the moment of attack, that he might slay with their cries sharp in the air. His voice would be their voice, when that time arrived. They had suffered their father's neglect for far too long.

The trail widened, flanked by old stumps and low-spreading juniper. Ahead, the lurid glare of hearths amidst dark, squat, conical houses glimmered through the woodsmoke haze. Near one of those firepits waited two mounted figures. A third shape, on foot, stood wrapped in furs to one side. Dayliss. She blessed Bairoth Gild, and now comes to see him off.

Karsa rode up to them, holding Havok back to a lazy lope. He was the leader, and he would make the truth of that plain. Bairoth and Delum awaited him, after all, and which of the three had gone to the Faces in the Rock? Dayliss had blessed a follower. Had Karsa held himself too aloof? Yet such was the burden of those who
commanded. She must have understood that. It made no sense.

He halted his horse before them, was silent.

Bairoth was a heavier man, though not as tall as Karsa or, indeed, Delum. He possessed a bear-like quality that he had long since recognized and had come to self-consciously affect. He rolled his shoulders now, as if loosening them for the journey, and grinned. 'A bold beginning, brother,' he rumbled, 'the theft of your father's horse.'

'I did not steal him, Bairoth. Synyg gave me both Havok and his blessing.'

'A night of miracles, it seems. And did Urugal stride out from the rock to kiss your brow as well, Karsa Orlong?'

Dayliss snorted at that.

If he had indeed stridden onto mortal ground, he would have found but one of us three standing before him.

To Bairoth's jibe Karsa said nothing. He slowly swung his gaze to Dayliss. 'You have blessed Bairoth?'

Her shrug was dismissive.

'I grieve,' Karsa said, 'your loss of courage.'

Her eyes snapped to his with sudden fury.

Smiling, Karsa turned back to Bairoth and Delum. "The stars wheel. Let us ride."

But Bairoth ignored the words and instead of voicing the ritual reply he growled, 'I'll chosen, to unleash your wounded pride on her. Dayliss is to be my wife upon our return. To strike at her is to strike at me.'

Karsa went motionless. 'But Bairoth,' he said, low and smooth, 'I strike where I will. A failing of courage can spread like a disease – has her blessing settled upon you as a curse? I am warleader. I invite you to challenge me, now, before we quit our home.'

Bairoth hunched his shoulders, slowly leaned forward. 'It is no failing of courage,' he grated, 'that stays my hand, Karsa Orlong—'

'I am pleased to hear it. "The stars wheel. Let us ride."'

Scowling at the interruption, Bairoth made to say something more, then stopped. He smiled, relaxing once again. He glanced over at Dayliss and nodded, as if silently reaffirming a secret, then intoned, "The stars wheel. Lead us, Warleader, into glory."

Delum, who had watched all in silence, his face empty of expression, now spoke in turn. ' "Lead us, Warleader, into glory."

Karsa in front, the three warriors rode the length of the village. The tribe's elders had spoken against the journey, so no-one came out to watch them depart. Yet Karsa knew that none could escape hearing them pass, and he knew that, one day, they would come to regret that they had been witness to nothing more than the heavy, muffled thump of hoofs. None the less, he wished dearly for a witness other than Dayliss. Not even Pahlk had appeared.

Yet I feel as if we are indeed being watched. By the Seven perhaps. Urugal, risen to the height of the stars, riding the current of the wheel, gazing down upon us now. Hear me, Urugal! I, Karsa Orlong, shall slay for you a thousand children! A thousand souls to lay at your feet!

Nearby, a dog moaned in restless sleep, but did not awaken.

On the north valley side overlooking the village, at the very edge of the tree line, stood twenty-three silent witnesses to the departure of Karsa Orlong, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. Ghostly in the darkness between
the broadleafed trees, they waited, motionless, until long after the three warriors had passed out of sight down
the eastern track.

Uryd born. Uryd sacrificed, they were blood-kin to Karsa, Bairoth and Delum. In their fourth month of life
they had each been given to the Faces in the Rock, laid down by their mothers in the glade at sunset. Offered to
the Seven's embrace, vanishing before the sun's rise. Given, one and all, to a new mother.

'Siballe's children, then and now. 'Siballe, the Unfound, the lone goddess among the Seven without a tribe of
her own. And so, she had created one, a secret tribe drawn from the six others, had taught them of their
individual blood ties – in order to link them with their unsacrificed kin. Taught them, as well, of their own
special purpose, the destiny that would belong to them and them alone.

She called them her Found, and this was the name by which they knew themselves, the name of their own
hidden tribe. Dwelling unseen in the midst of their kin, their very existence unimagined by anyone in any of the
six tribes. There were some, they knew, who might suspect, but suspicion was all they possessed. Men such as
Synyg, Karsa's father, who treated the memorial blood-posts with indifference, if not contempt. Such men
usually posed no real threat, although on occasion more extreme measures proved necessary when true risk was
perceived. Such as with Karsa's mother.

The twenty-three Found who stood witness to the beginning of the warriors' journey, hidden among the trees
of the valley side, were by blood the brothers and sisters of Karsa, Bairoth and Delum, yet they were strangers
as well, though at that moment that detail seemed to matter little.

'One shall make it.' This from Bairoth's eldest brother.

Delum's twin sister shrugged in reply and said, 'We shall be here, then, upon that one's return.'

'So we shall.'

Another trait was shared by all of the Found. 'Siballe had marked her children with a savage scar, a stripping
away of flesh and muscle on the left side – from temple down to jawline – of each face, and with that
destruction the capacity for expression had been severely diminished. Features on the left were fixed in a
downturned grimace, as if in permanent dismay. In some strange manner, the physical scarring had also
stripped inflection from their voices – or perhaps 'Siballe's own toneless voice had proved an overwhelming
influence.

Thus bereft of intonation, words of hope had a way of ringing false to their own ears, sufficient to silence
those who had spoken.

One would make it.

Perhaps.

Synyg continued stirring the stew at the cookfire when the door opened behind him. A soft wheeze, a dragged
foot, the clatter of a walking stick against the doorframe. Then a harsh accusatory question.

'Did you bless your son?'

'I gave him Havok, Father.'

Somehow Pahlk filled a single word with contempt, disgust and suspicion all at once: 'Why?'

Synyg still did not turn as he listened to his father make a tortured journey to the chair closest to the hearth.
'Havok deserved a final battle, one I knew I would not give him. So.'

'So, as I thought.' Pahlk settled into the chair with a pained grunt. 'For your horse, but not for your son.'

'Are you hungry?' Synyg asked.

'I will not deny you the gesture.'
Synyg allowed himself a small, bitter smile, then reached over to collect a second bowl and set it down beside his own.

'He would batter down a mountain,' Pahlk growled, 'to see you stir from your straw.'

'What he does is not for me, Father, it is for you.'

'He perceives only the fiercest glory possible will achieve what is necessary – the inundation of the shame that is you, Synyg. You are the straggly bush between two towering trees, child of one and sire to the other. This is why he reached out to me, reached out – do you fret and chafe there in the shadows between Karsa and me? Too bad, the choice was always yours.'

Synyg filled both bowls and straightened to hand one to his father. 'The scar around an old wound feels nothing,' he said.

'To feel nothing is not a virtue.'

Smiling, Synyg sat in the other chair. 'Tell me a tale, Father, as you once did. Those days following your triumph. Tell me again of the children you killed. Of the women you cut down. Tell me of the burning homesteads, the screams of the cattle and sheep trapped in the flames. I would see those fires once more, rekindled in your eyes. Stir the ashes, Father.'

'When you speak these days, son, all I hear is that damned woman.'

'Eat, Father, lest you insult me and my home.'

'I shall.'

'You were ever a mindful guest.'

'True.'

No more words were exchanged until both men had finished their meals. Then Synyg set down his bowl. He rose and collected Pahlk's bowl as well, then, turning, he threw it into the fire.

His father's eyes widened.

Synyg stared down at him. 'Neither of us shall live to see Karsa's return. The bridge between you and me is now swept away. Come to my door again, Father, and I shall kill you.' He reached down with both hands and pulled Pahlk upright, dragged the sputtering old man to the door and without ceremony threw him outside. The walking stick followed.

They travelled the old trail that paralleled the spine of the mountains. Old rockslides obscured the path here and there, dragging firs and cedars down towards the valley below, and in these places bushes and broadleafed trees had found a foothold, making passage difficult. Two days and three nights ahead lay Rathyd lands, and of all the other Teblor tribes it was the Rathyd with whom the Uryd feuded the most. Raids and vicious murders entangled the two tribes together in a skein of hatred that stretched back centuries.

Passing unseen through Rathyd territories was not what Karsa had in mind. He intended to carve a bloody path through real and imagined insults with a vengeful blade, gathering a score or more Teblor souls to his name in the process. The two warriors riding behind him, he well knew, believed that the journey ahead would be one of stealth and subterfuge. They were, after all, but three.

But Urugal is with us, in this, his season. And we shall announce ourselves in his name, and in blood. We shall shock awake the hornets in their nest, and the Rathyd shall come to know, and fear, the name of Karsa Orlong. As will the Sunyd, in their turn.

The warhorses moved cautiously across the loose scree of a recent slide. There had been a lot of snow the past winter, more than Karsa could recall in his lifetime. Long before the Faces in the Rock awoke to proclaim
to the elders, within dreams and trances, that they had defeated the old Teblor spirits and now demanded obeisance; long before the taking of enemy souls had become foremost among Teblor aspirations, the spirits that had ruled the land and its people were the bones of rock, the flesh of earth, the hair and fur of forest and glen, and their breath was the wind of each season. Winter arrived and departed with violent storms high in the mountains, the savage exertions of the spirits in their eternal, mutual war. Summer and winter were as one: motionless and dry, but the former revealed exhaustion while the latter evinced an icy, fragile peace. Accordingly, the Teblor viewed summers with sympathy for the battle-weary spirits, while they detested winters for the weakness of the ascendant combatants, for there was no value in the illusion of peace.

Less than a score days remained in this, the season of spring. The high storms were diminishing, both in frequency and fury. Though the Faces in the Rock had long ago destroyed the old spirits and were, it seemed, indifferent to the passage of seasons, Karsa secretly envisioned himself and his two companion warriors as harbingers of one last storm. Their bloodwood swords would echo ancient rages among the unsuspecting Rathyd and Sunyd.

They cleared the recent slide. The path ahead wound down into a shallow valley with a highland meadow open to the bright afternoon sunlight.

Bairoth spoke behind Karsa. 'We should camp on the other side of this valley, Warleader. The horses need rest.'

'Perhaps your horse needs rest, Bairoth,' Karsa replied. 'You've too many feast nights on your bones. This journey shall make a warrior of you once again, I trust. Your back has known too much straw of late.' With Dayliss riding you.

Bairoth laughed, but made no other reply.

Delum called, 'My horse needs rest as well, Warleader. The glade ahead should make a good camp. There are rabbit runs here and I would set my snare.'

Karsa shrugged. 'Two weighted chains about me, then. The warcries of your stomachs leave me deafened. So be it. We shall camp.'

There would be no fire, so they ate the rabbits Delum had caught raw. Once, such fare would have been risky, for rabbits often carried diseases that could only be killed by cooking, most of them fatal to the Teblor. But since the coming of the Faces in the Rock, illnesses had vanished among the tribes. Madness, it was true, still plagued them, but this had nothing to do with what was eaten or drunk. At times, the elders had explained, the burdens laid upon a man by the Seven proved too powerful. A mind must be strong, and strength was found in faith. For the weak man, for the man who knew doubt, rules and rites could become a cage, and imprisonment led to madness.

They sat around a small pit Delum had dug for the rabbit bones, saying little through the course of the meal. Overhead, the sky slowly lost its colour, and the stars had begun their wheel. In the gathering gloom Karsa listened to Bairoth sucking at a rabbit skull. He was ever last to finish, for he left nothing and would even gnaw, on the next day, the thin layer of fat from the underside of the skin. Finally, Bairoth tossed the empty skull into the pit and sat back, licking his fingers.

'I have given,' Delum said, 'some thought as to the journey ahead. Through Rathyd and Sunyd lands. We should not take trails that set us against skyline or even bare rock. Therefore, we must take lower paths. Yet these are ones that will lead us closest to camps. We must, I think, shift our travelling to night.'

'Better, then,' Bairoth nodded, 'to count coup. To turn the hearthstones and steal feathers. Perhaps a few lone sleeping warriors can give us their souls.'

Karsa spoke. 'Hiding by day, we see little smoke to tell us where the camps are. At night, the wind swirls, so it will not help us find the hearths. The Rathyd and Sunyd are not fools. They will not build fires beneath overhangs or against rock-faces – we shall find no welcoming wash of light on stone. Also, our horses see better during the day, and are more sure-footed. We shall ride by day;' he finished.
Neither Bairoth nor Delum said anything for a moment.

Then Bairoth cleared his throat. 'We shall find ourselves in a war, Karsa.'

'We shall be as an arrow of the Lanyd in its flight through a forest, changing direction with each twig, branch and bole. We shall gather souls, Bairoth, in a roaring storm. War? Yes. Do you fear war, Bairoth Gild?'

Delum said, 'We are three, Warleader.'

'Aye, we are Karsa Orlong, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. I have faced twenty-four warriors and have slain them all. I dance without equal – would you deny it? Even the elders have spoken in awe. And you, Delum, I see eighteen tongues looped on the thong at your hip. You can read a ghost's trail, and hear a pebble roll over from twenty paces. And Bairoth, in the days when all he carried was muscle – you, Bairoth, did you not break a Buryd's spine with your bare hands? Did you not drag a warhorse down? That ferocity but sleeps within you and this journey shall awaken it once more. Any other three ... aye, glide the dark winding ways and turn hearthstones and pluck feathers and crush a few windpipes among sleeping foes. A worthy enough glory for any other three warriors. For us? No. Your warleader has spoken.'

Bairoth grinned over at Delum. 'Let us gaze upward and witness the wheel, Delum Thord, for scant few such sights remain to us.'

Karsa slowly rose. 'You follow your warleader, Bairoth Gild. You do not question him. Your faltering courage threatens to poison us all. Believe in victory, warrior, or turn back now.'

Bairoth shrugged and leaned back, stretching out his hide-wrapped legs. 'You are a great warleader, Karsa Orlong, but sadly blind to humour. I have faith that you shall indeed find the glory you seek, and that Delum and I shall shine as lesser moons, yet shine none the less. For us, it is enough. You may cease questioning that, Warleader. We are here, with you—'

'Challenging my wisdom!'

'Wisdom is not a subject we have as yet discussed,' Bairoth replied. 'We are warriors as you said, Karsa. And we are young. Wisdom belongs to old men.'

'Yes, the elders,' Karsa snapped. 'Who would not bless our journey!'

Bairoth laughed. 'That is our truth and we must carry it with us, unchanged and bitter in our hearts. But upon our return, Warleader, we shall find that that truth has changed in our absence. The blessing will have been given after all. Wait and see.'

Karsa's eyes widened. 'The elders will lie?'

'Of course they will lie. And they will expect us to accept their new truths, and we shall – no, we must, Karsa Orlong. The glory of our success must serve to bind the people together – to hold it close is not only selfish, it is potentially deadly. Think on this, Warleader. We will be returning to the village with our own claims. Aye, no doubt a few trophies with us to add proof to our tale, but if we do not share out that glory then the elders will see to it that our claims shall know the poison of disbelief.'

'Disbelief?'

'Aye. They will believe but only if they can partake of our glory. They will believe us, but only if we in turn believe them – their reshaping of the past, the blessing that was not given, now given, all the villagers lining our ride out. They were all there, or so they will tell you, and, eventually, they will themselves come to believe it, and will have the scenes carved into their minds. Does this still confuse you, Karsa? If so, then we'd best not speak of wisdom.'

'The Teblor do not play games of deceit,' Karsa growled.

Bairoth studied him for a moment, then he nodded. 'True, they do not.'
Delum pushed soil and stones into the pit. 'It is time to sleep,' he said, rising to check one last time on the hobbled horses.

Karsa eyed Bairoth. **His mind is as a Lanyd arrow in the forest, but will that aid him when our bloodwood blades are out and battlecries sound on all sides? This is what comes when muscle turns to fat and straw clings to your back. Duelling with words will win you nothing, Bairoth Gild, except perhaps that your tongue will not dry out as quickly on a Rathyd warrior's belt.**

'At least eight,' Delum murmured. 'With perhaps one youth. There are indeed two hearths. They have hunted the grey bear that dwells in caves, and carry a trophy with them.'

'Meaning they are full of themselves.' Bairoth nodded. 'That's good.'

Karsa frowned at Bairoth. 'Why?'

The cast of the enemy's mind, Warleader. They will be feeling invincible, and this will make them careless. Do they have horses, Delum?'

'No. Grey bears know the sound of hoofs too well. If they brought dogs on the hunt, none survived for the return journey.'

'Better still.'

They had dismounted, and now crouched near the edge of the tree line. Delum had slipped ahead to scout the Rathyd encampment. His passage through the tall grasses, knee-high stumps and brush of the slope beyond the trees had not stirred a single blade or leaf.

The sun was high overhead, the air dry, hot and motionless.

'Eight,' Bairoth said. He grinned at Karsa. 'And a youth. He should be taken first.'

*To make the survivors know shame. He expects us to lose.* 'Leave him to me,' Karsa said. 'My charge will be fierce, and will take me to the other side of the camp. The warriors still standing will turn to face me one and all. That is when you two will charge.'

Delum blinked. 'You would have us strike from behind?'

'To even the numbers, yes. Then we shall each settle to our duels.'

'Will you dodge and duck in your pass?' Bairoth asked, his eyes glittering.

'No, I will strike.'

'They will bind you, then, Warleader, and you shall fail in reaching the far side.'

'I will not be bound, Bairoth Gild.'

'There are nine of them.'

'Then watch me dance.'

Delum asked, 'Why do we not use our horses, Warleader?'

'I am tired of talking. Follow, but at a slower pace.'

Bairoth and Delum shared an unreadable look, then Bairoth shrugged. 'We will be your witnesses, then.'

Karsa unslung his bloodwood sword, closing both hands around the leather-wrapped grip. The blade's wood was deep red, almost black, the glassy polish making the painted warcrest seem to float a finger's width above the surface. The weapon's edge was almost translucent, where the blood-oil rubbed into the grain had hardened, coming to replace the wood. There were no nicks or notches along the edge, only a slight rippling of the line
where damage had repaired itself, for blood-oil clung to its memory and would little tolerate denting or scarring. Karsa held the weapon out before him, then slipped forward through the high grasses, quickening into the dance as he went.

Reaching the boar trail leading into the forest that Delum had pointed out, he hunched lower and slipped onto its hard-packed, flattened track without breaking stride. The broad, tapered sword-point seemed to lead him forward as if cutting its own silent, unerring path through the shadows and shafts of light. He picked up greater speed.

In the centre of the Rathyd camp, three of the eight adult warriors were crouched around a slab of bear meat that they had just unwrapped from a fold of deer hide. Two others sat nearby with their weapons across their thighs, rubbing the thick blood-oil into the blades. The remaining three stood speaking to one another less than three paces from the mouth of the boar trail. The youth was at the far end.

Karsa's sprint was at its peak when he reached the glade. At distances of seventy paces or less, a Teblor could run alongside a galloping warhorse. His arrival was explosive. One moment, eight warriors and one youth at rest in a clearing, the next, the tops of the heads of two of the standing warriors were cut off in a single horizontal blow. Scalp and bone flew, blood and brain sprayed and spat across the face of the third Rathyd. This man reeled back, and pivoted to his left to see the return swing of Karsa's sword, as it swept under his chin, then was gone from sight. Eyes, still held wide, watched the scene tilt wildly before darkness burgeoned.

Still moving, Karsa leapt high to avoid the warrior's head as it thudded and rolled across the ground.

The Rathyd who had been oiling their swords had already straightened and readied their weapons. They split away from each other and darted forward to take Karsa from either side.

He laughed, twisting around to plunge among the three warriors whose bloodied hands held but butchering knives. Snapping his sword into a close-quarter guard, he ducked low. Three small blades each found their mark, slicing through leathers, skin and into muscle. Momentum propelled Karsa through the press, and he took those knives with him, spinning to rip his sword through a pair of arms, then up into an armpit, tearing the shoulder away, the scapula coming with it – a curved plate of purple bone latticed in veins attached by a skein of ligaments to a twitching arm that swung in its flight to reach skyward.

A body dived with a snarl to wrap burly arms around Karsa's legs. Still laughing, the Uryd warleader punched down with his sword, the pommel crunching through the top of the warrior's skull. The arms spasmed and fell away.

A sword hissed towards his neck from the right. Still in close-quarter guard, Karsa spun to take the blade with his own, the impact ringing both weapons with a pealing, sonorous sound.

He heard the closing step of the Rathyd behind him, felt the air cleave to the blade swinging in towards his left shoulder, and he pitched instantly down and to his right. Wheeling his own sword around, arms extending as he fell. The edge swept above and past the warrior's savage down-stroke, cut through a pair of thick wrists, then tore through abdomen, from belly-button and across, between ribcage and point of hip, then bursting clear.

Still spinning as he toppled, he renewed the swing that had been staggered by bone and flesh, twisting his shoulders to follow the blade as it passed beneath him, then around to the other side. The slash cleared the ground at a level that took the last Rathyd's left leg at the ankle. Then the ground hammered into Karsa's right shoulder. Rolling away, his sword trailing crossways across his own body, deflecting but not quite defeating a downward blow – fire tearing into his right hip – then he was beyond the warrior's reach – and the man was shrieking and stumbling an awkward retreat.

Karsa's roll brought him upright once more, into a crouch that spurted blood down his right leg, that sent stinging stabs into his left side, his back beneath his right shoulder blade, and his left thigh where the knives were still buried.

He found himself facing the youth.

No more than forty, not yet at his full height, lean of limb as the Unready often were. Eyes filled with horror.
Karsa winked, then wheeled around to close on the one-footed warrior.

His shrieks had grown frenzied, and Karsa saw that Bairoth and Delum had reached him and had joined in the game, their blades taking the other foot and both hands. The Rathyd was on the ground between them, limbs jerking and spurting blood across the trampled grass.

Karsa glanced back to see the youth fleeing towards the woods. The warleader smiled.

Bairoth and Delum began chasing the floundering Rathyd warrior about, chopping pieces from his flailing limbs.

They were angry, Karsa knew. He had left them nothing.

Ignoring his two companions and their brutal torture, he plucked the butchering knife from his thigh. Blood welled but did not spurt, telling him that no major artery or vein had been touched. The knife in his left side had skittered along ribs and lay embedded flat beneath skin and a few layers of muscle. He drew the weapon out and tossed it aside. The last knife, sunk deep into his back, was harder to reach and it took a few attempts before he managed to find a sure clasp of its smeared handle and then pull it out. A longer blade would have reached his heart. As it was, it would probably be the most irritating of the three minor wounds. The sword-cut into his hip and through part of a buttock was slightly more serious. It would have to be carefully sewn, and would make both riding and walking painful for a while.

Loss of blood or a fatal blow had silenced the dismembered Rathyd, and Karsa heard Bairoth's heavy steps approach. Another scream announced Delum's examination of the other fallen.

'Warleader.' Anger made the voice taut.

Karsa slowly turned. 'Bairoth Gild.'

The heavy warrior's face was dark. 'You let the youth escape. We must hunt him, now, and it will not be easy for these are his lands, not ours.'

'He is meant to escape,' Karsa replied.

Bairoth scowled.

'You're the clever one,' Karsa pointed out, 'why should this baffle you so?'

'He reaches his village.'

'Aye.'

'And tells of the attack. Three Uryd warriors. There is rage and frenzied preparations.' Bairoth allowed himself a small nod as he continued. 'A hunt sets out, seeking three Uryd warriors. Who are on foot. The youth is certain on this. Had the Uryd had horses, they would have used them, of course. Three against eight, to do otherwise is madness. So the hunt confines itself, in what it seeks, in its frame of thought, in all things. Three Uryd warriors, on foot.'

Delum had joined them, and now eyed Karsa without expression.

Karsa said, 'Delum Thord would speak.'

'I would, Warleader. The youth, you have placed an image in his mind. It will harden there, its colours will not fade, but sharpen. The echo of screams will become louder in his skull. Familiar faces, frozen eternal in expressions of pain. This youth, Karsa Orlong, will become an adult. And he will not be content to follow, he will lead. He must lead; and none shall challenge his fierceness, the gleaming wood of his will, the oil of his desire. Karsa Orlong, you have made an enemy for the Uryd, an enemy to pale all we have known in the past.'

'One day,' Karsa said, 'that Rathyd warleader shall kneel before me. This, I vow, here, on the blood of his kin, I so vow.'
The air was suddenly chill. Silence hung in the glade except for the muted buzz of flies.

Delum's eyes were wide, his expression one of fear.

Bairoth turned away. 'That vow shall destroy you, Karsa Orlong. No Rathyd kneels before an Uryd. Unless you prop his lifeless corpse against a tree stump. You now seek the impossible, and that is a path to madness.'

'One vow among many I have made,' Karsa said. 'And each shall be kept. Witness, if you dare.'

Bairoth paused from studying the grey bear's fur and defleshed skull – the Rathyd trophies – and glanced back at Karsa. 'Do we have a choice?'

'If you still breathe, then the answer is no, Bairoth Gild.'

'Remind me to tell you one day, Karsa Orlong.'

'Tell me of what?'

'What life is like, for those of us in your shadow.'

Delum stepped close to Karsa. 'You have wounds that need mending, Warleader.'

'Aye, but for now, only the sword-cut. We must return to our horses and ride.'

'Like a Lanyd arrow.'

'Aye, just so, Delum Thord.'

Bairoth called out, 'Karsa Orlong, I shall collect for you your trophies.'

'Thank you, Bairoth Gild. We shall take that fur and skull, as well. You and Delum may keep those.'

Delum turned to face Bairoth. 'Take them, brother. The grey bear better suits you than me.'

Bairoth nodded his thanks, then waved towards the dismembered warrior. 'His ears and tongue are yours, Delum Thord.'

'It is so, then.'

Among the Teblor, the Rathyd bred the fewest horses; despite this, there were plenty of wide runs from glade to glade down which Karsa and his companions could ride. In one of the clearings they had come upon an adult and two youths tending to six destriers. They had ridden them down, blades flashing, pausing only to collect trophies and gather up the horses, each taking two on a lead. An hour before darkness fell, they came to a fork of the trail, rode down the lower of the two for thirty paces, then released the leads and drove the Rathyd horses on. The three Uryd warriors then slipped a single, short rope around the necks of their own mounts, just above the collar bones, and with gentle, alternating tugs walked them backwards until they reached the fork, whereupon they proceeded onto the higher trail. Fifty paces ahead, Delum dismounted and backtracked to obscure their trail.

With the wheel taking shape overhead, they cut away from the rocky path and found a small clearing in which they made camp. Bairoth cut slices from the bear meat and they ate. Delum then rose to attend to the horses, using wet moss to wipe them down. The beasts were tired and left unhobbled to allow them to walk the clearing and stretch their necks.

Examining his wounds, Karsa noted that they had already begun to knit. So it was among the Teblor. Satisfied, he found his flask of blood-oil and set to repairing his weapon. Delum rejoined them and he and Bairoth followed suit.

'Tomorrow,' Karsa said, 'we leave this trail.'
'Down to the wider, easier ones in the valley?' Bairoth asked.

'If we are quick,' Delum said, 'we can pass through Rathyd land in a single day.'

'No, we lead our horses higher, onto the goat and sheep trails,' Karsa replied. 'And we reverse our path for the length of the morning. Then we ride down into the valley once more. Bairoth Gild, with the hunt out, who will remain in the village?'

The heavy man drew out his new bear cloak and wrapped it about himself before answering. 'Youths. Women. The old and the crippled.'

'Dogs?'

'No, the hunt will have taken those. So, Warleader, we attack the village.'

'Yes. Then we find the hunt's trail.'

Delum drew a deep breath and was slow in its release. 'Karsa Orlong, the village of our victims thus far is not the only village. In the first valley alone there are at least three more. Word will go out. Every warrior will ready his sword. Every dog will be unleashed and sent out into the forest. The warriors may not find us, but the dogs will.'

'And then,' Bairoth growled, 'there are three more valleys to cross.'

'Small ones,' Karsa pointed out. 'And we cross them at the south ends, a day or more hard riding from the north mouths and the heart of the Rathyd lands.'

Delum said, 'There will be such a foment of anger pursuing us, Warleader, that they will follow us into the valleys of the Sunyd.'

Karsa flipped the blade on his thighs to begin work on the other side. 'So I hope, Delum Thord. Answer me this, when last have the Sunyd seen an Uryd?'

'Your grandfather,' Bairoth said.

Karsa nodded. 'And we well know the Rathyd warcry, do we not?'

'You would start a war between the Rathyd and Sunyd?'

'Aye, Bairoth.'

The warrior slowly shook his head. 'We are not yet done with the Rathyd, Karsa Orlong. You plan too far in advance, Warleader.'

'Witnes what comes, Bairoth Gild.'

Bairoth picked up the bear skull. The lower jaw still hung from it by a single strip of gristle. He snapped it off and tossed it to one side. Then he drew out a spare bundle of leather straps. He began tightly wrapping the cheek bones, leaving long lengths dangling beneath.

Karsa watched these efforts curiously. The skull was too heavy even for Bairoth to wear as a helm. Moreover, he would need to break the bone away on the underside, where it was thickest around the hole that the spinal cord made.

Delum rose. 'I shall sleep now,' he announced, moving off.

'Karsa Orlong,' Bairoth said, 'do you have spare straps?'

'You are welcome to them,' Karsa replied, also rising. 'Be sure to sleep this night, Bairoth Gild.'

'I will.'
For the first hour of light they heard dogs in the forested valley floor below. These faded as they backtracked along a high cliffside path. When the sun was directly overhead, Delum found a downward wending trail and they began the descent.

Midway through the afternoon, they came upon stump-crowded clearings and could smell the smoke of the village. Delum dismounted and slipped ahead.

He returned a short while later. 'As you surmised, Warleader. I saw eleven elders, thrice as many women, and thirteen youths – all very young, I imagine the older ones are with the hunt. No horses. No dogs.' He climbed back onto his horse.

The three Uryd warriors readied their swords. They then each drew out their flasks of blood-oil and sprinkled a few drops around the nostrils of their destriers. Heads snapped back, muscles tensed.

'I have the right flank,' Bairoth said.

'And I the centre,' Karsa announced.

'And so I the left,' Delum said, then frowned. 'They will scatter from you, Warleader.'

'I am feeling generous today, Delum Thord. This village shall be to the glory of you and Bairoth. Be sure that no-one escapes on the other side.'

'None shall.'

'And if any woman seeks to fire a house to turn the hunt, slay her.'

'They would not be so foolish,' Bairoth said. 'If they do not resist they shall have our seed, but they shall live.'

The three removed the reins from their horses and looped them around their waists. They edged further onto their mounts' shoulders and drew their knees up.

Karsa slipped his wrist through the sword's thong and whirled the weapon once through the air to tighten it. The others did the same. Beneath him, Havok trembled.

'Lead us, Warleader,' Delum said.

A slight pressure launched Havok forward, three strides into a canter, slow and almost loping as they crossed the stump-filled glade. A slight shifting to the left led them towards the main path. Reaching it, Karsa lifted his sword into the destrier's range of vision. The beast surged into a gallop.

Seven lengthening strides brought them to the village. Karsa's companions had already split away to either side to come up behind the houses, leaving him the main artery. He saw figures there, directly ahead, heads turning. A scream rang through the air. Children scattered.

Sword lashed out, chopped down easily through young bone. Karsa glanced to his right and Havok shifted direction, hoofs kicking out to gather in and trample an elder. They plunged onward, pursuing, butchering. On the far sides of the houses, beyond the refuse trenches, more screams sounded.

Karsa reached the far end. He saw a single youth racing for the trees and drove after him. The lad carried a practice sword. Hearing the heavy thump of Havok's charge closing fast – and with the safety of the forest still too far in front of him – he wheeled.

Karsa's swing cut through practice sword then neck. A head thrust from Havok sent the youth's decapitated body sprawling.

*I lost a cousin in such a manner. Ridden down by a Rathyd. Ears and tongue taken. Body strung by one foot from a branch. The head propped beneath, smeared in excrement. The deed is answered. Answered.*

Havok slowed, then wheeled.
Karsa looked back upon the village. Bairoth and Delum had done their slaughter and were now herding the women into the clearing surrounding the village hearth.

At a trot, Havok carried him back into the village.

'The chief's own belong to me,' Karsa announced.

Bairoth and Delum nodded, and he could see their heightened spirits, from the ease with which they surrendered the privilege. Bairoth faced the women and gestured with his sword. A middle-aged, handsome woman stepped forward, followed by a younger version – a lass perhaps the same age as Dayliss. Both studied Karsa as carefully as he did them.

'Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord, take your first among the others. I will guard.'

The two warriors grinned, dismounted and plunged among the women to select one each. They vanished into separate houses, leading their prizes by the hand.

Karsa watched with raised brows.

The chief's wife snorted. 'Your warriors were not blind to the eagerness of those two,' she said.

'Their warriors, be they father or mate, will not be pleased with such eagerness,' Karsa commented. Uryd women would not—

'They will never know, Warleader,' the chief's wife replied, 'unless you tell them, and what is the likelihood of that? They will spare you no time for taunts before killing you. Ah, but I see now,' she added, stepping closer to stare up at his face. 'You thought to believe that Uryd women are different, and now you realize the lie of that. All men are fools, but now you are perhaps a little less so, as truth steals into your heart. What is your name, Warleader?'

'You talk too much,' Karsa growled, then he drew himself straight. 'I am Karsa Orlong, grandson of Pahlk—'

'Pahlk?'

'Aye.' Karsa grinned. 'I see you recall him.'

'I was a child, but yes, he is well known among us.'

'He lives still, and sleeps calm despite the curses you have laid upon his name.'

She laughed. 'Curses? There are none. Pahlk bowed his head to beg passage through our lands—'

'You lie!'

She studied him, then shrugged. 'As you say.'

One of the women cried out from one of the houses, a cry more pleasure than pain.

The chief's wife turned her head. 'How many of us will take your seed, Warleader?'

Karsa settled back. 'All of you. Eleven each.'

'And how many days will that take? You want us to cook for you as well?'

'Days? You think as an old woman. We are young. And, if need be, we have blood-oil.'

The woman's eyes widened. The others behind her began murmuring and whispering. The chief's wife spun and silenced them with a look, then she faced Karsa once more. 'You have never used blood-oil in this fashion before, have you? It is true, you will know fire in your loins. You will know stiffness for days to come. But, Warleader, you do not know what it will do to each of us women. I do, for I too was young and foolish once. Even my husband's strength could not keep my teeth from his throat, and he carries the scars still. There is more. What for you will last less than a week, haunts us for months.'
'And so,' Karsa replied, 'if we do not kill your husbands, you will upon their return. I am pleased.'

'You three will not survive the night.'

'It will be interesting, do you not think,' Karsa smiled, 'who among Bairoth, Delum and me will find need for it first.' He addressed all the women. 'I suggest to each of you to be eager, so you are not the first to fail us.'

Bairoth appeared, nodded at Karsa.

The chief's wife sighed and waved her daughter forward.

'No,' Karsa said.

The woman stopped, suddenly confused. 'But ... will you not want a child from this? Your first will carry the most seed—'

'Aye, it will. Are you past bearing age?'

After a long moment, she shook her head. 'Karsa Orlong,' she whispered, 'you invite my husband to set upon you a curse – he will burn blood on the stone lips of Imroth herself.'

'Yes, that is likely.' Karsa dismounted and approached her. 'Now, lead me to your house.'

She drew back. 'The house of my husband? Warleader – no, please, let us choose another one—'

'Your husband's house,' Karsa growled. 'I am done talking and so are you.'

An hour before dusk, and Karsa led the last of his prizes towards the house – the chief's daughter. He and Bairoth and Delum had not needed the blood-oil, a testament, Bairoth claimed, to Uryd prowess, though Karsa suspected the true honour belonged to the zeal and desperate creativity of the women of the Rathyd, and even then, the last few for each of the warriors had been peremptory.

As he drew the young woman into the gloomy house with its dying hearth, Karsa swung shut the door and dropped the latch. She turned to face him, a curious tilt to her chin.

'Mother said you were surprisingly gentle.'

He eyed her. *She is as Dayliss, yet not. There is no dark streak within this one. That is... a difference.*

'Remove your clothes.'

She quickly climbed out of the one-piece hide tunic. 'Had I been first, Karsa Orlong, I would have made home for your seed. Such is this day in my wheel of time.'

'You would have been proud?'

She paused to give him a startled look, then shook her head. 'You have slain all the children, all the elders. It will be centuries before our village recovers, and indeed it may not, for the anger of the warriors may turn them on each other, and on us women – should you escape.'

'Escape? Lie down, there, where your mother did. Karsa Orlong is not interested in escape.' He moved forward to stand over her. 'Your warriors will not be returning. The life of this village is ended, and within many of you there shall be the seed of the Uryd. Go there, all of you, to live among my people. And you and your mother, go to the village where I was born. Await me. Raise your children, my children, as Uryd.'

'You make bold claims, Karsa Orlong.'

He began removing his leathers.

'More than claims, I see,' she observed. 'No need, then, for blood-oil.'

'We will save the blood-oil, you and I, for my return.'
Her eyes widened and she leaned back as he moved down over her. In a small voice, she asked, 'Do you not wish to know my name?'

'No,' he growled. 'I will call you Dayliss.'

And he saw nothing of the shame that filled her young, beautiful face. Nor did he sense the darkness his words clawed into her soul.

Within her, as within her mother, Karsa Orlong's seed found a home.

A late storm had descended from the mountains, devouring the stars. Treetops thrashed to a wind that made no effort to reach lower, creating a roar of sound overhead and a strange calm among the boles. Lightning flickered, but the thunder's voice was long in coming.

They rode through an hour of darkness, then found an old campsite near the trail the hunt had left. The Rathyd warriors had been careless in their fury, leaving far too many signs of their passage. Delum judged that there were twelve adults and four youths on horseback in this particular party, perhaps a third of the village's entire strength. The dogs had already been set loose to range in packs on their own, and none accompanied the group the Uryd now pursued.

Karsa was well pleased. The hornets were out of the nest, yet flying blind.

They ate once more of the ageing bear meat, then Bairoth once again unwrapped the bear skull and resumed winding straps, this time around the snout, pulling them taut between the teeth. The ends left dangling were long, an arm and a half in length. Karsa now understood what Bairoth was fashioning. Often, two or three wolf skulls were employed for this particular weapon – only a man of Bairoth's strength and weight could manage the same with the skull of a grey bear. 'Bairoth Gild, what you create shall make a bright thread in the legend we are weaving.'

The man grunted. 'I care nothing for legends, Warleader. But soon, we shall be facing Rathyd on destriers.'

Karsa smiled in the darkness, said nothing.

A soft wind flowed down from upslope.

Delum lifted his head suddenly and rose in silence. 'I smell wet fur,' he said.

There had been no rain as yet.

Karsa removed his sword harness and laid the weapon down. 'Bairoth,' he whispered, 'remain here. Delum, take with you your brace of knives – leave your sword.' He rose and gestured. 'Lead.'

'Warleader,' Delum murmured. 'It is a pack, driven down from the high ground by the storm. They have no scent of us, yet their ears are sharp.'

'Do you not think,' Karsa asked, 'that they would have set to howling if they had heard us?'

Bairoth snorted. 'Delum, beneath this roar they have heard nothing.'

But Delum shook his head. 'There are high sounds and there are low sounds, Bairoth Gild, and they each travel their own stream.' He swung to Karsa. 'To your question, Warleader, this answer: possibly not, if they are unsure whether we are Uryd or Rathyd.'

Karsa grinned. 'Even better. Take me to them, Delum Thord. I have thought long on this matter of Rathyd dogs, the loosed packs. Take me to them, and keep your throwing knives close to hand.'

Havok and the other two destriers had quietly flanked the warriors during the conversation, and now all faced upslope, ears pricked forward.

After a moment's hesitation, Delum shrugged and, crouching, set off into the woods. Karsa followed.
The slope grew steeper after a score of paces. There was no path, and fallen tree trunks made traverse
difficult and slow, though thick swaths of damp moss made the passage of the two Teblor warriors virtually
noiseless. They reached a flatter shelf perhaps fifteen paces wide and ten deep, a high crack-riven cliff opposite.
A few trees leaned against the rock, grey with death. Delum scanned the cliffside, then made to move towards a
narrow, dirt-filled crevasse near the left end of the cliff that served as a game trail, but Karsa restrained him
with a hand.

He leaned close. 'How far ahead?'

'Fifty heartbeats. We've still time to make this climb—'

'No. We position ourselves here. Take that ledge to the right and have your knives ready.'

With baffled expression, Delum did as he was told. The ledge was halfway up the cliffside. Within moments
he was in place.

Karsa moved towards the game trail. A dead pine had fallen from above, taking the same path in its descent,
coming to rest half a pace to the trail's left. Karsa reached it and gave the trunk a nudge. The wood was still
sound. He quickly climbed it, then, feet resting on branches, he twisted round until he faced the flat expanse of
shelf, the game trail now almost within arm's reach to his left, the bole and cliff at his back.

Then he waited. He could not see Delum from his position unless he leaned forward, which might well pull
the tree away from the cliffside, taking him with it in a loud, probably damaging fall. He would have to trust,
therefore, that Delum would grasp what he intended, and act accordingly when the time came.

A skitter of stones down the trail.

The dogs had begun the descent.

Karsa drew a slow, deep breath and held it.

The pack's leader would not be the first. Most likely the second, a safe beat or two behind the scout.

The first dog scrambled past Karsa's position in a scatter of stones, twigs and dirt, its momentum taking it a
half-dozen paces out onto the flat shelf, where it paused, nose lifting to test the air. Hackles rising, it moved
cautiously towards the shelf's edge.

Another dog came down the trail, a larger beast, this one kicking up more detritus than the first. As its
scarred head and shoulders came into view, Karsa knew that he had found the pack's leader.

The animal reached the flat.

Just as the scout began swinging his head around.

Karsa leapt.

His hands shot out to take the leader on the neck, driving the beast down, spinning it onto its back, his left
hand closing on the throat, his right gripping both flailing, kicking front legs just above the paws.

The dog flew into a frenzy beneath him, but Karsa held firm.

More dogs tumbled in a rush down the trail, then fanned out in sudden alarm and confusion.

The leader's snarls had turned to yelps.

Savage teeth had ripped into Karsa's wrist, until he managed to push his chokehold higher under the dog's
jaw. The animal writhed, but it had already lost and they both knew it.

As did the rest of the pack.

Karsa finally glanced up to study the dogs surrounding him. At his lifting of head they all backed away – all
but one. A young, burly male, who ducked low as it crept forward.

Two of Delum's knives thudded into the animal, one in the throat and the other behind its right shoulder. The dog pitched to the ground with a strangled grunt, then lay still. The others of the pack retreated still further.

The leader had gone motionless beneath Karsa. Baring his teeth, the warrior slowly lowered himself until his cheek lay alongside the dog's jawline. Then he whispered into the animal's ear. 'You heard the deathcry, friend? That was your challenger. This should please you, yes? Now, you and your pack belong to me.' As he spoke, his tone soft and reassuring, he slowly loosened his grip on the dog's throat. A moment later, he leaned back, shifted his weight to one side, withdrawing his arm entirely, then releasing the dog's forelimbs.

The beast scrambled to its feet.

Karsa straightened, stepped close to the dog, smiling to see its tail droop.

Delum climbed down from the ledge. 'Warleader,' he said as he approached, 'I am witness to this.' He retrieved his knives.

'Delum Thord, you are both witness and participant, for I saw your knives and they were well timed.'

'The leader's rival saw his moment.'

'And you understood that.'

'We now have a pack that will fight for us.'

'Aye, Delum Thord.'

'I will go ahead of you back to Bairoth, then. The horses will need calming.'

'We shall give you a few moments.'

At the shelf's edge, Delum paused and glanced back at Karsa. 'I no longer fear the Rathyd, Karsa Orlong. Nor the Sunyd. I now believe that Urugal indeed walks with you on this journey.'

'Then know this, Delum Thord. I am not content to be champion among the Uryd. One day, all the Teblor shall kneel to me. This, our journey to the outlands, is but a scouting of the enemy we shall one day face. Our people have slept for far too long.'

'Karsa Orlong, I do not doubt you.'

Karsa's answering grin was cold. 'Yet you once did.'

To that, Delum simply shrugged, then he swung about and set off down the slope.

Karsa examined his chewed wrist, then looked down at the dog and laughed. 'You've the taste of my blood in your mouth, beast. Urugal now races to clasp your heart, and so, you and I, we are joined. Come, walk at my side. I name you Gnaw.'

There were eleven adult dogs in the pack and three not quite full-grown. They fell in step behind Karsa and Gnaw, leaving their lone fallen kin unchallenged ruler of the shelf beneath the cliff. Until the flies came.

Towards midday, the three Uryd warriors and their pack descended into the middle of the three small valleys on their southeasterly course across Rathyd lands. The hunt they tracked had clearly been driven to desperation, to have travelled so far in their search. It was also evident that the warriors ahead had avoided contact with other villages in the area. Their lengthening failure had become a shame that haunted them.

Karsa was mildly disappointed in that, but he consoled himself that the tale of their deeds would travel none the less, sufficient to make their return journey across Rathyd territory a deadlier and more interesting task.
Delum judged that the hunt was barely a third of a day ahead. They had slowed their pace, sending outriders to either side in search of a trail that did not yet exist. Karsa would not permit himself a gloat concerning that, however; there were, after all, two other parties from the Rathyd village, these ones probably on foot and moving cautiously, leaving few signs of their stealthy passage. At any time, they might cross the Uryd trail.

The pack of dogs remained close on the upwind side, loping effortlessly alongside the trotting horses. Bairoth had simply shaken his head at hearing Delum’s recount of Karsa’s exploits, though of Karsa’s ambitions, Delum curiously said nothing.

They reached the valley floor, a place of tumbled stone amidst birch, black spruce, aspen and alder. The remnants of a river seeped through the moss and rotting stumps, forming black pools that hinted nothing of their depth. Many of these sinkholes were hidden among boulders and treefalls. Their pace slowed as they cautiously worked their way deeper into the forest.

A short while later they came to the first of the mud-packed, wooden walkways the Rathyd of this valley had built long ago and still maintained, if only indifferently. Lush grasses filling the joins attested to this particular one’s disuse, but its direction suited the Uryd warriors, and so they dismounted and led their horses up onto the raised track.

It creaked and swayed beneath the combined weight of horses, Teblor and dogs.

'We'd best spread out and stay on foot,' Bairoth said.

Karsa crouched and studied the roughly dressed logs. 'The wood is still sound,' he observed.

'But the stilts are seated in mud, Warleader.'

'Not mud, Bairoth Gild. Peat.'

'Karsa Orlong is right,' Delum said, swinging himself back onto his destrier. 'The way may pitch but the cross-struts underneath will keep it from twisting. We ride down the centre, in single file.'

'There is little point,' Karsa said to Bairoth, 'in taking this path if we then creep along it like snails.'

'The risk, Warleader, is that we become far more visible.'

'Best we move along it quickly, then.'

Bairoth grimaced. 'As you say, Karsa Orlong.'

Delum in the lead, they rode at a slow canter down the centre of the walkway. The pack followed. To either side, the only trees that reached to the eye level of the mounted warriors were dead birch, their leafless, black branches wrapped in the web of caterpillar nests. The living trees – aspen and alder and elm – reached no higher than chest height with their fluttering canopy of dusty-green leaves. Taller black spruce was visible in the distance. Most of these looked to be dead or dying.

'The old river is returning,' Delum commented. 'This forest slowly drowns.'

Karsa grunted, then said, 'This valley runs into others that all lead northward, all the way to the Buryd Fissure. Pahlk was among the Teblor elders who gathered there sixty years ago. The river of ice filling the Fissure had died, suddenly, and had begun to melt.'

Behind Karsa, Bairoth spoke. 'We never learned what the elders of all the tribes discovered up there, nor if they had found whatever it was they were seeking.'

'I did not know they were seeking anything in particular,' Delum muttered. 'The death of the ice river was heard in a hundred valleys, including our own. Did they not travel to the Fissure simply to discover what had happened?'

Karsa shrugged. 'Pahlk told me of countless beasts that had been frozen within the ice for numberless centuries, becoming visible amidst the shattered blocks. Fur and flesh thawing, the ground and sky alive with
crows and mountain vultures. There was ivory, but most of it was too badly crushed to be of any worth. The river had a black heart, or so its death revealed, but whatever lay within that heart was either gone or destroyed. Even so, there were signs of an ancient battle in that place. The bones of children. Weapons of stone, all broken.'

'This is more than I have ever—' Bairoth began, then stopped.

The walkway, which had been reverberating to their passage, had suddenly acquired a deeper, syncopating thunder. The walkway ahead made a bend, forty paces distant, to the left, disappearing behind trees.

The pack of dogs began snapping their jaws in voiceless warning. Karsa twisted round, and saw, two hundred paces behind them on the walkway, a dozen Rathyd warriors on foot. Weapons were lifted in silent promise.

Yet the sound of hoofs – Karsa swung forward again, to see six riders pitch around the bend. Warcries rang in the air.

'Clear a space!' Bairoth bellowed, driving his horse past Karsa, and then Delum. The bear skull sprang into the air, snapping as it reached the length of the straps, and Bairoth began whirling the massive, bound skull over his and his horse's head, using both hands, his knees high on his destrier's shoulders. The whirling skull made a deep, droning sound. His horse loped forward.

The Rathyd riders were at full charge. They rode two abreast, the edge of the walkway less than half an arm's length away on either side.

They had closed to within twenty paces of Bairoth when he released the bear skull.

When two or three wolf skulls were used in this fashion, it was to bind or break legs. But Bairoth's target was higher. The skull struck the destrier on the left with a force that shattered the horse's chest. Blood sprayed from the animal's nose and mouth. Crashing down, it fouled the beast beside it – no more than the crack of a single hoof against its shoulder, but sufficient to make it veer wildly, and plunge down off the walkway. Legs snapped. The Rathyd warrior flew over his horse's head.

The rider of the first horse landed with bone-breaking impact on the walkway, at the very hoofs of Bairoth's destrier. Those hoofs punched down on the man's head in quick succession, leaving a shattered mess.

The charge floundered. Another horse went down, stumbling with a scream over the wildly kicking beast that now blocked the walkway.

Loosing the Uryd warcry, Bairoth drove his mount forward. A surging leap carried them over the first downed destrier. The Rathyd warrior from the other fallen horse was just clambering clear and had time to look up to see Bairoth's sword blade reach the bridge of his nose.

Delum was suddenly behind his comrade. Two knives darted through the air, passing Bairoth on his right. There was a sharp report as a Rathyd's heavy sword-blade slashed across to block one of the knives, then a wet gasp as the second knife found the man's throat.

Two of the enemy remained, one each for Delum and Bairoth, and so the duels could begin.

Karsa, after watching the effect of Bairoth's initial attack, had wheeled his mount round. Sword in his hands, blade flashing into Havok's vision, and they were charging back down the walkway towards the pursuing band.

The dog pack split to either side to avoid the thundering hoofs, then raced after rider and horse.

Ahead, eight adults and four youths.

A barked order sent the youths to either side of the walkway, then down. The adults wanted room, and, seeing their obvious confidence as they formed an inverted V spanning the walkway, weapons ready, Karsa laughed.
They wanted him to ride down into the centre of that inverted V – a tactic that, while it maintained Havok’s
drastic speed, also exposed horse and rider to flanking attacks. Speed counted for much in the engagement to
come. The Rathyd’s expectations fit neatly into the attacker’s intent — had that attacker been someone other
than Karsa Orlong. ‘Urugal!’ he bellowed, lifting himself high on Havok’s shoulders. ‘Witness!’ He held his
sword, point forward, over his destrier’s head, and fixed his gaze on the Rathyd warrior on the V’s extreme left.

Havok sensed the shift in attention and angled his charge just moments before contact, hoofs pounding along
the very edge of the walkway.

The Rathyd directly before them managed a single backward step, swinging a two-handed overhead chop at
Havok’s snout as he went.

Karsa took that blade on his own, even as he twisted and threw his right leg forward, his left back. Havok
turned beneath him, surged in towards the centre of the walkway.

The V had collapsed, and every Rathyd warrior was on Karsa’s left.

Havok carried him diagonally across the walkway. Keening his delight, Karsa slashed and chopped
repeatedly, his blade finding flesh and bone as often as weapon. Havok pitched around before reaching the
opposite edge, and lashed out his hind legs. At least one connected, flinging a shattered body from the bridge.

The pack then arrived. Snarling bodies hurling onto the Rathyd warriors – most of whom had turned when
engaging Karsa, and so presented exposed backs to the frenzied dogs. Shrieks filled the air.

Karsa spun Havok round. They plunged back into the savage press. Two Rathyd had managed to fight clear
of the dogs, blood spraying from their blades as they backed up the walkway.

Bellowing a challenge, Karsa drove towards them.

And was shocked to see them both leap from the walkway.

‘Bloodless cowards! I witness! Your youths witness! These damned dogs witness!’

He saw them reappear, weapons gone, scrambling and stumbling across the bog.

Delum and Bairoth arrived, dismounting to add their swords to the maniacal frenzy of the surviving dogs as
they tore unceasing at fallen Rathyd.

Karsa drew Havok to one side, eyes still on the fleeing warriors, who had been joined now by the four
youths. ‘I witness! Urugal witnesses!’

Gnaw, black and grey hide barely visible beneath splashes of gore, panted up to stand beside Havok, his
muscles twitching but no wounds showing. Karsa glanced back and saw that four more dogs remained, whilst a
fifth had lost a foreleg and limped a red circle off to one side.

‘Delum, bind that one’s leg – we will sear it anon.’

‘What use a three-legged hunting dog, Warleader?’ Bairoth asked, breathing heavy.

‘Even a three-legged dog has ears and a nose, Bairoth Gild. One day, she will lie grey-nosed and fat before
my hearth, this I swear. Now, is either of you wounded?’

‘Scratches.’ Bairoth shrugged, turning away.

‘I have lost a finger,’ Delum said as he drew out a leather strap and approached the wounded dog, ‘but not an
important one.’

Karsa looked once more at the retreating Rathyd. They had almost reached a stand of black spruce. The
warleader sent them a final sneer, then laid a hand on Havok’s brow. ‘My father spoke true, Havok. I have never
ridden such a horse as you.’
An ear had cocked at his words. Karsa leaned forward and set his lips to the beast's brow. 'We become, you and I,' he whispered, 'legend. Legend, Havok.' Straightening, he studied the sprawl of corpses on the walkway, and smiled. 'It is time for trophies, my brothers. Bairoth, did your bear skull survive?'

'I believe so, Warleader.'

'Your deed was our victory, Bairoth Gild.'

The heavy man turned, studied Karsa through slitted eyes. 'You ever surprise me, Karsa Orlong.'

'As your strength does me, Bairoth Gild.'

The man hesitated, then nodded. 'I am content to follow you, Warleader.'

You ever were, Bairoth Gild, and that is the difference between us.
CHAPTER TWO

There are hints, if one scans the ground with a clear and sharp eye, that this ancient Jaghut war, which for the Kron T'lan Imass was either their seventeenth or eighteenth, went terribly awry. The Adept who accompanied our expedition evinced no doubt whatsoever that a Jaghut remained alive within the Laederon glacier. Terribly wounded, yet possessing formidable sorcery still. Well beyond the ice river's reach (a reach which has been diminishing over time), there are shattered remains of T'lan Imass, the bones strangely malformed, and on them the flavour of fierce and deadly Omtose Phellack lingering to this day.

Of the ensorcelled stone weapons of the Kron, only those that were broken in the conflict remained, leading one to assume that either looters have been this way, or the T'lan Imass survivors (assuming there were any) took them with them . . .

*The Nathii Expedition of 1012*

Kenemass Trybanos, Chronicler

'I believe,' Delum said as they led their horses down from the walkway, 'that the last group of the hunt has turned back.'

'The plague of cowardice ever spreads,' Karsa growled.

'They surmised at the very first,' Bairoth rumbled, 'that we were crossing their lands. That our first attack was not simply a raid. So, they will await our return, and will likely call upon the warriors of other villages.'

'That does not concern me, Bairoth Gild.'

'I know that, Karsa Orlong, for what part of this journey have you not already anticipated? Even so, two more Rathyd valleys lie before us. I would know. There will be villages – do we ride around them or do we collect still more trophies?'

'We shall be burdened with too many trophies when we reach the lands of the lowlanders at Silver Lake,' Delum commented.

Karsa laughed, then considered. 'Bairoth Gild, we shall slip through these valleys like snakes in the night, until the very last village. I would still draw hunters after us, into the lands of the Sunyd.'

Delum had found a trail leading up the valley side.

Karsa checked on the dog limping in their wake. Gnaw walked alongside it, and it occurred to Karsa that the three-legged beast might well be its mate. He was pleased with his decision to not slay the wounded creature.

There was a chill in the air that confirmed their gradual climb to higher elevations. The Sunyd territory was higher still, leading to the eastern edge of the escarpment. Pahlk had told Karsa that but a single pass cut through the escarpment, marked by a torrential waterfall that fed into Silver Lake. The climb down was treacherous. Pahlk had named it Bone Pass.

The trail began to wind sinuously among winter-cracked boulders and treefalls. They could now see the summit, six hundred steep paces upward.

The warriors dismounted. Karsa strode back and lifted the three-legged dog into his arms. He set it down across Havok's broad back and strapped it in place. The animal voiced no protest. Gnaw moved up to flank the destrier.

They resumed their journey.
The sun was bathing the slope in brilliant gold light by the time they had closed to within a hundred paces of the summit, reaching a broad ledge that seemed — through a sparse forest of straggly, wind-twisted oaks — to run the length of the valley side. Scanning the terrace's sweep to his right, Delum voiced a grunt, then said, 'I see a cave. There,' he pointed, 'behind those fallen trees, where the shelf bulges.'

Bairoth nodded and said, 'It looks big enough to hold our horses. Karsa Orlong, if we are to begin riding at night...'

'Agreed,' Karsa said.

Delum led the way along the terrace. Gnaw scrambled past him, slowing upon nearing the cave mouth, then crouching down and edging forward.

The Uryd warriors paused, waiting to see if the dog's hackles rose, thus signalling the presence of a grey bear or some other denizen. After a long moment, with Gnaw motionless and lying almost flat before the cave entrance, the beast finally rose and glanced back at the party, then trotted into the cave.

The fallen trees had provided a natural screen, hiding the cave from the valley below. There had been an overhang, but it had collapsed, perhaps beneath the weight of the trees, leaving a rough pile of rubble partially blocking the entrance.

Bairoth began clearing a path to lead the horses through. Delum and Karsa took Gnaw's route into the cave.

Beyond the mound of tumbled stones and sand, the floor levelled out beneath a scatter of dried leaves. The setting sun's light painted the back wall in patches of yellow, revealing an almost solid mass of carved glyphs. A small cairn of piled stones sat in the domed chamber's centre.

Gnaw was nowhere to be seen, but the dog's tracks crossed the floor and vanished into an area of gloom near the back.

Delum stepped forward, his eyes on a single, oversized glyph directly opposite the entrance. 'That Bloodsign is neither Rathyd nor Sunyd,' he said.

'But the words beneath it are Teblor,' Karsa asserted.

'The style is very...!' Delum frowned, 'ornate.'

Karsa began reading aloud, "I led the families that survived. Down from the high lands. Through the broken veins that bled beneath the sun..." Broken veins?"

'Ice,' Delum said.

'Bleeding beneath the sun, aye. "We were so few. Our blood was cloudy and would grow cloudier still. I saw the need to shatter what remained. For the T'lan Imass were still close and much agitated and inclined to continue their indiscriminate slaughter."' Karsa scowled. 'T'lan Imass? I do not know those two words.'

'Nor I,' Delum replied. 'A rival tribe, perhaps. Read on, Karsa Orlong. Your eye is quicker than mine.'

'"And so I sundered husband from wife. Child from parent. Brother from sister. I fashioned new families and then sent them away. Each to a different place. I proclaimed the Laws of Isolation, as given us by Icarium whom we had once sheltered and whose heart grew vast with grief upon seeing what had become of us. The Laws of Isolation would be our salvation, clearing the blood and strengthening our children. To all who follow and to all who shall read these words, this is my justification—"'

'These words trouble me, Karsa Orlong.'

Karsa glanced back at Delum. 'Why? They signify nothing of us. They are an elder's ravings. Too many words — to have carved all these letters would have taken years, and only a madman would do such a thing. A madman, who was buried here, alone, driven out by his people—'

Delum's gaze sharpened on Karsa. 'Driven out? Yes, I believe you are correct, Warleader. Read more – let us
Shrugging, Karsa returned his attention to the stone wall. "To survive, we must forget. So Icarium told us. Those things that we had come to, those things that softened us. We must abandon them. We must dismantle our ..." I know not that word, "and shatter each and every stone, leaving no evidence of what we had been. We must bum our ..." another word I do not know, "and leave naught but ash. We must forget our history and seek only our most ancient of legends. Legends that spoke of feuds, of murders and rapes. We must return to those terrible times. To isolate our streams of blood, to weave new, smaller nets of kinship. New threads must be born of rape, for only with violence would they remain rare occurrences, and random. To cleanse our blood, we must forget all that we were, yet find what we had once been—"

'Down here,' Delum said, squatting. 'Lower down. I recognize words. Read here, Karsa Orlong.'

'It's dark, Delum Thord, but I shall try. Ah, yes. These are . . . names. "I have given these new tribes names, the names given by my father for his sons."' And then a list. "Baryd, Sanyd, Phalyd, Urad, Gelad, Manyd, Rathyd and Lanyd. These, then, shall be the new tribes . . ." It grows too dark to read on, Delum Thord, nor,' he added, fighting a sudden chill, 'do I desire to. These thoughts are spider-bitten. Fever-twisted into lies.'

'Phalyd and Lanyd are—'

Karsa straightened. 'No more, Delum Thord.'

'The name of Icarium has lived on in our—'

'Enough!' Karsa growled. 'There is nothing of meaning here in these words!'

'As you say, Karsa Orlong.'

Gnaw emerged from the gloom, where a darker fissure was now evident to the two Teblor warriors.

Delum nodded towards it. 'The carver's body lies within.'

'Where he no doubt crawled to die,' Karsa sneered. 'Let us return to Bairoth. The horses can be sheltered here. We shall sleep outside.'

Both warriors turned and strode back to the cave mouth. Behind them, Gnaw stood beside the cairn a moment longer. The sun had left the wall, filling the cave with shadows. In the darkness, the dog's eyes flickered.

Two nights later, they sat on their horses and looked down into the valley of the Sunyd. The plan to draw Rathyd pursuers after them had failed, for the last two villages they had come across had been long abandoned. The surrounding trails had been overgrown and rains had taken the charcoal from the firepits, leaving only red-rimmed black stains in the earth.

And now, across the entire breadth and length of the Sunyd valley, they could see no fires.

'They have fled,' Bairoth muttered.

'But not from us,' Delum replied, 'if the Sunyd villages prove to be the same as those Rathyd ones. This is a flight long past.'

Bairoth grunted. 'Where, then, have they gone?'

Shrugging, Karsa said, 'There are Sunyd valleys north of this one. A dozen or more. And some to the south as well. Perhaps there has been a schism. It matters little to us, except that we shall gather no more trophies until we reach Silver Lake.'

Bairoth rolled his shoulders. 'Warleader, when we reach Silver Lake, will our raid be beneath the wheel or
the sun? With the valley before us empty, we could camp at night. These trails are unfamiliar, forcing us to go slowly in the dark.'

'You speak the truth, Bairoth Gild. Our raid will be in daylight. Let us make our way down to the valley floor, then, and find us a place to camp.'

The wheel of stars had travelled a fourth of its journey by the time the Uryd warriors reached level ground and found a suitable campsite. Delum had, with the aid of the dogs, killed a half-dozen rock hares during the descent, which he now skinned and spit while Bairoth built a small fire.

Karsa saw to the horses, then joined his two companions at the hearth. They sat, waiting in silence for the meat to cook, the sweet smell and sizzle strangely unfamiliar after so many meals of raw food. Karsa felt a lassitude settle into his muscles, and only now realized how weary he had become.

The hares were ready. The three warriors ate in silence.

'Delum has spoken,' Bairoth said when they were done, 'of the words written in the cave.'

Karsa shot Delum a glare. 'Delum Thord spoke when he should not have. Within the cave, a madman's ravings, nothing more.'

'I have considered them,' Bairoth persisted, 'and I believe there is truth hidden within those ravings, Karsa Orlong.'

'Pointless belief, Bairoth Gild.'

'I think not, Warleader. The names of the tribes – I agree with Delum when he says there are, among them, the names of our tribes. "Urad" is far too close to Uryd to be accidental, especially when three of the other names are unchanged. Granted, one of those tribes has since vanished, but even our own legends whisper of a time when there were more tribes than there are now. And those two words that you did not know, Karsa Orlong. "Great villages" and "yellow bark"—'

'Those were not the words!'

'True enough, but that is the closest Delum could come to. Karsa Orlong, the hand that inscribed those words was from a place and time of sophistication, a place and a time where the Teblor language was, if anything, more complex than it is now.'

Karsa spat into the fire. 'Bairoth Gild, if these be truths as you and Delum say, I still must ask: what value do they hold for us now? Are we a fallen people? That is not a revelation. Our legends all speak of an age of glory, long past, when a hundred heroes strode among the Teblor, heroes that would make even my own grandfather, Pahlk, seem but a child among men—'

Delum's face in the firelight was deeply frowning as he cut in, 'And this is what troubles me, Karsa Orlong. Those legends and their tales of glory – they describe an age little different from our own. Aye, more heroes, greater deeds, but essentially the same, in the manner of how we lived. Indeed, it often seems that the very point of those tales is one of instruction, a code of behaviour, the proper way of being a Teblor.'

Bairoth nodded. 'And there, in those carved words in the cave, we are offered the explanation.'

'A description of how we would be,' Delum added. 'No, of how we are.'

'None of it matters,' Karsa growled.

'We were a defeated people,' Delum continued, as if he hadn't heard. 'Reduced to a broken handful.' He looked up, met Karsa's eyes across the fire. 'How many of our brothers and sisters who are given to the Faces in the Rock – how many of them were born flawed in some way? Too many fingers and toes, mouths with no palates, faces with no eyes. We've seen the same among our dogs and horses, Warleader. Defects come of inbreeding. That is a truth. The elder in the cave, he knew what threatened our people, so he fashioned a means of separating us, of slowly clearing our cloudy blood – and he was cast out as a betrayer of the Teblor. We were
witness, in that cave, to an ancient crime—'

'Vere are fallen,' Bairoth said, then laughed.

Delum's gaze snapped to him. 'And what is it that you find so funny, Bairoth Gild?'

'If I must needs explain, Delum Thord, then there is no point.'

Bairoth's laughter had chilled Karsa. 'You have both failed to grasp the true meaning of all this—'

Bairoth grunted, 'The meaning you said did not exist, Karsa Orlong?'

'The fallen know but one challenge,' Karsa resumed. 'And that is to rise once more. The Teblor were once few, once defeated. So be it. We are no longer few. Nor have we known defeat since that time. Who from the lowlands dares venture into our territories? The time has come, I now say, to face that challenge. The Teblor must rise once more.'

Bairoth sneered, 'And who will lead us? Who will unite the tribes? I wonder.'

'Hold,' Delum rumbled, eyes glittering. 'Bairoth Gild, from you I now hear unseemly envy. With what we three have done, with what our warleader has already achieved – tell me, Bairoth Gild, do the shadows of the ancient heroes still devour us whole? I say they do not. Karsa Orlong now walks among those heroes, and we walk with him.'

Bairoth slowly leaned back, stretching his legs out beside the hearth. 'As you say, Delum Thord.' The flickering light revealed a broad smile that seemed directed into the flames. "'Who from the lowlands dares venture into our territories?' Karsa Orlong, we travel an empty valley. Empty of Teblor, aye. But what has driven them away? It may be that defeat stalks the formidable Teblor once more.'

There was a long moment when none of the three spoke, then Delum added another stick to the fire. 'It may be,' he said in a low voice, 'that there are no heroes among the Sunyd.'

Bairoth laughed. 'True. Among all the Teblor, there are but three heroes. Will that be enough, do you think?'

'Three is better than two,' Karsa snapped, 'but if need be, two will suffice.'

'I pray to the Seven, Karsa Orlong, that your mind ever remain free of doubt.'

Karsa realized that his hands had closed on the grip of his sword. 'Ah, that's your thought, then. The son of the father. Am I being accused of Synyg's weakness?'

Bairoth studied Karsa, then slowly shook his head. 'Your father is not weak, Karsa Orlong. If there are doubts to speak of here and now, they concern Pahlk and his heroic raid to Silver Lake.'

Karsa was on his feet, the bloodwood sword in his hands.

Bairoth made no move. 'You do not see what I see,' he said quietly. 'There is the potential within you, Karsa Orlong, to be your father's son. I lied earlier when I said I prayed that you would remain free of doubt. I pray for the very opposite, Warleader. I pray that doubt comes to you, that it tempers you with its wisdom. Those heroes in our legends, Karsa Orlong, they were terrible, they were monsters, for they were strangers to uncertainty.'

'Stand before me, Bairoth Gild, for I will not kill you whilst your sword remains at your side.'

'I will not, Karsa Orlong. The straw is on my back, and you are not my enemy.'

Delum moved forward with his hands full of earth, which he dropped onto the fire between the two other men. 'It is late,' he muttered, 'and it may be as Bairoth suggests, that we are not as alone in this valley as we believe ourselves to be. At the very least, there may be watchers on the other side. Warleader, there have been only words this night. Let us leave the spilling of blood for our true enemies.'
Karsa remained standing, glaring down at Bairoth Gild. 'Words,' he growled. 'Yes, and for the words he has spoken, Bairoth Gild must apologize.'

'I, Bairoth Gild, beg forgiveness for my words. Now, Karsa Orlong, will you put away your sword?'

'You are warned,' Karsa said, 'I will not be so easily appeased next time.'

'I am warned.'

Grasses and saplings had reclaimed the Sunyd village. The trails leading to and from it had almost vanished beneath brambles, but here and there, among the stone foundations of the circular houses, the signs of fire and violence could be seen.

Delum dismounted and began poking about the ruins. It was only a few moments before he found the first bones.

Bairoth grunted. 'A raiding party. One that left no survivors.'

Delum straightened with a splintered arrow shaft in his hands. 'Lowlanders. The Sunyd keep few dogs, else they would not have been so unprepared.'

'We now take upon ourselves,' Karsa said, 'not a raid, but a war. We journey to Silver Lake not as Uryd, but as Teblor. And we shall deliver vengeance.' He dismounted and removed from the saddle pack four hard leather sheaths, which he began strapping onto Havok's legs to protect the horse from the brambles. The other two warriors followed suit.

'Lead us, Warleader,' Delum said when he was done, swinging himself onto his destrier's back.

Karsa collected the three-legged dog and laid it down once more behind Havok's withers. He regained his seat and looked to Bairoth.

The burly warrior also remounted. His eyes were hooded as he met Karsa's gaze. 'Lead us, Warleader.'

'We shall ride as fast as the land allows,' Karsa said, drawing the three-legged dog onto his thighs. 'Once beyond this valley, we head northward, then east once more. By tomorrow night we shall be close to Bone Pass, the southward wend that will take us to Silver Lake.'

'And if we come across lowlanders on the way?'

'Then, Bairoth Gild, we shall begin gathering trophies. But none must be allowed to escape, for our attack on the farm must come as a complete surprise, lest the children flee.'

They skirted the village until they came to a trail that led them into the forest. Beneath the trees there was less undergrowth, allowing them to ride at a slow canter. Before long, the trail began climbing the valley side. By dusk, they reached the summit. Horses steaming beneath them, the three warriors reined in.

They had come to the edge of the escarpment. To the north and east and still bathed in golden sunlight, the horizon was a jagged line of mountains, their peaks capped in snow with rivers of white stretching down their flanks. Directly before them, after a sheer drop of three hundred or more paces, lay a vast, forested basin.

'I see no fires,' Delum said, scanning the shadow-draped valley.

'We must now skirt this edge, northward,' Karsa said. 'There are no trails breaking the cliffside here.'

'The horses need rest,' Delum said. 'But we are highly visible here, Warleader.'

'We shall walk them on, then,' Karsa said, dismounting. When he set the three-legged dog onto the ground, Gnaw moved up alongside her. Karsa collected Havok's single rein. A game trail followed the ridgeline along the top for another thirty paces before dropping slightly, sufficient to remove the silhouette they made against the sky.
They continued on until the wheel of stars had completed a fifth of its passage, whereupon they found a high-walled cul de sac just off the trail in which to make camp. Delum began preparing the meal while Bairoth rubbed down the horses.

Taking Gnaw and his mate with him, Karsa scouted the path ahead. Thus far, the only tracks they had seen were those from mountain goats and wild sheep. The ridge had begun a slow, broken descent, and he knew that, somewhere ahead, there would be a river carrying the run-off from the north range of mountains, and a waterfall cutting a notch into the escarpment's cliffside.

Both dogs shied suddenly in the gloom, bumping into Karsa's legs as they backed away from another dead-end to the left. Laying a hand down to calm Gnaw, he found the beast trembling. Karsa drew his sword. He sniffed the air, but could smell nothing awry, nor was there any sound from the dark-shrouded dead-end and Karsa was close enough to hear breathing had there been anyone hiding in it.

He edged forward.

A massive flat slab dominated the stone floor, leaving only a forearm's space on the three sides where rose the rock walls. The surface of the slab was unadorned, but a faint grey light seemed to emanate from the stone itself. Karsa moved closer, then slowly crouched down before the lone, motionless hand jutting from the slab's nearmost edge. It was gaunt, yet whole, the skin a milky blue-green, the nails chipped and ragged, the fingers patched in white dust.

Every space within reach of that hand was etched in grooves, cut deep into the stone floor – as deep as the fingers could reach – in a chaotic, cross-hatched pattern.

The hand, Karsa could see, was neither Teblor nor low-lander, but in size somewhere in between, the bones prominent, the fingers narrow and overlong and seeming to bear far too many joints.

Something of Karsa's presence – his breath perhaps as he leaned close in his study – was sensed, for the hand spasmed suddenly, jerking down to lie flat, fingers spread, on the rock. And Karsa now saw the unmistakable signs that animals had attacked that hand in the past – mountain wolves and creatures yet fiercer. It had been chewed, clawed and gnawed at, though, it seemed, never broken. Motionless once more, it lay pressed against the ground.

Hearing footsteps behind him, Karsa rose and turned. Delum and Bairoth, weapons out, made their way up the trail. Karsa strode to meet them.

Bairoth rumbled, 'Your two dogs came skulking back to us.'

'What have you found, Warleader?' Delum asked in a whisper.

'A demon,' he replied. 'Pinned for eternity beneath that stone. It lives, still.'

'The Forkassal.'

'Even so. There is much truth in our legends, it seems.'

Bairoth moved past and approached the slab. He crouched down before the hand and studied it long in the gloom, then he straightened and strode back. 'The Forkassal. The demon of the mountains, the One Who Sought Peace.'

'In the time of the Spirit Wars, when our old gods were young,' Delum said. 'What, Karsa Orlong, do you recall of that tale? It was so brief, nothing more than torn pieces. The elders themselves admitted that most of it had been lost long ago, before the Seven awoke.'

'Pieces,' Karsa agreed. 'The Spirit Wars were two, perhaps three invasions, and had little to do with the Teblor. Foreign gods and demons. Their battles shook the mountains, and then but one force remained—'

'In those tales,' Delum interjected, 'are the only mention of Icarium. Karsa Orlong, it may be that the T'lan Imass – spoken of in that elder's cave – belonged to the Spirit Wars, and that they were the victors, who then
left never to return. It may be that it was the Spirit Wars that shattered our people.'

Bairoth's gaze remained on the slab. Now he spoke. 'The demon must be freed.'

Both Karsa and Delum turned to him, struck silent by the pronouncement.

'Say nothing,' Bairoth continued, 'until I have finished. The Forkassal was said to have come to the place of the Spirit Wars, seeking to make peace between the contestants. That is one of the torn pieces of the tale. For the demon's effort it was destroyed. That is another piece. Icarium too sought to end the war, but he arrived too late, and the victors knew they could not defeat him so they did not even try. A third piece. Delum Thord, the words in the cave also spoke of Icarium, yes?'

'They did, Bairoth Gild. Icarium gave the Teblor the Laws that ensured our survival.'

'Yet, were they able, the T'lan Imass would have laid a stone on him as well.' After these words, Bairoth fell silent.

Karsa swung about and walked to the slab. Its luminescence was fitful in places, hinting of the sorcery's antiquity, a slow dissolution of the power invested in it. Teblor elders worked magic, but only rarely. Since the awakening of the Faces in the Rock, sorcery arrived as a visitation, locked within the confines of sleep or trance. The old legends spoke of vicious displays of overt magic, of dread weapons tempered with curses, but Karsa suspected these were but elaborate inventions to weave bold colours into the tales. He scowled. 'I have no understanding of this magic,' he said.

Bairoth and Delum joined him.

The hand still lay flat, motionless.

'I wonder if the demon can hear our words,' Delum said.

Bairoth grunted. 'Even if it could, why would it understand them? The lowlanders speak a different tongue. Demons must also have their own.'

'Yet he came to make peace—'

'He cannot hear us,' Karsa asserted. 'He can do no more than sense the presence of someone ... of something.'

Shrugging, Bairoth crouched down beside the slab. He reached out, hesitated, then settled his palm against the stone. 'It is neither hot nor cold. Its magic is not for us.'

'It is not meant to ward, then, only hold,' Delum suggested.

'The three of us should be able to lift it.'

Karsa studied Bairoth. 'What do you wish to awaken here, Bairoth Gild?'

The huge warrior looked up, eyes narrowing. Then his brows rose and he smiled. 'A bringer of peace?'

'There is no value in peace.'

'There must be peace among the Teblor, or they shall never be united.'

Karsa cocked his head, considering Bairoth's words.

'This demon may have gone mad,' Delum muttered. 'How long, trapped beneath this rock?'

'There are three of us,' Bairoth said.

'Yet this demon is from a time when we had been defeated, and if it was these T'lan Imass who imprisoned this demon, they did so because they could not kill him. Bairoth Gild, we three would be as nothing to this creature.'
'We will have earned its gratitude.'

'The fever of madness knows no friends.'

Both warriors looked to Karsa. 'We cannot know the mind of a demon,’ he said. 'But we can see one thing, and that is how it still seeks to protect itself. This lone hand has fended off all sorts of beasts. In that, I see a holding on to purpose.'

'The patience of an immortal.' Bairoth nodded. 'I see the same as you, Karsa Orlong.'

Karsa faced Delum. 'Delum Thord, do you still possess doubts?'

'I do, Warleader, yet I will give your effort my strength, for I see the decision in your eyes. So be it.'

Without another word the three Uryd positioned themselves along one side of the stone slab. They squatted, hands reaching down to grip the edge.

'With the fourth breath,’ Karsa instructed.

The stone lifted with a grinding, grating sound, a sifting of dust. A concerted heave sent it over, to crack against the rock wall.

The figure had been pinned on its side. The immense weight of the slab must have dislocated bones and crushed muscle, but it had not been enough to defeat the demon, for it had, over millennia, gouged out a rough, uneven pit for half the length of its narrow, strangely elongated body. The hand trapped beneath that body had clawed out a space for itself first, then had slowly worked grooves for hip and shoulder. Both feet, which were bare, had managed something similar. Spider webs and the dust of ground stone covered the figure like a dull grey shroud, and the stale air that rose from the space visibly swirled in its languid escape, heavy with a peculiar, insect-like stench.

The three warriors stood looking down on the demon.

It had yet to move, but they could see its strangeness even so. Elongated limbs, extra-jointed, the skin stretched taut and pallid as moonlight, A mass of blue-black hair spread out from the face-down head, like fine roots, forming a latticework across the stone floor. The demon was naked, and female.

The limbs spasmed.

Bairoth edged closer and spoke in a low, soothing tone. 'You are freed, Demon. We are Teblor, of the Uryd tribe. If you will, we would help you. Tell us what you require.'

The limbs had ceased their spasming, and now but trembled. Slowly, the demon lifted her head. The hand that had known an eternity of darkness slipped free from under her body, probed out over the flat stone floor. The fingertips cut across strands of hair and those strands fell to dust. The hand settled in a way that matched its opposite. Muscles tautened along the arms, neck and shoulders, and the demon rose, in jagged, shaking increments. She shed hair in black sheets of dust until her pate was revealed, smooth and white.

Bairoth moved to take her weight but Karsa snapped a hand out to restrain him. 'No, Bairoth Gild, she has known enough pressure that was not her own. I do not think she would be touched, not for a long time, perhaps never again.'

Bairoth’s hooded gaze fixed on Karsa for a long moment, then he sighed and said, 'Karsa Orlong, I hear wisdom in your words. Again and again, you surprise me – no, I did not mean to insult. I am dragged towards admiration – leave me my edged words.'

Karsa shrugged, eyes returning once more to the demon. 'We can only wait, now. Does a demon know thirst? Hunger? Hers is a throat that has not known water for generations, a stomach that has forgotten its purpose, lungs that have not drawn a full breath since the slab first settled. Fortunate it is night, too, for the sun might be as fire to her eyes—' He stopped then, for the demon, on hands and knees, had raised her head and they could see her face for the first time.
Skin like polished marble, devoid of flaws, a broad brow over enormous midnight eyes that seemed dry and flat, like onyx beneath a layer of dust. High, flaring cheekbones, a wide mouth withered and crusted with fine crystals.

'There is no water within her,' Delum said. 'None.' He backed away, then set off for their camp.

The woman slowly sat back onto her haunches, then struggled to stand.

It was difficult to just watch, but both warriors held back, tensed to catch her should she fall.

It seemed she noticed that, and one side of her mouth curled upward a fraction.

That one twitch transformed her face, and, in response, Karsa felt a hammerblow in his chest. She mocks her own sorry condition. This, her first emotion upon being freed. Embarrassment, yet finding the humour within it. Hear me, Urugal the Woven, I will make the ones who imprisoned her regret their deed, should they or their descendants still live. These T’lan Imass – they have made of me an enemy. I, Karsa Orlong, so vow.

Delum returned with a waterskin, his steps slowing upon seeing her standing upright.

She was gaunt, her body a collection of planes and angles. Her breasts were high and far apart, her sternum prominent between them. She seemed to possess far too many ribs. In height, she was as a Teblor child.

She saw the waterskin in Delum's hands, but made no gesture towards it. Instead, she turned to settle her gaze on the place where she had lain.

Karsa could see the rise and fall of her breath, but she was otherwise motionless.

Bairoth spoke. 'Are you the Forkassal?'

She looked over at him and half-smiled once more.

'We are Teblor,' Bairoth continued, at which her smile broadened slightly in what was to Karsa clear recognition, though strangely flavoured with amusement.

'She understands you,' Karsa observed.

Delum approached with the waterskin. She glanced at him and shook her head. He stopped.

Karsa now saw that some of the dustiness was gone from her eyes, and that her lips were now slightly fuller.

'She recovers,' he said.

'Freedom was all she needed,' Bairoth said.

'In the manner that sun-hardened lichen softens in the night,' Karsa said. 'Her thirst is quenched by the air itself—'

She faced him suddenly, her body stiffening.

'If I have given cause for offence—'

Before Karsa drew another breath she was upon him. Five concussive blows to his body and he found himself lying on his back, the hard stone floor stinging as if he was lying on a nest of fire-ants. There was no air in his lungs. Agony thundered through him. He could not move.

He heard Delum's warcry – cut off with a strangled grunt – then the sound of another body striking the ground.

Bairoth cried out from one side, 'Forkassal! Hold! Leave him—'

Karsa blinked up through tear-filled eyes as her face hovered above his. It moved closer, the eyes gleaming now like black pools, the lips full and almost purple in the starlight.
In a rasping voice she whispered to him in the language of the Teblor, ‘They will not leave you, will they? These once enemies of mine. It seems shattering their bones was not enough.’ Something in her eyes softened slightly. ‘Your kind deserve better.’ The face slowly withdrew. ‘I believe I must needs wait. Wait and see what comes of you, before I decide whether I shall deliver unto you, Warrior, my eternal peace.’

Bairoth’s voice from a dozen paces away: ‘Forkassal!’

She straightened and turned with extraordinary fluidity. ‘You have fallen far, to so twist the name of my kind, not to mention your own. I am Forkrul Assail, young warrior – not a demon. I am named Calm, a Bringer of Peace, and I warn you, the desire to deliver it is very strong in me at the moment, so remove your hand from that weapon.’

‘But we have freed you!’ Bairoth cried. ‘Yet you have struck Karsa and Delum down!’

She laughed. ‘And Icarium and those damned T’lan Imass will not be pleased that you undid their work. Then again, it is likely Icarium has no memory of having done so, and the T’lan Imass are far away. Well, I shall not give them a second chance. But I do know gratitude, Warrior, and so I give you this. The one named Karsa has been chosen. If I was to tell you even the little that I sense of his ultimate purpose, you would seek to kill him. But I tell you there would be no value in that, for the ones using him will simply select another. No. Watch this friend of yours. Guard him. There will come a time when he stands poised to change the world. And when that time comes, I shall be there. For I bring peace. When that moment arrives, cease guarding him. Step back, as you have done now.’

Karsa dragged a sobbing breath into his racked lungs. At a wave of nausea he twisted onto his side and vomited onto the gritty stone floor. Between his gasping and coughing, he heard the Forkrul Assail – the woman named Calm – stride away.

A moment later Bairoth knelt beside Karsa. ‘Delum is badly hurt, Warleader,’ he said. ‘There is liquid leaking from a crack in his head. Karsa Orlong, I regret freeing this ... this creature. Delum had doubts. Yet he—’

Karsa coughed and spat, then, fighting waves of pain from his battered chest, he climbed to his feet. ‘You could not know, Bairoth Gild,’ he muttered, wiping the tears from his eyes.

‘Warleader, I did not draw my weapon. I did not seek to protect you as did Delum Thord—’

‘Which leaves one of us healthy,’ Karsa growled, staggering over to where Delum lay across the trail. He had been thrown some distance, by what looked to be a single blow. Slanting crossways across his forehead were four deep impressions, the skin split, yellowy liquid oozing from the punched-through bone underneath. Her fingertips. Delum’s eyes were wide, yet cloudy with confusion. Whole sections of his face had gone slack, as if no underlying thought could hold them to an expression.

Bairoth joined him. ‘See, the fluid is clear. It is thought-blood. Delum Thord will not come all the way back with such an injury.’

‘No,’ Karsa murmured, ‘he will not. None who lose thought-blood ever do.’

‘It is my fault.’

‘No, Delum made a mistake, Bairoth Gild. Am I killed? The Forkassal chose not to slay me. Delum should have done as you did – nothing.’

Bairoth winced. ‘She spoke to you, Karsa Orlong. I heard her whispering. What did she say?’

‘Little I could understand, except that the peace she brings is death.’

‘Our legends have twisted with time.’

‘They have, Bairoth Gild. Come, we must wrap Delum’s wounds. The thought-blood will gather in the bandages and dry, and so clot the holes. Perhaps it will not leak so much then and he will come some of the way back to us.’
The two warriors set off for their camp. When they arrived they found the dogs huddled together, racked with shivering. Through the centre of the clearing ran the tracks of Calm's feet. Heading south.

A crisp, chill wind howled along the edge of the escarpment. Karsa Orlong sat with his back against the rock wall, watching Delum Thord move about on his hands and knees among the dogs. Reaching out and gathering the beasts close, to stroke and nuzzle. Soft, crooning sounds issued from Delum Thord, the smile never leaving the half of his face that still worked.

The dogs were hunters. They suffered the manhandling with miserable expressions that occasionally became fierce, low growls punctuated with warning snaps of their jaws – to which Delum Thord seemed indifferent.

Gnaw, lying at Karsa's feet, tracked with sleepy eyes Delum's random crawling about through the pack.

It had taken most of a day for Delum Thord to return to them, a journey that had left much of the warrior behind. Another day had passed whilst Karsa and Bairoth waited to see if more would come, enough to send light into his eyes, enough to gift Delum Thord with the ability to once more look upon his companions. But there had been no change. He did not see them at all. Only the dogs.

Bairoth had left earlier to hunt, but Karsa sensed, as the day stretched on, that Bairoth Gild had chosen to avoid the camp for other reasons. Freeing the demon had taken Delum from them, and it had been Bairoth's words that had yielded a most bitter reward. Karsa had little understanding of such feelings, this need to self-inflict some sort of punishment. The error had belonged to Delum, drawing his blade against the demon. Karsa's sore ribs attested to the Forkruil Assail's martial prowess – she had attacked with impressive speed, faster than anything Karsa had seen before, much less faced. The three Teblor were as children before her. Delum should have seen that, instantly, should have stayed his hand as Bairoth had done.

Instead, the warrior had been foolish, and now he crawled among the dogs. The Faces in the Rock held no pity for foolish warriors, so why should Karsa Orlong? Bairoth Gild was indulging himself, making regret and pity and castigation into sweet nectars, leaving him to wander like a tortured drunk.

Karsa was fast running out of patience. The journey must be resumed. If anything could return Delum Thord to himself, then it would be battle, the blood's fierce rage searing the soul awake.

Footsteps from uptrail. Gnaw's head turned, but the distraction was only momentary.

Bairoth Gild strode into view, the carcass of a wild goat draped over one shoulder. He paused to study Delum Thord, then let the goat drop in a crunch and clatter of hoofs. He drew his butchering knife and knelt down beside it.

'We have lost another day,' Karsa said.

'Game is scarce,' Bairoth replied, slicing open the goat's belly.

The dogs moved into an expectant half-circle, Delum following to take his place among them. Bairoth cut through connecting tissues and began flinging blood-soaked organs to the beasts. None made a move.

Karsa tapped Gnaw on the flank and the beast rose and moved forward, trailed by its three-legged mate. Gnaw sniffed at the offerings, each in turn, and settled on the goat's liver, while its mate chose the heart. They each trotted away with their prizes. The remaining dogs then closed in on what remained, snapping and bickering. Delum pounced forward to wrest a lung from the jaws of one of the dogs, baring his own teeth in challenge. He scrambled off to one side, hunching down over his prize.

Karsa watched as Gnaw rose and trotted towards Delum Thord, watched as Delum, whimpering, dropped the lung then crouched flat, head down, while Gnaw licked the pooling blood around the organ for a few moments, then padded back to its own meal.

Grunting, Karsa said, 'Gnaw's pack has grown by one.' There was no reply and he glanced over to see Bairoth staring at Delum in horror. 'See his smile, Bairoth Gild? Delum Thord has found happiness, and this tells us that he will come back no further, for why would he?"
Bairoth stared down at his bloodied hands, at the butchering knife gleaming red in the dying light. 'Know you no grief, Warleader?' he asked in a whisper.

'No. He is not dead.'

'Better he were!' Bairoth snapped.

'Then kill him.'

Raw hatred flared in Bairoth's eyes. 'Karsa Orlong, what did she say to you?'

Karsa frowned at the unexpected question, then shrugged. 'She damned me for my ignorance. Words that could not wound me, for I was indifferent to all that she uttered.'

Bairoth's eyes narrowed. 'You make of what has happened a jest? Warleader, you no longer lead me. I shall not guard your flank in this cursed war of yours. We have lost too much—'

'There is weakness in you, Bairoth Gild. I have known that all along. For years, I have known that. You are no different from what Delum has become, and it is this truth that now haunts you so. Did you truly believe we would all return from this journey without scars? Did you think us immune to our enemies?'

'So you think—'

Karsa's laugh was harsh. 'You are a fool, Bairoth Gild. How did we come this far? Through Rathyd and Sunyd lands? Through the battles we have fought? Our victory was no gift of the Seven. Success was carved by our skill with swords, and by my leadership. Yet all you saw in me was bravado, as would come from a youth fresh to the ways of the warrior. You deluded yourself, and it gave you comfort. You are not my superior, Bairoth Gild, not in anything.'

Bairoth Gild stared, his eyes wide, his crimson hands trembling.

'And now,' Karsa growled, 'if you would survive. Survive this journey. Survive me, then I suggest you teach yourself anew the value of following. Your life is in your leader's hands. Follow me to victory, Bairoth Gild, or fall to the wayside. Either way, I will tell the tale with true words. Thus, how would you have it?'

Emotions flitted like wildfire across Bairoth's broad, suddenly pale face. He drew a half-dozen tortured breaths.

'I lead this pack,' Karsa said quietly, 'and none other. Do you challenge me?'

Bairoth slowly settled back on his haunches, shifting the grip on the butchering knife, his gaze settling, level now on Karsa's own. 'We have been lovers a long time, Dayliss and I. You knew nothing, even as we laughed at your clumsy efforts to court her. Every day you would strut between us, filled with bold words, always challenging me, always seeking to belittle me in her eyes. But we laughed inside, Dayliss and I, and spent the nights in each other's arms. Karsa Orlong, it may be that you are the only one who will return to our village — indeed, I believe that you will make certain of it, so my life is as good as ended already, but I do not fear that. And when you return to the village, Warleader, you will make Dayliss your wife. But one truth shall remain with you until the end of your days, and that is: with Dayliss, it was not I who followed, but you. And there is nothing you can do to change that.'

Karsa slowly bared his teeth. 'Dayliss? My wife? I think not. No, instead I shall denounce her to the tribe. To have lain with a man not her husband. She shall be shorn, and then I shall claim her — as my slave—'

Bairoth launched himself at Karsa, knife flashing through the gloom. His back to the stone wall, Karsa could only manage a sideways roll that gave him no time to find his feet before Bairoth was upon him, one arm wrapping about his neck, arching him back, the hard knife-blade scoring up his chest, point driving for his throat.

Then the dogs were upon them both, thundering, bone-jarring impacts, snarls, the clash of canines, teeth punching through leather.
Bairoth screamed, pulled away, arm releasing Karsa.

Rolling onto his back, Karsa saw the other warrior stumbling, dogs hanging by their jaws from both arms, Gnaw with his teeth sunk into Bairoth's hip, other beasts flinging themselves forward, seeking yet more holds. Stumbling, then crashing to the ground.

'Away!' Karsa bellowed.

The dogs flinched, tore themselves free and backed off, still snarling. Off to one side, Karsa saw as he scrambled upright, crouched Delum, his face twisted into a wild smile, his eyes glittering, hands hanging low to the ground and spasmodically snatching at nothing. Then, his gaze travelling past Delum, Karsa stiffened. He hissed and the dogs fell perfectly silent.

Bairoth rolled onto his hands and knees, head lifting.

Karsa gestured, then pointed.

There was the flicker of torchlight on the trail ahead. Still a hundred or more paces distant, slowly nearing. With the way sound was trapped within the dead-end, it was unlikely the fighting had been heard.

Ignoring Bairoth, Karsa drew his sword and set off towards it. If Sunyd, then the ones who approached were displaying a carelessness that he intended to make fatal. More likely, they were lowlanders. He could see now, as he edged from shadow to shadow on the trail, that there were at least a half-dozen torches – a sizeable party, then. He could now hear voices, the foul tongue of the lowlanders.

Bairoth moved up alongside him. He had drawn his own sword. Blood dripped from puncture wounds on his arms, streamed down his hip. Karsa scowled at him, waved him back.

Grimacing, Bairoth withdrew.

The lowlanders had come to the cul de sac where the demon had been imprisoned. The play of torchlight danced on the high stone walls. The voices rose louder, edged with alarm.

Karsa slipped forward in silence until he was just beyond the pool of light. He saw nine lowlanders, gathered to examine the now-empty pit in the centre of the clearing. Two were well armoured and helmed, cradling heavy crossbows, longswords belted at their hips, positioned at the entrance to the cul de sac and watching the trail. Off to one side were four males dressed in earth-toned robes, their hair braided, pulled forward and knotted over their breastbones; none of these carried weapons.

The remaining three had the look of scouts, wearing tight-fitting leathers, armed with short bows and hunting knives. Clan tattoos spanned their brows. It was one of these who seemed to be in charge, for he spoke in hard tones, as if giving commands. The other two scouts were crouched down beside the pit, eyes studying the stone floor.

Both guards stood within the torchlight, leaving them effectively blind to the darkness beyond. Neither appeared particularly vigilant.

Karsa adjusted his grip on the bloodsword, his gaze fixed on the guard nearest him.

Then he charged.

Head flew from shoulders, blood fountaining. Karsa's headlong rush carried him to where the other guard had been standing, to find the lowlander no longer there. Cursing, the Teblor pivoted, closed on the three scouts.

Who had already scattered, black-iron blades hissing from their sheaths.

Karsa laughed. There was little room beyond his reach in the high-walled cul de sac, and the only chance of escape would have to be through him.

One of the scouts shouted something then darted forward.
Karsa’s wooden sword chopped down, splitting tendon, then bone. The lowlander shrieked. Stepping past the crumpling figure, Karsa dragged his weapon free.

The remaining two scouts had moved away from each other and now attacked from the sides. Ignoring one – and feeling the broad-bladed hunting knife rip through his leather armour to score along his ribs – Karsa batted aside the other’s attack and, still laughing, crushed the lowlander’s skull with his sword. A back slash connected with the other scout, sent him flying to strike the stone wall.

The four robed figures awaited Karsa, evincing little fear, joined in a low chant.

The air sparkled strangely before them, then coruscating fire suddenly unfolded, swept forward to engulf Karsa.

It raged against him, a thousand clawed hands, tearing, raking, battering his body, his face and his eyes.

Karsa, shoulders hunching, walked through it.

The fire burst apart, flames fleeing into the night air. Shrugging the effects off with a soft growl, Karsa approached the four lowlanders.

Their expressions, calm and serene and confident a moment ago, now revealed disbelief that swiftly shifted to horror as Karsa’s sword ripped into them.

They died as easily as had the others, and moments later the Teblor stood amidst twitching bodies, blood gleaming dark on his sword’s blade. Torches lay on the stone floor here and there, fitfully throwing smoky light to dance against the cul de sac’s walls.

Bairoth Gild strode into view. ‘The second guard escaped up the trail, Warleader,’ he said. ‘The dogs now hunt.’

Karsa grunted.

‘Karsa Orlong, you have slain the first group of children. The trophies are yours.’

Reaching down, Karsa closed the fingers of one hand in the robes of one of the bodies at his feet. He straightened, lifting the corpse into the air, and studied its puny limbs, its small head with its peculiar braids. A face lined, as would be a Teblor’s after centuries upon centuries of life, yet the visage he stared down upon was scaled to that of a Teblor newborn.

‘They squealed like babes,’ Bairoth Gild said. ‘The tales are true, then. These lowlanders are like children indeed.’

‘Yet not,’ Karsa said, studying the aged face now slack in death.

‘They died easily.’

‘Aye, they did.’ Karsa flung the body away. ‘Bairoth Gild, these are our enemies. Do you follow your warleader?’

‘For this war, I shall,’ Bairoth replied. ‘Karsa Orlong, we shall speak no more of our … village. What lies between us must await our eventual return.’

‘Agreed.’

Two of the pack’s dogs did not return, and there was nothing of strutting victory in the gaits of Gnaw and the others as they padded back into the camp at dawn. Surprisingly, the lone guard had somehow escaped. Delum Thord, his arms wrapped about Gnaw’s mate – as they had been throughout the night – whimpered upon the pack’s return.

Bairoth shifted the supplies from his and Karsa’s destriers to Delum’s warhorse, for it was clear that Delum
had lost all knowledge of riding. He would run with the dogs.

As they readied to depart, Bairoth said, 'It may be that the guard came from Silver Lake. That he will bring to
them warning words of our approach.'

'Ve shall find him,' Karsa growled from where he crouched, threading the last of his trophies onto the leather
cord. 'He could only have eluded the dogs by climbing, so there will be no swiftness to his flight. We shall seek
sign of him. If he has continued on through the night, he will be tired. If not, he will be close.' Straightening,
Karsa held the string of severed ears and tongues out before him, studied the small, mangled objects for a
moment longer, then looped his collection of trophies round his neck.

He swung himself onto Havok's back, collected the lone rein.

Gnaw's pack moved ahead to scout the trail, Delum among them, the three-legged dog cradled in his arms.

They set off.

Shortly before midday, they came upon signs of the last lowlander, thirty paces beyond the corpses of the
two missing dogs – a crossbow quarrel buried in each one. A scattering of iron armour, straps and fittings. The
guard had shed weight.

'This child is a clever one,' Bairoth Gild observed. 'He will hear us before we see him, and will prepare an
ambush.' The warrior's hooded gaze flicked to Delum. 'More dogs will be slain.'

Karsa shook his head at Bairoth's words. 'He will not ambush us, for that will see him killed, and he knows
it. Should we catch up with him, he will seek to hide. Evasion is his only hope, up the cliffside, and then we
will have passed him, and so he will not succeed in reaching Silver Lake before us.'

'We do not hunt him down?' Bairoth asked in surprise.

'No. We ride for Bone Pass.'

'Then he shall trail us. Warleader, an enemy loose at our backs—'

'A child. Those quarrels might well kill a dog, but they are as twigs to us Teblor. Our armour alone will take
much of those small barbs—'

'He has a sharp eye, Karsa Orlong, to slay two dogs in the dark. He will aim for where our armour does not
cover us.'

Karsa shrugged. 'Then we must outpace him beyond the pass.'

They continued on. The trail widened as it climbed, the entire escarpment pushing upward in its northward
reach. Riding at a fast trot, they covered league after league until, by late afternoon, they found themselves
entering clouds of mist, a deep roaring sound directly ahead.

The path dropped away suddenly.

Reining in amidst the milling dogs, Karsa dismounted.

The edge was sheer. Beyond it and on his left, a river had cut a notch a thousand paces or more deep into the
cliff-side, down to what must have been a ledge of some sort, over which it then plunged another thousand
paces to a mist-shrouded valley floor. A dozen or more thread-thin waterfalls drifted out from both sides of the
notch, issuing from fissures in the bedrock. The scene, Karsa realized after a moment, was all wrong. They had
reached the highest part of the escarpment's ridge. A river, cutting a natural route through to the lowlands, did
not belong in this place. Stranger still, the flanking waterfalls poured out from riven cracks, not one level with
another, as if the mountains on both sides were filled with water.

'Karsa Orlong,' Bairoth had to shout to be heard over the roar rising from far below, 'someone – an ancient
god, perhaps – has broken a mountain in half. That notch, it was not carved by water. No, it has the look of
having been cut by a giant axe. And the wound ... bleeds.'
Not replying to Bairoth’s words, Karsa turned about. Directly on his right, a winding, rocky path descended on their side of the cliff, a steep path of shale and scree, gleaming wet.

‘This is our way down?’ Bairoth stepped past Karsa, then swung an incredulous look upon the warleader. ‘We cannot! It will vanish beneath our feet! Beneath the hoofs of the horses! We shall descend indeed, like stones down a cliffside!’

Karsa crouched and pried a rock loose from the ground. He tossed it down the trail. Where it first struck, the shale shifted, trembled, then slid in a growing wave that quickly followed the bouncing rock, vanishing into the mists.

Revealing rough, broad steps.

Made entirely of bones.

‘It is as Pahlk said,’ Karsa murmured, before turning to Bairoth. ‘Come, our path awaits.’

Bairoth’s eyes were hooded. ‘It does indeed, Karsa Orlong. Beneath our feet there shall be a truth.’

Karsa scowled. ‘This is our trail down from the mountains. Nothing more, Bairoth Gild.’

The warrior shrugged. ‘As you say, Warleader.’

Karsa in the lead, they began the descent.

The bones were lowlander in scale, yet heavier and thicker, hardened into stone. Here and there, antlers and tusks were visible, as well as artfully carved bone helms from larger beasts. An army had been slain, their bones then laid out, intricately fashioned into these grim steps. The mists had quickly laid down a layer of water, but each step was solid, broad and slightly angled back, the pitch reducing the risk of slipping. The Teblor’s pace was slowed only by the cautious descent of the destriers.

It seemed that the rockslide Karsa had triggered had cleared the way as far down as the massive shelf of stone where the river gathered before plunging over to the valley below. With the roaring tumble of water growing ever closer on their left and jagged, raw rock on their right, the warriors descended more than a thousand paces, and with each step the gloom deepened around them.

Pale, ghostly light broken by shreds of darker, opaque mists commanded the ledge that spread out on this side of the waterfall. The bones formed a level floor of sorts, abutting the rock wall to the right and appearing to continue on beneath the river that now roared, massive and monstrous, less than twenty paces away on their left.

The horses needed to rest. Karsa watched Bairoth make his way towards the river, then glanced over at Delum, who huddled now among Gnaw’s pack, wet and shivering. The faint glow emanating from the bones seemed to carry a breath unnaturally cold. On all sides, the scene was colourless, strangely dead. Even the river’s immense power felt lifeless.

Bairoth approached. ‘Warleader, these bones beneath us, they continue under the river to the other side. They are deep, almost my height where I could see. Tens of thousands have died to make this. Tens of tens. This entire shelf—’

‘Bairoth Gild, we have rested long enough. There are stones coming down from above – either the guard descends, or there will be another slide to bury what we have revealed. There must be many such slides, for the lowlanders used this on the way up, and that could not have been more than a few days ago. Yet we arrived to find it buried once more.’

Sudden unease flickered through Bairoth’s expression, and he glanced over to where small stones of shale pattered down from the trail above. There were more now than there had been a moment ago.

They gathered the horses once more and approached the shelf’s edge. The descent before them was too steep to hold a slide, the steps switchbacking for as far down as the Teblor could see. The horses balked before it.
'Karsa Orlong, we shall be very vulnerable on that path.'

'We have been so all along, Bairoth Gild. That low-lander behind us has already missed his greatest opportunity. That is why I believe we have outdistanced him, and that the stones we see falling from above portend another slide and nothing more.' With that Karsa coaxed Havok forward onto the first step.

Thirty paces down they heard a faint roar from above, a sound deeper in timbre than the river. A hail of stones swept over them, but at some distance out from the cliff wall. Muddy rain followed for a short time thereafter.

They continued on, until weariness settled into their limbs. The mists might have lightened for a time, but perhaps it was nothing more than their eyes growing accustomed to the gloom. The wheels of sun and stars passed unseen and unseeing over them. The only means of measuring time was through hunger and exhaustion. There would be no stopping until the descent was complete. Karsa had lost count of the switchbacks; what he had imagined to be a thousand paces was proving to be far more. Beside them, the river continued its fall, nothing but mists now, a hissing deluge bitter cold, spreading out to blind them to the valley below and the skies above. Their world had narrowed to the endless bones under their moccasins and the sheer wall of the cliff.

They reached another shelf and the bones were gone, buried beneath squelching, sodden mud and snarled bundles of vivid green grasses. Fallen tree branches cloaked in mosses littered the area. Mists hid all else.

The horses tossed their heads as they were led, finally, onto level ground. Delum and the dogs settled down into a clump of wet fur and skin. Bairoth stumbled close to Karsa. 'Warleader, I am distraught.'

Karsa frowned. His legs were trembling beneath him, and he could not keep the shivering from his muscles. 'Why, Bairoth Gild? We are done. We have descended Bone Pass.'

'Aye.' Bairoth coughed, then said, 'And before long we will come to this place again – to climb.'

Karsa slowly nodded. 'I have thought on this, Bairoth Gild. The lowlands sweep around our plateau. There are other passes, directly south of our own Uryd lands – there must be, else lowlanders would never have appeared among us. Our return journey will take us along the edge, westward, and we shall find those hidden passes.'

'Through lowlander territories the entire way! We are but two, Karsa Orlong! A raid upon the farm at Silver Lake is one thing, but to wage war against an entire tribe is madness! We will be hunted and pursued the entire way – it cannot be done!'

'Hunted and pursued?' Karsa laughed. 'What is new in that? Come, Bairoth Gild, we must find somewhere dry, away from this river. I see treetops, there, to the left. We shall make ourselves a fire, we shall rediscover what it is like to be warm, our bellies full.'

The ledge's slope led gently down a scree mostly buried beneath mosses, lichens and rich, dark soil, beyond which waited a forest of ancient redwoods and cedars. The sky overhead revealed a patch of blue, and shafts of sunlight were visible here and there. Once within the wood, the mists thinned to a musty dampness, smelling of rotting treefalls. The warriors continued on another fifty paces, until they found a sunlit stretch where a diseased cedar had collapsed some time past. Butterflies danced in the golden air and the soft crunch of pine-borers was a steady cadence on all sides. The huge, upright root-mat of the cedar had left a bare patch of bedrock where the tree had once stood. The rock was dry and in full sunlight.

Karsa began unstrapping supplies while Bairoth set off to collect deadwood from the fallen cedar. Delum found a mossy patch warmed by the sun and curled up to sleep. Karsa considered removing the man's sodden clothes, then, seeing the rest of the pack gather around Delum, he simply shrugged and resumed unburdening the horses.

A short while later, their clothes hanging from roots close to the fire, the two warriors sat naked on the bedrock, the chill slowly yielding from muscle and bone.
'At the far end of this valley,' Karsa said, 'the river widens, forming a flat before reaching the lake. The side we are now on becomes the south side of the river. There will be a spar of rock near the mouth, blocking our view to the right. Immediately beyond it, on the lake's southwest shore, stands the lowlander farm. We are very nearly there, Bairoth Gild.'

The warrior on the other side of the hearth rolled his shoulders. 'Tell me we shall attack in daylight, Warleader. I have found a deep hatred for darkness. Bone Pass has shrivelled my heart.'

'Daylight it shall be, Bairoth Gild,' Karsa replied, choosing to ignore Bairoth's last confession, for its words had trembled something within him, leaving a sour taste in his mouth. 'The children will be working in the fields, unable to reach the stronghold of the farmhouse in time. They will see us charging down upon them, and know terror and despair.'

'This pleases me, Warleader.'

The redwood and cedar forest cloaked the entire valley, showing no evidence of clearing or logging. There was little game to be found beneath the thick canopy, and days passed in a diffuse gloom relieved only by the occasional treefall. The Teblor's supply of food quickly dwindled, the horses growing leaner on a diet of blueleaf, cullan moss and bitter vine, the dogs taking to eating rotten wood, berries and beetles.

Midway through the fourth day, the valley narrowed, forcing them ever closer to the river. Travelling through the deep forest, away from the lone trail running alongside the river, the Teblor had ensured that they would remain undiscovered, but now, finally, they were nearing Silver Lake.

They arrived at the river mouth at dusk, the wheel of stars awakening in the sky above them. The trail flanking the river's boulder-strewn bank had seen recent passage, leading northwestern, but no sign of anyone's returning. The air was crisp above the river's rushing water. A broad fan of sand and gravel formed a driftwood-cluttered island where the river opened out into the lake. Mists hung over the water, making the lake's far north and east shores hazy. The mountains reached down on those distant shores, kneeling in the breeze-rippled waves.

Karsa and Bairoth dismounted and began preparing their camp, though on this night there would be no cookfire.

'Those tracks,' Bairoth said after a time, 'they belong to the lowlanders you killed. I wonder what they'd intended on doing in the place where the demon was imprisoned.'

Karsa's shrug was dismissive. 'Perhaps they'd planned on freeing her.'

'I think not, Karsa Orlong. The sorcery they used to assail you was god-aspected. I believe they came to worship, or perhaps the demon's soul could be drawn out from the flesh, in the manner of the Faces in the Rock. Perhaps, for the lowlanders, it was the site of an oracle, or even the home of their god.'

Karsa studied his companion for a long moment, then said, 'Bairoth Gild, there is poison in your words. That demon was not a god. It was a prisoner of the stone. The Faces in the Rock are true gods. There is no comparison to be made.'

Bairoth's heavy brows rose. 'Karsa Orlong, I make no comparison. The lowlanders are foolish creatures, whilst the Teblor are not. The lowlanders are children and are susceptible to self-deception. Why would they not worship that demon? Tell me, did you sense a living presence in that sorcery when it struck you?'

Karsa considered. 'There was ... something. Scratching and hissing and spitting. I flung it away and it then fled. So, it was not the demon's own power.'

'No, it wasn't, for she was gone. Perhaps they worshipped the stone that had pinned her down – there was magic in that as well.'

'But not living, Bairoth Gild. I do not understand the track of your thoughts, and I grow tired of these pointless words.'
'I believe,' Bairoth persisted, 'that the bones of Bone Pass belong to the people who imprisoned the demon. And this is what troubles me, Karsa Orlong, for those bones are much like the lowlanders' – thicker, yes, but still childlike. Indeed, it may be that the lowlanders are kin to that ancient people.'

'What of it?' Karsa rose. 'I will hear no more of this. Our only task now is to rest, then rise with the dawn and prepare our weapons. Tomorrow, we slay children.' He strode to where the horses stood beneath the trees. Delum sat nearby amidst the dogs, Gnaw's three-legged mate cradled in his arms. One hand stroked the beast's head in mindless repetition. Karsa stared at Delum for a moment longer, then turned away to prepare his bedding.

The river's passage was the only sound as the wheel of stars slowly crossed the sky. At some point in the night the breeze shifted, carrying with it the smell of woodsmoke and livestock and, once, the faint bark of a dog. Lying awake on his bed of moss, Karsa prayed to Urugal that the wind would not turn with the sun's rise. There were always dogs on lowlander farms, kept for the same reason as Teblor kept dogs. Sharp ears and sensitive noses, quick to announce strangers. But these would be lowlander breeds – smaller than those of the Teblor. Gnaw and his pack would make short work of them. And there would be no warning ... so long as the wind did not shift.

He heard Bairoth rise and make his way over to where the pack slept.

Karsa glanced over to see Bairoth crouched down beside Delum. Dogs had lifted their heads questioningly and were now watching as Bairoth stroked Delum's upturned face.

It was a moment before Karsa realized what he was witnessing. Bairoth was painting Delum's face in the battle-mask, black, grey and white, the shades of the Uryd. The battle-mask was reserved for warriors who knowingly rode to their deaths; it was an announcement that the sword would never again be sheathed. But it was a ritual that belonged, traditionally, to ageing warriors who had elected to set forth on a final raid, and thus avoid dying with straw on their backs. Karsa rose.

If Bairoth heard his approach, he gave no sign. There were tears running down the huge warrior's broad, blunt face, whilst Delum, lying perfectly still, stared up at him with wide, unblinking eyes.

'He does not comprehend,' Karsa growled, 'but I do. Bairoth Gild, you dishonour every Uryd warrior who has worn the battle-mask.'

'Do I, Karsa Orlong? Those warriors grown old, setting out for a final fight — there is nothing of glory in their deed, nothing of glory in their battle-mask. You are blind if you think otherwise. The paint hides nothing – the desperation remains undisguised in their eyes. They come to the ends of their lives, and have found that those lives were without meaning. It is that knowledge that drives them from the village, drives them out to seek a quick death.' Bairoth finished with the black paint and now moved on to the white, spreading it with three fingers across Delum's wide brow. 'Look into our friend's eyes, Karsa Orlong. Look closely.'

'I see nothing,' Karsa muttered, shaken by Bairoth's words.

'Delum sees the same, Warleader. He stares at ... nothing. Unlike you, however, he does not turn away from it. Instead, he sees with complete comprehension. Sees, and is terrified.'

'You speak nonsense, Bairoth Gild.'

'I do not. You and I, we are Teblor. We are warriors. We can offer Delum no comfort, and so he holds on to that dog, the beast with misery in its eyes. For comfort is what he seeks, now. It is, indeed, all he seeks. Why do I gift him the battle-mask? He will die this day, Karsa Orlong, and perhaps that will be comfort enough for Delum Thord. I pray to Urugal that it be so.'

Karsa glanced skyward. 'The wheel is nearly done. We must ready ourselves.'

'I am almost finished, Warleader.'

The horses stirred as Karsa rubbed blood-oil into his sword's wooden blade. The dogs were on their feet now, pacing restlessly. Bairoth completed his painting of Delum's face and headed off to attend to his own weapons.
The three-legged dog struggled in Delum's arms, but he simply held the beast all the tighter, until a soft growl from Gnaw made the whimpering warrior release it.

Karsa strapped the boiled leather armour onto Havok's chest, neck and legs. When he was done, he turned to see Bairoth already astride his own horse. Delum's destrier had also been armoured, but it stood without a rein. The animals were trembling.

'Warleader, your grandfather's descriptions have been unerring thus far. Tell me of the farmstead's layout.'

'A log house the size of two Uryd houses, with an upper floor beneath a steep roof. Heavy shutters with arrow-slits, a thick, quickly barred door at the front and at the back. There are three outbuildings; the one nearest the house and sharing one wall holds the livestock. Another is a forge, whilst the last one is of sod and likely was the first home before the log house was built. There is a landing on the lakeshore as well, and mooring poles. There will be a corral for the small lowlander horses.'

Bairoth was frowning. 'Warleader, how many lowlander generations have passed since Pahlk's raid?'

Karsa swung himself onto Havok's back. He shrugged in answer to Bairoth's question. 'Enough. Are you ready, Bairoth Gild?'

'Lead me, Warleader.'

Karsa guided Havok onto the trail beside the river. The mouth was on his left. To the right rose a high, raw mass of rock, treed on top, leaning out towards the lakeshore. A wide strand of round-stoned beach wound between the pinnacle and the lake.

The wind had not changed. The air smelled of smoke and manure. The farm's dogs were silent.

Karsa drew his sword, angled the glistening blade near Havok's nostrils. The destrier's head lifted. Trot to canter, onto the pebbled beach, lake on the left, rock wall sliding past to the right. Behind him, he heard Bairoth's horse, hoofs crashing down into the stones, and, further back, the dogs, Delum and his horse, the latter lagging to stay alongside its once-master.

Once clear of the pinnacle, they would shift hard right, and in moments be upon the unsuspecting children of the farm.

Canter to gallop.

Rock wall vanishing, flat, planted fields.

Gallop into charge.

The farm – smoke-blackened ruins barely visible through tall corn plants – and, just beyond it, sprawled all along the lake's shore and back, all the way to the foot of a mountain, a town.

Tall, stone buildings, stone piers and wood-planked docks and boats crowding the lake's edge. A wall of stones enclosing most of the structures inland, perhaps the height of a full-grown lowlander. A main road, a gate flanked by squat, flat-topped towers. Woodsmoke drifting in a layer above the slate rooftops.

Figures on those towers.

More lowlanders – more than could be counted – all scurrying about now, as a bell started clanging. Running towards the gate from the cornfields, farming implements tossed aside.

Bairoth was bellowing something behind Karsa. Not a warcry. A voice pitched with alarm. Karsa ignored it, already closing in on the first of the farmers. He would take a few in passing, but not slacken his pace. Leave these children to the pack. He wanted the ones in the town, cowering behind the now-closing gate, behind the puny walls.

Sword flashed, taking off the back of a farmer's head. Havok ran down another, trampling the shrieking woman under his hoofs.
The gate boomed as it shut.

Karsa angled Havok to the left of it, eyes on the wall as he leaned forward. A crossbow quarrel flitted past, striking the furrowed ground ten paces to his right. Another whistled over his head.

No lowlander horse could clear this wall, but Havok stood at twenty-six hands – almost twice the height and mass of the lowlander breeds – and, muscles bunching, legs gathering, the huge destrier leapt, sailing over the wall effortlessly.

To crash, front hoofs first, onto the sloped roof of a shack. Slate tiles exploded, wood beams snapped. The small structure collapsed beneath them, chickens scattering, as Havok stumbled, legs clawing for purchase, then surged forward onto the muddy cart ruts of the street beyond.

Another building, this one stone-walled, reared up before them. Havok slewed to the right. A figure suddenly appeared at the building's entrance, a round face, eyes wide. Karsa's crossover chop split the lowlander's skull where he stood just beyond the threshold, spinning him in place before his legs folded beneath him.

Hoofs pounding, Havok swept Karsa down the street towards the gate. He could hear slaughter in the fields and the road beyond – most of the workers had been trapped outside the town, it seemed. A dozen guards had succeeded in dropping a bar and had begun fanning out to take defensive positions when the warleader burst upon them.

Iron helm crunched, was torn from the dying child's head as if biting at the blade as it was dragged free. A backhanded slash separated another child's arm and shoulder from his body. Trampling a third guard, Havok pivoted, flinging his hindquarters around to strike a fourth child, sending him flying to crash up against the gate, sword spinning away.

A longsword — its blade as puny as a long knife's to Karsa's eyes — struck his leather-armoured thigh, cutting through two, perhaps three of the hardened layers, before bouncing away. Karsa drove his sword's pommel into the lowlander's face, felt bone crack. A kick sent the child reeling. Figures were scattering in panic from his path. Laughing, Karsa drove Havok forward.

He cut down another guard, whilst the others raced down the street.

Something punched the Teblor's back, then a brief, stinging blossom of pain. Reaching over, Karsa dragged the quarrel free and flung it away. He dropped down from the horse, eyes on the barred gate. Metal latches had been locked over the bar, holding the thick plank in place.

Taking three strides back, Karsa lowered one shoulder, then charged it.

The iron pins holding the hinges between blocks of mortared stone burst free with the impact, sending the entire gate toppling outward. The tower on Karsa's right groaned and sagged suddenly. Voices cried out inside it. The stone wall began to fold.

Cursing, the Teblor scrambled back towards the street as the entire tower collapsed in an explosion of dust.

Through the swirling white cloud, Bairoth rode, threads of blood and gore whipping from his bloodsword, his mount leaping to clear the rubble. The dogs followed, and with them Delum and his horse. Blood smeared Delum Thord's mouth, and Karsa realized, with a faint ripple of shock, that the warrior had torn out a farmer's throat with his own teeth, as would a dog.

Hoofs spraying mud, Bairoth reined in.

Karsa swung himself back onto Havok, twisted the destrier round to face down the street.

A square of pikemen approached at a trot, their long-poled weapons wavering, iron blades glinting in the morning light. They were still thirty paces distant.

A quarrel glanced off the rump of Bairoth's horse, coming from a nearby upper floor window.
From somewhere outside the wall came the sound of galloping horses.

Bairoth grunted. 'Our withdrawal shall be contested, Warleader.'

'Withdrawal?' Karsa laughed. He jutted his chin towards the advancing pikemen. 'There can be no more than thirty, and children with long spears are still children, Bairoth Gild. Come, let us scatter them!'

With a curse, Bairoth unlimbered his bear skull bolas. 'Precede me, then, Karsa Orlong, to hide my preparation.'

Baring his teeth in fierce pleasure, Karsa urged Havok forward. The dogs fanned out to either side, Delum positioning himself on the warleader's far right.

Ahead, the pikes slowly lowered, hovering at chest height as the square halted to plant their weapons.

Upper floor windows on the street opened then, and faces appeared, looking down to witness what would come.

'Urugal!' Karsa bellowed as he drove Havok into a charge. 'Witness!' Behind him he heard Bairoth riding just as hard, and within that clash of sounds rose the whirring flow of the grey bear skull, round and round, and round again.

Ten paces from the readied pikes, and Bairoth roared. Karsa ducked low, pitching Havok to the left even as he slowed the beast's savage charge.

Something massive and hissing whipped past him, and Karsa twisted to see the huge bolas strike the square of soldiers.

Deadly chaos. Three of the five rows on the ground. Piercing screams.

Then the dogs were among them, followed by Delum's horse.

Wheeling his destrier once again, Karsa closed on the shattered square, arriving in time to be alongside Bairoth as the two Teblor rode into the press. Batting aside the occasional, floundering pike, they slaughtered the children the dogs had not already taken down, in the passage of twenty heartbeats.

'Warleader!'

Dragging his bloodsword from the last victim, Karsa turned at Bairoth's bellow.

Another square of soldiers, this time flanked by cross-bowmen. Fifty, perhaps sixty in all, at the street's far end.

Scowling, Karsa glanced back towards the gate. Twenty mounted children, heavily armoured in plate and chain, were slowly emerging through the dust; more on foot, some armed with short bows, others with double-bladed axes, swords or javelins.

'Lead me, Warleader!'

Karsa glared at Bairoth. 'And so I shall, Bairoth Gild!' He swung Havok about. 'This side passage, down to the shoreline – we shall ride around our pursuers. Tell me, Bairoth Gild, have we slain enough children for you?'

'Aye, Karsa Orlong.'

'Then follow!'

The side passage was a street almost as wide as the main one, and it led straight down to the lake. Dwellings, trader stores and warehouses lined it. Shadowy figures were visible in windows, in doorways and at alley mouths as the Teblor raiders thundered past. The street ended twenty paces before the shoreline. The intervening space, through which a wide, wood-planked loadway ran down to the docks and piers, was filled
with heaps of detritus, dominant among them a huge pile of bleached bones, from which poles rose, skulls affixed to their tops.

Teblor skulls.

Amidst this stretch of rubbish, squalid huts and tents filled every clear patch, and scores of children had emerged from them, bristling with weapons, their rough clothing bedecked with Teblor charms and scalps, their hard eyes watching the warriors approach as they began readying long-handled axes, two-handed swords, thick-shafted halberds, whilst yet others strung robust, recurved bows and nocked over-long, barbed arrows – which they began to draw, taking swift aim.

Bairoth's roar was half horror, half rage as he sent his destrier charging towards these silent, deadly children.

Arrows flashed.

Bairoth's horse screamed, stumbled, then crashed to the ground. Bairoth tumbled, his sword spinning away through the air as he struck, then broke through, a sapling-walled hut.

More arrows flew.

Karsa shifted Havok sharply, watched an arrow hiss past his thigh, then he was among the first of the lowlanders. Bloodsword clashed against an axe's bronze-sheathed shaft, the impact tearing the weapon from the man's hands. Karsa's left hand shot out to intercept another axe as it swung towards Havok's head. He plucked it from the man, sent it flying, then lunged forward the same hand to take the lowlander by the neck, lifting him clear as they continued on. A single, bone-crunching squeeze left the head lolling, the body twitching and spilling piss. Karsa flung the corpse away.

Havok's onward plunge was brought to a sudden halt. The destrier shrieked, slewed to one side, blood gushing from its mouth and nostrils, dragging with it a heavy pike, its iron head buried deep in the horse's chest.

The beast stumbled, then, with a drunken weave, it began toppling.

Karsa, screaming his fury, launched himself from the dying destrier's back. A sword point rose to meet him, but Karsa batted it aside. He landed atop at least three tumbling bodies, hearing bones snap beneath him as he rolled his way clear.

Then he was on his feet, bloodsword slashing across the face of a lowlander, ripping black-bearded jaw from skull. An edged weapon scored deep across his back. Spinning, Karsa swung his blade under the attacker's outstretched arms, chopped deep between ribs, jamming at the breastbone.

He tugged fiercely, tearing his sword free, the dying low-lander's body cartwheeling past him.

Heavy weapons, many of them bearing knotted Teblor fetishes, surrounded him, each striving to drink Uryd blood. They fouled each other as often as not, yet Karsa was hard-pressed blocking the others as he fought his way clear. He killed two of his attackers in the process.

Now he heard another fight, nearby, from where Bairoth had crashed into the hut, and, here and there, the snap and snarl of the dogs.

His attackers had been silent until a moment ago. Now, all were screaming in their gibbering tongue, their faces filled with alarm, as Karsa wheeled once more and, seeing more than a dozen before him, attacked. They scattered, revealing a half-crescent line of lowlanders with bows and crossbows.

Strings thrummed.

Searing pain along Karsa's neck, twin punches to his chest, another against his right thigh. Ignoring them all, the warleader charged the half-crescent.

More shouts, sudden pursuit from the ones who had scattered, but it was too late for that. Karsa's sword was
a blur as he cut into the archers. Figures turning to run. Dying, spinning away in floods of blood. Skulls shattering. Karsa carved his way down the line, and left a trail of eight figures, some writhing and others still, behind him, by the time the first set of attackers reached him. He pivoted to meet them, laughing at the alarm in their tiny, wizened, dirt-smereared faces, then he lunged into their midst once more.

They broke. Flinging weapons away, stumbling and scrambling in their panic. Karsa killed one after another, until there were no more within reach of his bloodsword. He straightened, then.

Where Bairoth had been fighting, seven lowlander bodies lay in a rough circle, but of the Teblor warrior there was no sign. The screams of a dog continued from further up the street, and Karsa ran towards the sound.

He passed the quarrel-studded corpses of the rest of the pack, though he did not see Gnaw among them. They had killed a number of lowlanders before they had finally fallen. Looking up, he saw, thirty paces down the street, Delum Thord, near him his fallen horse, and, another fifteen paces beyond, a knot of villagers.

Delum was shrieking. He had taken a dozen or more quarrels and arrows, and a javelin had been thrust right through his torso, just above the left hip. He had left a winding trail of blood behind him, yet still he crawled forward – to where the villagers surrounded the three-legged dog, beating it to death with walking sticks, hoes and shovels.

Wailing, Delum dragged himself on, the javelin scraping alongside him, blood streaming down the shaft.

Even as Karsa began to run forward, a figure raced out from an alley mouth, coming up slightly behind Delum, a long-handled shovel in its hands. Lifting high.

Karsa screamed a warning.

Delum did not so much as turn, his eyes fixed on the now-dead three-legged dog, as the shovel struck the back of his head.

There was a loud crunch. The shovel pulled away, revealing a flat patch of shattered bone and twisted hair.

Delum toppled forward, and did not move.

His slayer spun at Karsa's charge. An old man, his toothless mouth opening wide in sudden terror.

Karsa's downward chop cut the man in half down to the hips.

Tearing his bloodsword free, the warleader plunged on, towards the dozen or so villagers still gathered around the pulped corpse of the three-legged dog. They saw him and scattered.

Ten paces beyond lay Gnaw, leaving his own blood-trail as, back legs dragging, he continued towards the body of his mate. He raised his head upon seeing Karsa. Pleading eyes fixed on the warleader's.

Bellowing, Karsa ran down two of the villagers and left their twitching corpses sprawled in the muddy street. He saw another, armed with a rust-pitted mattock, dart between two houses. The Teblor hesitated, then with a curse he swung about and moments later was crouched beside Gnaw.

A shattered hip.

Karsa glanced up the street to see the pike-wielding soldiers closing at a jog. Three mounted men rode in their wake, shouting out commands. A quick look towards the lakeside revealed more horsemen gathering, heads turned in his direction.

The warleader lifted Gnaw from the ground, tucking the beast under his left arm.

Then he set off in pursuit of the mattock-wielding villager.

Rotting vegetables crowded the narrow aisle between the two houses which, at the far end, opened out into a pair of corralled runs. As he emerged into the track between the two fence lines, he saw the man, still running, twenty paces ahead. Beyond the corrals was a shallow ditch, carrying sewage down to the lake. The child had
crossed it and was plunging into a tangle of young alders – there were more buildings beyond it, either barns or warehouses.

Karsa raced after him, leaping across the ditch, the hunting dog still under his arm. The jostling was giving it great pain, the Teblor knew. He contemplated slitting its throat.

The child entered a barn, still carrying his mattock.

Following, Karsa ducked low as he plunged through the side doorway. Sudden gloom. There were no beasts in the stalls; the straw, still piled high, looked old and damp. A large fishing boat commanded the wide centre aisle, flipped over and resting on wooden horses. Double sliding doors to the left, one of them slightly pushed back, the ropes from the handle gently swinging back and forth.

Karsa found the last, darkest stall, where he set Gnaw down on the straw. 'I shall return to you, my friend,' he whispered. 'Failing that, find a way to heal, then journey home. Home, among the Uryd.' The Teblor cut a thong of leather from his armour strappings. He tore from his belt-bag a handful of bronze sigils bearing the tribal signs, then strung the thong through them. None hung loose, and so would make no sound. He tied the makeshift collar round Gnaw's thick, muscled neck. Then he laid one hand lightly upon the dog's shattered hip and closed his eyes. 'I gift this beast the soul of the Teblor, the heart of the Uryd. Urugal, hear me. Heal this great fighter. Then send him home. For now, bold Urugal, hide him.'

He withdrew his hand and opened his eyes. The beast looked up at him calmly. 'Make fierce your long life, Gnaw. We will meet again, this I vow upon the blood of all the children I have slain this day.'

Shifting grip on his bloodsword, Karsa turned away and departed the stall without another backward glance.

He padded towards the sliding door, looked out.

A warehouse stood opposite, high-ceilinged with a loading loft beneath its slate-tiled roof. From within the building came the sounds of bolts and bars dropping into place. Smiling, Karsa darted across to where the loading chains dangled from pulleys, his eyes on the doorless loft platform high overhead.

As he prepared to sling his sword back over a shoulder, he saw, with a start, that he was festooned with arrows and quarrels, and realized, for the first time, that much of the blood sheathing his body was his own. Scowling, he pulled the darts out. There was more blood, particularly from his right thigh and the two wounds in his chest. A long arrow in his back had buried its barbed head deep into muscle. He attempted to drag the arrow free, but the pain that resulted came close to making him faint. He settled for snapping the shaft just behind the iron head, and this effort alone left him chilled and sweating.

Distant shouts alerted him to a slowly closing cordon of soldiers and townsfolk, all hunting him. Karsa closed his hands around the chains, then began climbing. Every time he lifted his left arm, his back flashed with agony. But it had been the flat of a mattock's blade that had felled Gnaw, a two-handed blow from behind – the attack of a coward. And nothing else mattered.

He swung himself onto the platform's dusty floorboards, padded silently away from the opening as he drew his sword once more.

He could hear breathing, harsh and ragged, below. Low whimpering between gasps, a voice praying to whatever gods the child worshipped.

Karsa made his way towards the gaping hole in the centre of the platform, careful to keep his moccasins from dragging, lest sawdust drift down from between the floorboards. He came to the edge and looked down.

The fool was directly beneath him, crouched down, trembling, the mattock held ready as he faced the barred doors. He had soiled himself in his terror.

Karsa carefully reversed grip on his sword, held it out point downward, then dropped from the ledge.

The sword's tip entered atop the man's pate, the blade driving down through bone and brain. As Karsa's full weight impacted the warehouse floor, there was a massive, splintering sound, and Teblor and victim both
plunged through, down into a cellar. Shattered floorboards crashed down around them. The cellar was deep, almost Karsa's height, stinking of salted fish yet empty.

Stunned by the fall, Karsa feebly groped for his sword, but he could not find it. He managed to raise his head slightly, and saw that something was sticking out of his chest, a red shard of splintered wood. He was, he bemusedly realized, impaled. His hand continued searching for his sword, though he could not otherwise move, but found only wood and fish-scales, the latter greasy with salt and sticking to his fingertips.

He heard the sound of boots from above. Blinking, Karsa stared up as a ring of helmed faces slowly swam into view. Then another child's face appeared, unhelmed, his brow marked in a tribal tattoo, the expression beneath it strangely sympathetic. There was a lot of conversation, hot with anger, then the tattooed child gestured and everyone fell silent. In the Sunyd dialect of the Teblor, the man said, 'Should you die down there, warrior, at least you'll keep for a time.'

Karsa sought to rise once more, but the shaft of wood held him fast. He bared his teeth in a grimace.

'What is your name, Teblor?' the child asked.

'I am Karsa Orlong, grandson of Pahlk—'

'Pahlk? The Uryd who visited centuries ago?'

'To slay scores of children—'

The man's nod was serious as he interjected, 'Children, yes, it makes sense for your kind to call us that. But Pahlk killed no-one, not at first. He came down from the pass, half starved and fevered. The first farmers who'd settled here took him in, nourished him back to health. It was only then that he murdered them all and fled. Well, not all. A girl escaped, made her way back along the lake's south shore to Orbs, and told the detachment there – well, told them everything they needed to know about the Teblor. Since that time, of course, the Sunyd slaves have told us even more. You are Uryd. We've not reached your tribe – you've had no bounty hunters as yet, but you will. Within a century, I'd hazard, there will be no more Teblor in the fastnesses of Laederon Plateau. The only Teblor will be the ones branded and in chains. Plying the nets on the fishing boats, as the Sunyd now do. Tell me, Karsa, do you recognize me?'

'You are the one who escaped us above the pass. Who came too late to warn his fellow children. Who, I know now, is full of lies. Your tiny voice insults the Teblor tongue. It hurts my ears.'

The man smiled. 'Too bad. You should reconsider, in any case, warrior. For I am all that stands between your living or dying. Assuming you don't die of your wounds first. Of course, you Teblor are uncommonly tough, as my companions have just been reminded, to their dismay. I see no blood frothing your lips, which is a good sign, and rather astonishing, since you've four lungs, while we have two.'

Another figure had appeared and now spoke to the tattooed man in stentorian tones, to which he simply shrugged. 'Karsa Orlong of the Uryd,' he called down, 'soldiers are about to descend, to tie ropes to your limbs so you can be lifted out. It seems you're lying on what's left of the town's factor, which has somewhat abated the anger up here, since he was not a well-liked man. I would suggest, if you wish to live, that you not resist the, uh, warleader's nervous volunteers.'

Karsa watched as four soldiers were slowly lowered down on ropes. He made no effort to resist as they roughly bound his wrists, ankles and upper arms, for the truth was, he was incapable of doing so.

The soldiers were quickly dragged back up, then the ropes were drawn taut, and Karsa was steadily lifted. He watched the shaft of splintered wood slowly withdrawing from his chest. It had entered high, just above his right shoulder blade, through muscles, reappearing just to the right of his clavicle on that side. As he was pulled free, pain overwhelmed him.

A hand was then slapping him awake. Karsa opened his eyes. He was lying on the warehouse floor, faces crowding him on all sides. Everyone seemed to be speaking to him at once in their thin, weedy tongue, and though he could not understand the words raw hatred rode the tone, and Karsa knew he was being cursed, in the
name of scores of low-lander gods, spirits and mouldering ancestors. The thought pleased him, and he smiled.

The soldiers flinched back as one.

The tattooed lowlander, whose hand had awakened him, was crouched down at Karsa's side. 'Hood's breath,' he muttered. 'Are all Uryd like you? Or are you the one the priests spoke of? The one who stalked their dreams like Hood's own Knight? Ah well, it doesn't matter, I suppose, for it seems their fears were unfounded. Look at you. Half dead, with a whole town eager to see you and your companion flayed alive – there's not a family to be found not in mourning, thanks to you. Grasp the world by the throat? Not likely; you'll need Oponn's luck to live out the hour.'

The broken arrow shaft had been driven deeper into Karsa's back with the fall, gouging into the bone of his shoulder blade. Blood was spreading out on the floorboards beneath him.

There was a commotion as a new lowlander arrived, this one tall for his kind, thin with a severe, weather-lined face. He was dressed in shimmering clothes, deep blue and trimmed with gold thread sewn into intricate patterns. The guard spoke to him at length, though the man himself said nothing, nor did his expression change. When the guard was finished, the newcomer nodded, then gestured with one hand and turned away.

The guard looked down at Karsa once more. 'That was Master Silgar, the man I work for, most of the time. He believes you will survive your wounds, Karsa Orlong, and so has prepared for you a ... a lesson, of sorts.' The man straightened and said something to the soldiers. There followed a brief argument, which concluded with an indifferent shrug from one of the soldiers.

Karsa's limbs were lifted once more, two lowlanders to each, the men straining to hold him as they carried him to the warehouse doors.

The blood dripping down from his wounds was slowing, pain retreating behind a dull lassitude in the Teblor's mind. He stared up at blue sky as the soldiers carried him to the centre of the street, the sounds of a crowd on all sides. They set him down propped up against a cart wheel, and Karsa saw before him Bairoth Gild.

He had been tied to a much larger spoked wheel, which itself rested against support poles. The huge warrior was a mass of wounds. A spear had been driven into his mouth, exiting just below his left ear, leaving the lower jaw shattered, bone gleaming red amidst torn flesh. The stubs of deep-driven quarrels crowded his torso.

But his eyes were sharp as they met Karsa's own.

Villagers filled the street, held back by a cordon of soldiers. Angry shouts and curses filled the air, punctuated every now and then by wails of grief.

The guard positioned himself between Karsa and Bairoth, his expression mockingly thoughtful. Then he turned to Karsa. 'Your comrade here will tell us nothing of the Uryd. We would know the number of warriors, the number and location of villages. We would know more of the Phalyd as well, who are said to be your match in ferocity. But he says nothing.'

Karsa bared his teeth. 'I, Karsa Orlong, invite you to send a thousand of your warriors to wage war among the Uryd. None shall return, but the trophies will remain with us. Send two thousand. It matters not.'

The guard smiled. 'You will answer our questions, then, Karsa Orlong?'

'I will, for such words will avail you naught—'

'Excellent.' The guard gestured with one hand. A low-lander stepped up to Bairoth Gild, drawing his sword.

Bairoth sneered at Karsa. He snarled, the sound a mangled roar that Karsa nevertheless understood, 'Lead me, Warleader!'

The sword slashed. Through Bairoth Gild's neck. Blood sprayed, the huge warrior's head flopping back, then rolling from a shoulder to land with a heavy thump on the ground.
A savage, gleeful roar erupted from the villagers.

The guard approached Karsa. 'Delighted to hear that you will co-operate. Doing so buys you your life. Master Silgar will add you to his herd of slaves once you've told us all you know. I don't think you will be joining the Sunyd out on the lake, however. No hauling of nets for you, Karsa Orlong, I'm afraid.' He turned as a heavily armoured soldier appeared. 'Ah, here is the Malazan captain. Ill luck, Karsa Orlong, that you should have timed your attack to coincide with the arrival of a Malazan company on its way to Bettrys. Now then, assuming the captain has no objections, shall we begin the questioning?'

The twin trenches of the slave-pits lay beneath the floor of a large warehouse near the lake, accessed through a trapdoor and a mould-smeared staircase. One side held, for the moment, only a half-dozen lowlanders chained to the tree trunk running the length of the trench, but more shackles awaited the return of the Sunyd net-haulers. The other trench was home to the sick and dying. Emaciated low-lander shapes huddled in their own filth, some moaning, others silent and motionless.

After he had done describing the Uryd and their lands, Karsa was dragged to the warehouse and chained in the second trench. Its sides were sloped, packed with damp clay. The centre log ran along the narrow, flat bottom, half-submerged in blood-streaked sewage. Karsa was taken to the far end, out of the reach of any of the other slaves, and shackles were fixed to both wrists and both ankles – whereas, he saw, among everyone else a single shackle sufficed.

They left him alone then.

Flies swarmed him, alighting on his chilled skin. He lay on his side against one of the sloping sides. The wound within which the arrow-head remained was threatening to close, and this he could not allow. He shut his eyes and began to concentrate until he could feel each muscle, cut and torn and seeping, holding fast around the iron point. Then he began working them, the slightest of contractions to test the position of the arrow-head – fighting the pulses of pain that radiated out with each flex. After a few moments, he ceased, let his body relax, taking deep breaths until he was recovered from his efforts. The flanged iron blade lay almost flat against his shoulder blade. Its tip had scoured a groove along the bone. There were barbs as well, bent and twisted.

To leave such an object within his flesh would make his left arm useless. He needed to drive it out.

He began to concentrate once more. Ravaged muscles and tissue, a path inward of chopped and sliced flesh.

A layer of sweat sheathed him as he continued to focus his mind, preparing, his breaths slowing, steadying.

He contracted his muscles. A ragged scream forced its way out. Another welter of blood, amidst relentless pain. The muscles spasmed in a rippling wave. Something struck the clay slope and slid down into the sewage.

Gaspng, trembling, Karsa lay motionless for a long while. The blood streaming down from his back slowed, then ceased.

'Lead me, Warleader'.

Bairoth Gild had made those words a curse, in a manner and from a place of thought that Karsa did not understand. And then, Bairoth Gild had died senselessly. Nothing the lowlanders could do threatened the Uryd, for the Uryd were not as the Sunyd. Bairoth had surrendered his chance for vengeance, a gesture so baffling to Karsa that he was left stunned.

A brutal, knowing glare in Bairoth's eyes, fixed solely on Karsa, even as the sword flashed towards his neck. He would tell the lowlanders nothing, yet it was a defiance without meaning – but no, there was meaning... for Bairoth chose to abandon me.

A sudden shiver took him. Urugal, have my brothers betrayed me? Delum Thord's flight, Bairoth Gild's death –am I to know abandonment again and again? What of the Uryd awaiting my return? Will they not follow when I proclaim war against the lowlanders?

Perhaps not at first. No, he realized, there would be arguments, and opinions, and, seated around the camp
hearth, the elders would poke smouldering sticks into the fire and shake their heads.

Until word came that the lowlander armies were coming.

And then they will have no choice. Would we flee into the laps of the Phalyd? No. There will be no choice but to fight, and I, Karsa Orlong, will be looked upon then, to lead the Uryd.

The thought calmed him.

He slowly rolled over, blinking in the gloom, flies scattering all around his face.

It took a few moments of groping in the sludge to find the arrow-head and its stubby, splintered fragment of shaft. He then crouched down beside the centre log to examine the fittings holding the chains.

There were two sets of chains, one for his arms and one for his legs, each fixed to a long iron rod that had been driven through the trunk, the opposite end flattened out. The links were large and solid, forged with Teblor strength in mind. But the wood on the underside had begun to rot.

Using the arrow-head, he began gouging and digging into the sewage-softened wood around the flange.

Bairoth had betrayed him, betrayed the Uryd. There had been nothing of courage in his last act of defiance. Indeed, the very opposite. They had discovered enemies to the Teblor. Hunters, who collected Teblor trophies. These were truths that the warriors of all the tribes needed to hear, and delivering those truths was now Karsa's sole task.

He was not Sunyd, as the lowlanders were about to discover.

The rot had been drawn up the hole. Karsa dug out the soaked, pulpy mass as far as the arrow-head could reach. He then moved on to the second fitting. The iron bar holding his leg chains would be tested first.

There was no way to tell if it was day or night outside. Heavy boots occasionally crossed the plank floor above him, too random to indicate a set passage of time. Karsa worked unceasingly, listening to the coughs and moans of the lowlanders chained further down the trunk. He could not imagine what those sad children had done, to warrant such punishment from their kin. Banishment was the harshest sentence the Teblor inflicted on those among the tribe whose actions had, with deliberate intent, endangered the survival of the village, actions that ranged from carelessness to kin-murder. Banishment led, usually, to death, but that came of starvation of the spirit within the one punished. Torture was not a Teblor way, nor was prolonged imprisonment.

Of course, he reconsidered, it may be that these lowlanders were sick because their spirits were dying. Among the legends, there were fragments whispering that the Teblor had once owned slaves – the word, the concept, was known to him. Possession of another's life, to do with as one wished. A slave's spirit could do naught but starve.

Karsa had no intention of starving. Urugal's shadow protected his spirit.

He tucked the arrow-head into his belt. Setting his back against the slope, he planted his feet against the log, one to either side of the fitting, then slowly extended his legs. The chain tautened. On the underside of the trunk, the flange was pulled into the wood with a steady splintering, grinding sound.

The shackles dug into his hide-wrapped ankles.

He began to push harder. There was a solid crunch, then the flange would go no further. Karsa slowly relaxed. A kick sent the bar thumping free on the other end. He rested for a few moments, then resumed the process once more.

After a dozen tries he had managed to pull the bar up the span of three fingers from where it had been at the beginning. The flange's edges were bent now, battered by their assault on the wood. His leggings had been cut through and blood gleamed on the shackles.

He leaned his head back on the damp clay of the slope, his legs trembling.
More boots thumped overhead, then the trapdoor was lifted. The glow of lantern light descended the steps, and within it Karsa saw the nameless guard.

'Uryd,' he called out. 'Do you still breathe?'

'Come closer,' Karsa challenged in a low voice, 'and I will show you the extent of my recovery.'

The lowlander laughed. 'Master Silgar saw true, it seems. It will take some effort to break your spirit, I suspect.' The guard remained standing halfway down the steps. 'Your Sunyd kin will be returning in a day or two.'

'I have no kin who accept the life of slavery.'

'That's odd, since you clearly have, else you would have contrived to kill yourself by now.'

'You think I am a slave because I am in chains? Come closer, then, child.'

"'Child," yes. Your strange affectation persists, even while we children have you at our mercy. Well, never mind. The chains are but the beginning, Karsa Orlong. You will indeed be broken, and had you been captured by the bounty hunters high on the plateau, by the time they'd delivered you to this town you'd have had nothing left of Teblor pride, much less defiance. The Sunyd will worship you, Karsa Orlong, for killing an entire camp of bounty hunters.'

'What is your name?' Karsa asked.

'Why?'

The Uryd warrior smiled in the gloom. 'For all your words, you still fear me.'

'Hardly.'

But Karsa heard the strain in the guard's tone and his smile broadened. 'Then tell me your name.'

'Damisk. My name is Damisk. I was once a tracker in the Greydog army during the Malazan conquest.'

'Conquest. You lost, then. Which of our spirits has broken, Damisk Greydog? When I attacked your party on the ridge, you fled. Left the ones who had hired you to their fates. You fled, as would a coward, a broken man. And this is why you are here, now. For I am chained and you are beyond my reach. You come, not to tell me things, but because you cannot help yourself. You seek the pleasure of gloating, yet you devour yourself inside, and so feel no true satisfaction. Yet we both know, you will come again. And again.'

'I shall advise,' Damisk said, his voice ragged, 'my master to give you to the surviving bounty hunters, to do with you as they will. And I will watch—'

'Of course you will, Damisk Greydog.'

The man backed up the stairs, the lantern's light swinging wildly.

Karsa laughed.

A moment later the trapdoor slammed down once more, and there was darkness.

The Teblor warrior fell silent, then planted his feet on the log yet again.

A weak voice from the far end of the trench stopped him. 'Giant.'

The tongue was Sunyd, the voice a child's. 'I have no words for you, lowlander,' Karsa growled.

'I do not ask for words. I can feel you working on this Hood-damned tree. Will you succeed at whatever it is you are doing?'

'I am doing nothing.'
'All right, then. Must be my imagination. We're dying here, the rest of us. In a most terrible, undignified manner.'

'You must have done great wrong—'

The answering laugh was a rasping cough. 'Oh indeed, giant. Indeed. We're the ones who would not accept Malazan rule, so we held on to our weapons and hid in the hills and forests. Raiding, ambushing, making nuisances of ourselves. It was great fun. Until the bastards caught us.'

'Careless.'

'Three of you and a handful of your damned dogs, raiding an entire town? And you call me careless? Well, I suppose we both were, since we're here.'

Karsa grimaced at the truth of that. 'What is it you want, lowlander?'

'Your strength, giant. There are four of us over here who are still alive, though I alone am still conscious ... and very nearly sane. Sane enough, that is, to comprehend the fullest ignobility of my fate.'

'You talk too much.'

'For not much longer, I assure you. Can you lift this log, giant? Or spin it over a few times?'

Karsa was silent for a long moment. 'What would that achieve?'

'It would shorten the chains.'

'I have no wish to shorten the chains.'

'Temporarily.'

'Why?'

'Spin the damned thing, giant. So our chains wrap around it again and again. So, with one last turn, you drag us poor fools at this end under. So we drown.'

'You would have me kill you?'

'I applaud your swift comprehension, giant. More souls to crowd your shadow, Teblor— that's how your kind see it, yes? Kill me, and I will walk with honour in your shadow.'

'I am not interested in mercy, lowlander.'

'How about trophies?'

'I cannot reach you to take trophies.'

'How well can you see in this gloom? I've heard that Teblor—'

'I can see. Well enough to know that your right hand is closed in a fist. What lies within it?'

'A tooth. Just fallen out. The third one since I've been chained down here.'

'Throw it to me.'

'I will try. I am afraid I'm somewhat... worse for wear. Are you ready?'

"Throw.'

The man's arm wavered as he lifted it.

The tooth flew high and wide, but Karsa's arm shot out, chain snapping behind it, and he snatched the tooth from the air. He brought it down for a closer look, then grunted. 'It's rotted.'
'Probably why it fell out. Well? Consider this, too. You will succeed in getting water right through the shaft, which should soften things up even more. Not that you've been up to anything down there.'

Karsa slowly nodded. 'I like you, lowlander.'

'Good. Now drown me.'

'I will.'

Karsa slipped down to stand knee-deep in the foul muck, the fresh wounds around his ankles stinging at the contact.

'I saw them bring you down, giant,' the man said. 'None of the Sunyd are as big as you.'

'The Sunyd are the smallest among the Teblor.'

'Must be some lowlander blood from way back, I'd imagine.'

'They have fallen far indeed.' Karsa lowered both arms, chains dragging, until his hands rested beneath the log.

'My thanks to you, Teblor.'

Karsa lifted, twisted the log, then set it down once more, gasping. 'This will not be quick, lowlander, and for that I am sorry.'

'I understand. Take your time. Biltar slid right under in any case, and Alrute looks about to the next time. You're doing well.'

He lifted the log once more, rolled it another half-twist. Splashes and gurgling sounds came from the other end.

Then a gasp. 'Almost there, Teblor. I'm the last. One more – I'll roll myself under it, so it pins me down.'

'Then you are crushed, not drowned.'

'In this muck? No worries there, Teblor. I'll feel the weight, true, but it won't cause me much pain.'

'You lie.'

'So what? It's not the means, it's the end that matters.'

'All things matter,' Karsa said, preparing once more. 'I shall twist it all the way round this time, lowlander. It will be easier now that my own chains are shorter. Are you ready?'

'A moment, please,' the man sputtered.

Karsa lifted the log, grunting with the immense weight pulling down on his arms.

'I've had a change of heart—' 

'I haven't.' Karsa spun the log. Then dropped it.

Wild thrashing from the other end, chains sawing the air, then frantic coughing.

Surprised, Karsa looked up. A brown-smeared figure flailed about, sputtering, kicking.

Karsa slowly sat back, waiting for the man to recover. For a while, there was naught but heavy gasping from the other end of the log. 'You managed to roll back over, then under and out. I am impressed, lowlander. It seems you are not a coward after all. I did not believe there were such as you among the children.'

'Sheer courage,' the man rasped. 'That's me.'
'Whose tooth was it?'

'Alrute's. Now, no more spinning, if you please.'

'I am sorry, lowlander, but I must now spin it the opposite way, until the log is as it was before I started.'

'I curse your grim logic, Teblor.'

'What is your name?'

'Torvald Nom, though to my Malazan enemies, I'm known as Knuckles.'

'And how came you to learn the Sunyd tongue?'

'It's the old trader language, actually. Before there were bounty hunters, there were Nathii traders. A mutually profitable trade between them and the Sunyd. The truth is, your language is close kin to Nathii.'

'The soldiers spoke gibberish.'

'Naturally; they're soldiers.' He paused. 'All right, that sort of humour's lost on you. So be it. Likely, those soldiers were Malazan.'

'I have decided that the Malazans are my enemy.'

'Something we share, then, Teblor.'

'We share naught but this tree trunk, lowlander.'

'If you prefer. Though I feel obliged to correct you on one thing. Hateworthy as the Malazans are, the Nathii these days are no better. You've no allies among the lowlanders, Teblor, be sure of that.'

'Are you a Nathii?'

'No. I'm Daru. From a city far to the south. The House of Nom is vast and certain families among it are almost wealthy. We've a Nom in the Council, in fact, in Darujhistan. Never met him. Alas, my own family's holdings are more, uh, modest. Hence my extended travels and nefarious professions—'

'You talk too much, Torvald Nom. I am ready to turn this log once more.'

'Damn, I was hoping you'd forgotten about that.'

The iron bar's end was more than halfway through the trunk, the flange a blunt, shapeless piece of metal. Karsa could not keep the aching and trembling from his legs, even as the rest periods between efforts grew ever longer. The larger wounds in his chest and back, created by the splinter of wood, had reopened, leaking steadily to mix with the sweat soaking his clothes. The skin and flesh of his ankles were shredded.

Torvald had succumbed to his own exhaustion, shortly after the log had been returned to its original position, groaning in his sleep whilst Karsa laboured on.

For the moment, as the Uryd warrior rested against the clay slope, the only sounds were his own ragged gasps, underscored by softer, shallow breaths from the far end of the trunk.

Then the sound of boots crossed overhead, first in one direction, then back again, and gone.

Karsa pushed himself upright once more, his head spinning.

'Rest longer, Teblor.'

'There is no time for that, Torvald Nom—'

'Oh, but there is. That slavemaster who now owns you will be waiting here for a while, so that he and his
train can travel in the company of the Malazan soldiers. For as far as Malybridge, at least. There's been plenty
of bandit activity from Fool's Forest and Yellow Mark, for which I acknowledge some proprietary pride, since
it was me who united that motley collection of highwaymen and throat-slitters in the first place. They'd have
already come to rescue me, too, if not for the Malazans.'

'I will kill that slavemaster,' Karsa said.

'Careful with that one, giant. Silgar's not a pleasant man, and he's used to dealing with warriors like you—'

'I am Uryd, not Sunyd.'

'So you keep saying, and I've no doubt you're meaner – you're certainly bigger. All I was saying is, be wary
of Silgar.'

Karsa positioned himself over the log.

'You have time to spare, Teblor. There's no point in freeing yourself if you're then unable to walk. This isn't
the first time I've been in chains, and I speak from experience: bide your time, an opportunity will arise, if you
don't wither and die first.'

'Or drown.'

'Point taken, and yes, I understood your meaning when you spoke of courage. I admit to a moment of
despair.'

'Do you know how long you have been chained here?'

'Well, there was snow on the ground and the lake's ice had just broken.'

Karsa slowly glanced over at the barely visible, scrawny figure at the far end. Torvald Nom, even a
lowlander should not be made to suffer such a fate.'

The man's laugh was a rattle. 'And you call us children. You Teblor cut people down as if you were
executioners, but among my kind, execution is an act of mercy. For your average condemned bastard,
prolonged torture is far more likely. The Nathii have made the infliction of suffering an art – must be the cold
winters or something. In any case, if not for Silgar claiming you – and the Malazan soldiers in town – the locals
would be peeling the skin from your flesh right now, a sliver at a time. Then they'd lock you inside a box to let
you heal. They know that your kind are immune to infections, which means they can make you suffer for a
long, long time. There's a lot of frustrated townsfolk out there right now, I'd imagine.'

Karsa began pulling on the bar once more.

He was interrupted by voices overhead, then heavy thumping, as of a dozen or more barefooted arrivals, the
sound joined now by chains slithering across the warehouse floor.

Karsa settled back against the opposite trench slope.

The trapdoor opened. A child in the lead, lantern in hand, and then Sunyd – naked but for rough-woven short
skirts – making a slow descent, their left ankles shackled with a chain linking them all together. The lowlander
with the lantern walked down the walkway between the two trenches. The Sunyd, eleven in all, six men and
five women, followed.

Their heads were lowered; none would meet Karsa's steady, cold regard.

At a gesture from the child, who had halted four long paces from Karsa's position, the Sunyd turned and slid
down the slope of their trench. Three more lowlanders had appeared, and followed them down to apply the
fixed shackles to the Teblor's other ankles. There was no resistance from the Sunyd.

Moments later, the lowlanders were back on the walk-way, then heading up the steps. The trapdoor squealed
on its hinges, closing with a reverberating thump that sent dust drifting down through the gloom.
'It is true, then. An Uryd.' The voice was a whisper.

Karsa sneered. 'Was that the voice of a Teblor? No, it could not have been. Teblor do not become slaves. Teblor would rather die than kneel before a lowlander.'

'An Uryd . . . in chains. Like the rest of us——'

'Like the Sunyd? Who let these foul children come close and fix shackles to their legs? No. I am a prisoner, but no bindings shall hold me for long. The Sunyd must be reminded what it is to be a Teblor.'

A new voice spoke from among the Sunyd, a woman's. 'We saw the dead, lined up on the ground before the hunters' camp. We saw wagons, filled with dead Malazans. Townsfolk were wailing. Yet, it is said there were but three of you——'

'Two, not three. Our companion, Delum Thord, was wounded in the head, his mind had fallen away. He ran with the dogs. Had his mind been whole, his bloodsword in his hands——'

There was sudden murmuring from the Sunyd, the word bloodsword spoken in tones of awe.

Karsa scowled. 'What is this madness? Have the Sunyd lost all the old ways of the Teblor?'

The woman sighed. 'Lost? Yes, long ago. Our own children slipping away in the night to wander south into the lowlands, eager for the cursed lowlander coins – the bits of metal around which life itself seems to revolve. Sorely used, were our children – some even returned to our valleys, as scouts for the hunters. The secret groves of bloodwood were burned down, our horses slain. To be betrayed by our own children, Uryd, this is what broke the Sunyd.'

'Your children should have been hunted down,' Karsa said. 'The hearts of your warriors were too soft. Blood-kin is cut when betrayal is done. Those children ceased being Sunyd. I will kill them for you.'

'You would have trouble finding them, Uryd. They are scattered, many fallen, many now sold into servitude to repay their debts. And some have travelled great distances, to the great cities of Nathilog and Genabaris. Our tribe is no more.'

The first Sunyd who had spoken added, 'Besides, Uryd, you are in chains. Now the property of Master Silgar, from whom no slave has ever escaped. You will be killing no-one, ever again. And like us, you will be made to kneel. Your words are empty.'

Karsa straddled the log once more. He grasped hold of the chains this time, wrapping them about his wrists as many times as he could.

Then he threw himself back. Muscles bunching, legs pushing down on the log, back straightening. Grinding, splintering, a sudden loud crack.

Karsa was thrown backward onto the clay slope, chains snapping around him. Blinking the sweat from his eyes, he stared down at the log.

The trunk had split, down its entire length.

There was a low hiss from the other end, the rustle of freed chains. 'Hood take me, Karsa Orlong,' Torvald whispered, 'you don't take insults well, do you?'

Though no longer attached to the log, Karsa's wrists and ankles were still chained to the iron bars. The warrior unstrung the chains from his battered, bleeding forearms, then collected one of the bars. Laying the ankle chain against the log, he drove the bar's unflanged end into a single link, then began twisting it with both hands.

'What has happened?' a Sunyd asked. 'What was that sound?'

'The Uryd's spine has snapped,' the first speaker replied in a drawl.
Torvald's laugh was a cold chuckle. 'The Lord's push for you, Ganal, I'm afraid.'

'What do you mean, Nom?'

The link popped, sending a piece whipping across the trench to thud against the earthen wall.

Karsa dragged the chain from his ankle shackles. Then he set to splitting the one holding his wrists.

Another popping sound. He freed his arms.

'What is happening?'

A third crack, as he snapped the chain from the iron bar he had been using – which was the undamaged one, its flange intact, sharp-edged and jagged. Karsa clambered from the trench.

'Where is this Ganal?' he growled.

All but one of the Sunyd lying in the opposite trench shrank back at his words.

'I am Ganal,' said the lone warrior who had not moved. 'Not a broken spine after all. Well then, warrior, kill me for my sceptical words.'

'I shall.' Karsa strode down the walkway, lifting the iron bar.

'If you do that,' Torvald said hastily, 'the others will likely raise a cry.'

Karsa hesitated.

Ganal smiled up at him. 'If you spare me, there will be no alarm sounded, Uryd. It is night, still a bell or more before dawn. You will make good your escape—'

'And by your silence, you will all be punished,' Karsa said.

'No. We were all sleeping.'

The woman spoke. 'Bring the Uryd, in all your numbers. When you have slain everyone in this town, then you can settle judgement upon us Sunyd, as will be your right.'

Karsa hesitated, then he nodded. 'Ganal, I give you more of your miserable life. But I shall come once more, and I shall remember you.'

'I have no doubt, Uryd,' Ganal replied. 'Not any more.'

'Karsa,' Torvald said. 'I may be a lowlander and all—'

'I shall free you, child,' the Uryd replied, turning from the Sunyd trench. 'You have shown courage.' He slid down to the man's side. 'You are too thin to walk,' he observed. 'Unable to run. Do you still wish for me to release you?'

'Thin? I haven't lost more than half a stone, Karsa Orlong. I can run.'

'You sounded poorly earlier on—'

'Sympathy.'

'You sought sympathy from an Uryd?'

The man's bony shoulders lifted in a sheepish shrug. 'It was worth a try.'

Karsa pried the chain apart.

Torvald pulled his arms free. 'Bern's blessing on you, lad.'
'Keep your lowlander gods to yourself.'

'Of course. Apologies. Anything you say.'

Torvald scrambled up the slope. On the walkway, he paused. 'What of the trapdoor, Karsa Orlong?'

'What of it?' the warrior growled, climbing up and moving past the lowlander.

Torvald bowed as Karsa went past, a scrawny arm sweeping out in a graceful gesture. 'Lead me, by all means.'

Karsa halted on the first step and glanced back at the child. 'I am warleader,' he rumbled. 'You would have me lead you, lowlander?'

Ganal said from the other trench, 'Careful how you answer, Daru. There are no empty words among the Teblor.'

'Well, uh, it was naught but an invitation. To precede me up the steps—'

Karsa resumed his climb.

Directly beneath the trapdoor, he examined its edges. He recalled that there was an iron latch that was lowered when locked, making it flush with the surrounding boards. Karsa jammed the chain-fixing end of the iron bar into the join beneath the latch. He drove it in as far as he could, then began levering, settling his full weight in gradual increments.

A splintering snap, the trapdoor jumping up slightly. Karsa set his shoulders against it and lifted.

The hinges creaked.

The warrior froze, waited, then resumed, slower this time.

As his head cleared the hatchway, he could see faint lantern-glow from the far end of the warehouse, and saw, seated around a small round table, three lowlanders. They were not soldiers – Karsa had seen them earlier in the company of the slavemaster, Silgar. There was the muted clatter of bones on the tabletop.

That they had not heard the trapdoor's hinges was, to Karsa's mind, remarkable. Then his ears caught a new sound – a chorus of creaks and groans, and, outside, the howl of a wind. A storm had come in from the lake, and rain had begun spraying against the north wall of the warehouse.

'Urugal,' Karsa said under his breath, 'I thank you. And now, witness ...'

One hand holding the trapdoor over him, the warrior slowly slid onto the floor. He moved far enough to permit Torvald's equally silent arrival, then he slowly lowered the hatch until it settled. A gesture told Torvald to remain where he was, understanding indicated by the man's fervent nod. Karsa carefully shifted the bar from his left hand to his right, then made his way forward.

Only one of the three guards might have seen him, from the corner of his eye, but his attention was intent on the bones skidding over the tabletop before him. The other two had their backs to the room.

Karsa remained low on the floor until he was less than three paces away, then he silently rose into a crouch.

He launched himself forward, the bar whipping horizontally, connecting with first one unhelmeted head, then on to the second. The third guard stared open-mouthed. Karsa's swing finished with his left hand grasping the red-smeared end of the bar, which he then drove crossways into the lowlander's throat. The man was thrown back over his chair, striking the warehouse doors and falling in a heap.

Karsa set the bar down on the tabletop, then crouched down beside one of the victims and began removing his sword-belt.

Torvald approached. 'Hood's own nightmare,' he muttered, 'that's what you are, Uryd.'
'Take yourself a weapon,' Karsa directed, moving on to the next corpse.

'I will. Now, which way shall we run, Karsa? They'll be expecting northwest, back the way you came. They'll ride hard for the foot of the pass. I have friends—'

'I have no intention of running,' the warleader growled, looping both sword-belts over a shoulder, the scabbarded longswords looking minuscule where they rested against his back. He collected the flanged bar once more. He turned to find Torvald staring at him. 'Run to your friends, lowlander. I will, this night, deliver sufficient diversion to make good your escape. Tonight, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord shall be avenged.'

'Don't expect me to avenge your death, Karsa. It's madness – you've already done the impossible. I'd advise you to thank the Lady's pull and get away while you can. In case you've forgotten, this town's full of soldiers.'

'Be on your way, child.'

Torvald hesitated, then he threw up his hands. 'So be it. For my life, Karsa Orlong, I thank you. The family of Nom will speak your name in its prayers.'

'I will wait fifty heartbeats.'

Without another word Torvald headed to the warehouse's sliding doors. The main bar had not been lowered into its slots; a smaller latch loosely held the door to the frame. He flipped it back, pushed the door to one side, sufficient only to pop his head out for a quick look. Then he shoved it open slightly more, and slipped outside.

Karsa listened to his footfalls, the splash of bare feet in mud, hurrying away to the left. He decided he would not wait fifty heartbeats. Even with the storm holding fast the darkness, dawn was not far away.

The Teblor slid the door back further and stepped outside. A track narrower than the main street, the wooden buildings opposite indistinct behind a slanting curtain of hard rain. To the right and twenty paces distant, light showed from a single murky window on the upper floor of a house standing next to a side street.

He wanted his bloodsword, but had no idea where it might be. Failing that, any Teblor weapon would suffice. And he knew where he might find some.

Karsa slid the door shut behind him. He swung right and, skirting the edge of the street, made his way towards the lakefront.

The wind whipped rain against his face, loosening the crusted blood and dirt. The shredded leathers of his shirt flapped heavily as he jogged towards the clearing, where waited the camp of the bounty hunters.

There had been survivors. A careless oversight on Karsa's part; one he would now correct. And, in the huts of those cold-eyed children, there would be Teblor trophies. Weapons. Armour.

The huts and shacks of the fallen had already been stripped, the doors hanging open, rubbish strewn about. Karsa's gaze settled on a nearby reed-walled shack clearly still occupied. He padded towards it.

Ignoring the small door, the warrior threw his shoulder against a wall. The reed panel fell inward, Karsa plunging through. There was a grunt from a cot to his left, a vague shape bolting into a sitting position. Iron bar swung down. Blood and bits of bone sprayed the walls. The figure sank back down.

The small, lone room of the shack was cluttered with Sunyd objects, most of them useless: charms, belts and trinkets. He did find, however, a pair of Sunyd hunting knives, sheathed in beaded buckskin over wood. A low altar caught Karsa's attention. Some lowlander god, signified by a small clay statue – a boar, standing on its hind legs.

The Teblor knocked it to the earthen floor, then shattered it with a single stomp of his heel.

Returning outside, he approached the next inhabited shack.

The wind howled off the lake, white-maned waves crashing up the pebbled beach. The sky overhead was still black with clouds, the rain unceasing.
There were seven shacks in all, and in the sixth one – after killing the two men entwined together in the cot beneath the skin of a grey bear – he found an old Sunyd bloodsword, and an almost complete set of armour that, although of a style Karsa had never seen before, was clearly Teblor in origin, given its size and the sigils burned into the wooden plates. It was only when he began strapping it on that he realized that the grey, weathered wood was blood-wood – bleached by centuries of neglect.

In the seventh hut he found a small jar of blood-oil, and took the time to remove the armour and rub the pungent salve into its starved wood. He used the last of it to ease the sword's own thirst.

He then kissed the gleaming blade, tasting the bitter oil.

The effect was instantaneous. His heart began pounding, fire ripping through his muscles, lust and rage filling his mind.

He found himself back outside, staring at the town before him through a red haze. The air was foul with the stench of lowlanders. He moved forward, though he could no longer feel his legs, his gaze fixing on the bronze-banded door of a large, timbered house.

Then it was flying inward, and Karsa was entering the low-ceilinged hallway beyond the threshold. Someone was shouting upstairs.

He found himself on the landing, face to face with a broad-shouldered, bald child. Behind him cowered a woman with grey-streaked hair, and behind her – now fleeing – a half-dozen servants.

The bald child had just taken down from the wall a longsword still in its jewel-studded scabbard. His eyes glittered with terror, his expression of disbelief remaining frozen on his features even as his head leapt from his shoulders.

And then Karsa found himself in the last room upstairs, ducking to keep his head beneath the ceiling as he stepped over the last of the servants, the house silent behind him. Before him, hiding behind a poster bed, a young female lowlander.

The Teblor dropped his sword. A moment later he held her before him, her feet kicking at his knees. He cupped the back of her head in his right hand, pushed her face against his armour's oil-smeared breastplate.

She struggled, then her head snapped back, eyes suddenly wild.

Karsa laughed, throwing her down on the bed.

Animal sounds came from her mouth, her long-fingered hands snatching up at him as he moved over her.

The female clawed at him, her back arching in desperate need.

She was unconscious before he was done, and when he drew away there was blood between them. She would live, he knew. Blood-oil was impatient with broken flesh.

He was outside in the rain once more, sword in his hands. The clouds were lightening to the east.

Awareness drifted away then, for a time, and when it returned he found himself in an attic with a window at the far end through which streamed bright sunlight. He was on his hands and knees, sheathed in blood, and to one side lay a child's body, fat and in slashed robes, eyes staring sightlessly.

Waves of shivering racked him, his breath harsh gasps that echoed dully in the close, dusty attic. He heard shouts from somewhere outside and crawled over to the round, thick-glassed window at the far end.

Below was the main street, and he realized that he was near the west gate. Glass-distorted figures on restless horses were gathering – Malazan soldiers. As he watched, and to his astonishment, they suddenly set forth for the gate. The thundering of horse hoofs quickly diminished as the party rode westward.
The warrior slowly sat back. There was no sound from directly beneath him, and he knew that no-one remained alive in the house. He knew, also, that he had passed through at least a dozen such houses, sometimes through the front door, but more often through recessed side and rear doors. And that those places were now as silent as the one in which he now found himself.

*The escape has been discovered. But what of the bounty hunters? What of the townsfolk who have yet to emerge onto the street, though the day is already half done? How many did I truly kill?*

Soft footfalls below, five, six sets, spreading out through the room under him. Karsa, his senses still heightened beyond normal by the blood-oil, sniffed the air, but their scent had yet to reach him. Yet he knew – these were hunters, not soldiers. He drew a deep breath and held it for a moment, then nodded to himself. Yes, the slavemaster's warriors. Deeming themselves cleverer than the Malazans, still wanting me for their master.

Karsa made no move – any shift of weight would be heard, he well knew. Twisting his head slowly, he glanced back at the attic's hatch. It was closed – he'd no recollection of doing so, so probably it was the trapdoor's own weight that had dropped it back into place. But how long ago? His gaze flicked to the child's corpse. The blood dripping from his gaping wounds was thick and slow. Some time had passed, then.

He heard someone speak, and it was a moment before he realized that he could understand the language. 'A bell, sir, maybe more.'

'So where,' another asked, 'is Merchant Balantis? Here's his wife, their two children... four servants – did he own more?'

There was more movement.

'Check the lofts—'

'Where the servants slept? I doubt fat old Balantis could have climbed that ladder.'

'Here!' another voice cried from further in. 'The attic stairs are down!'

'All right, so the merchant's terror gave him wings. Go up and confirm the grim details, Astabb, and be quick. We need to check the next house.'

'Hood's breath, Borrug, I nearly lost my breakfast in the last place. It's all quiet up there, can't we just leave it at that? Who knows, the bastard might be chopping up the next family right now.'

There was silence, then: 'All right, let's go. This time, I think Silgar's plain wrong. That Uryd's path of slaughter is straight for the west gate, and I'd lay a year's column he's heading for T'lan Pass right now.'

'Then the Malazans will run him down.'

'Aye, they will. Come on.'

Karsa listened as the hunters converged on the front door then headed back outside. The Teblor remained motionless for another dozen heartbeats. Silgar's men would find no further scenes of slaughter westward along the street. This fact alone would bring them back. He padded across to the trapdoor, lifted it clear, and made his way down the blood-spattered wooden steps. There were corpses strewn along the length of the hallway, the air foul with the reek of death.

He quickly moved to the back door. The yard outside was churned mud and puddles, a heap of pavestones off to one side awaiting the arrival of labourers. Beyond it was a newly built low stone wall, an arched gate in its centre. The sky overhead was broken with clouds carried on a swift wind. Shadows and patches of sunlight crawled steadily over the scene. There was no-one in sight.

Karsa crossed the yard at a sprint. He crouched down at the arched gate. Opposite him ran a rutted, narrow track, parallel to the main street, and beyond it a row of irregular heaps of cut brush amidst tall yellow grasses. The back walls of houses reared behind the heaps.
He was on the western side of the town, and here there were hunters. It followed, then, that he would be safer on the eastern side. At the same time, the Malazan soldiers appeared to be quartered there ... though he'd watched at least thirty of them ride out through the west gate. Leaving how many?

Karsa had proclaimed the Malazans his enemy.

The warrior slipped out onto the track and headed east. Hunched low, he ran hard, his eyes scanning the way ahead, seeking cover, expecting at any moment the shout that would announce his discovery.

He moved into the shadows of a large house that leaned slightly over the alley. In another five strides he would come to the wide street that led down to the lakeshore. Crossing it undetected was likely to prove a challenge. Silgar's hunters remained in the town, as did an unknown number of Malazans. Enough to cause him trouble? There was no telling.

Five cautious strides, and he was at the edge of the street. There was a small crowd at the far end, lakeside. Wrapped bodies were being carried out of a house, whilst two men struggled with a young, naked, blood-splashed woman. She was hissing and trying to claw at their eyes. It was a moment before Karsa recollected her. The blood-oil still burned within her, and the crowd had drawn back in obvious alarm, their attention one and all fixed on her writhing form.

A glance to the right. No-one.

Karsa bolted across the street. He was but a single stride from the alley opposite when he heard a hoarse shout, then a chorus of cries. Skidding through sluicing mud, the warrior raised his sword and snapped his gaze towards the distant crowd.

To see only their backs, as they fled like panicked deer, leaving the wrapped corpses strewn in their wake. The young woman, suddenly released, fell to the mud shrieking, one hand snapping out to clamp on the ankle of one of her captors. She was dragged through the mud for a body length before she managed to foul the man's stride and send him sprawling. She clambered atop him with a snarl.

Karsa padded into the alley.

A bell started a wild clanging.

He continued on, eastward, parallel to the main street. The far end, thirty or more paces distant, seemed to face onto a long, stone-walled, single level building, the windows visible bearing heavy shutters. As he raced towards it, he saw three Malazan soldiers dart across his field of vision – all were helmed, visors lowered, and none turned their heads.

Karsa slowed his pace as he neared the alley's end. He could see more of the building ahead now. It looked somehow different from all the others in the town, its style more severe, pragmatic – a style the Teblor could admire.

He halted at the alley mouth. A glance to his right revealed that the building before him fronted onto the main street, beyond which was a clearing to match that of the west gate, the edge of the town wall visible just beyond. To his left, and closer to hand, the building came to an end, with a wooden corral flanked by stables and outbuildings. Karsa returned his attention to his right and leaned out slightly further.

The three Malazan soldiers were nowhere to be seen.

The bell was still pealing somewhere behind him, yet the town seemed strangely deserted.

Karsa jogged towards the corral. He arrived with no alarms raised, stepped over the railing, and made his way along the building's wall towards the doorway.

It had been left open. The antechamber within held hooks, racks and shelves for weapons, but all such weapons had been removed. The close dusty air held the memory of fear. Karsa slowly entered. Another door stood opposite, this one shut.
A single kick sent it crashing inward.

Beyond, a large room with a row of cots on either side. Empty.

The echoes of the shattered door fading, Karsa ducked through the doorway and straightened, looking around, sniffing the air. The chamber reeked of tension. He felt something like a presence, still there, yet somehow managing to remain unseen. The warrior cautiously stepped forward. He listened for breathing, heard nothing, took another step.

The noose dropped down from above, over his head and down onto his shoulders. Then a wild shout, and it snapped tight around his neck.

As Karsa raised his sword to slice through the hemp rope, four figures descended behind him, and the rope gave a savage yank, lifting the Teblor off his feet.

There was a sudden splintering from above, followed by a desultory curse, then the crossbeam snapped, the rope slackening though the noose remained taut around Karsa's throat. Unable to draw breath, he spun, sword cleaving in a horizontal slash – that passed through empty air. The Malazan soldiers, he saw, had already dropped to the floor and rolled away.

Karsa dragged the rope free of his neck, then advanced on the nearest scrambling soldier.

Sorcery hammered him from behind, a frenzied wave that engulfed the Teblor. He staggered, then, with a roar, shook it off.

He swung his sword. The Malazan before him leapt backward, but the blade's tip connected with his right knee, shattering the bone. The man shrieked as he toppled.

A net of fire descended on Karsa, an impossibly heavy web of pain that drove him to his knees. He sought to slash at it, but his weapon was fouled by the flickering strands. It began constricting as if it possessed a life of its own.

The warrior struggled within the ever-tightening net, and in moments was rendered helpless.

The wounded soldier's screams continued, until a hard voice rumbled a command and eerie light flashed in the room. The shrieks abruptly stopped.

Figures closed in around Karsa, one crouching down near his head. A dark-skinned, scarred face beneath a bald, tattoo-stitched pate. The man's smile was a row of gleaming gold. 'You understand Nathii, I take it. That's nice. You've just made Limp's bad leg a whole lot worse, and he won't be happy about that. Even so, you stumbling into our laps will more than make up for the house arrest we're presently under—'

'Let's kill him, Sergeant—'

'Enough of that, Shard. Bell, go find the slavemaster. Tell him we got his prize. We'll hand him over, but not for nothing. Oh, and do it quietly — I don't want the whole town outside with torches and pitchforks.' The sergeant looked up as another soldier arrived. 'Nice work, Ebron.'

'I damned near wet my pants, Cord,' the man named Ebron replied, 'when he just threw off the nastiest I had.'

'Just shows, don't it?' Shard muttered.

'Shows what?' Ebron demanded.

'Well, only that clever beats nasty every time, that's all.'

Sergeant Cord grunted, then said, 'Ebron, see what you can do for Limp, before he comes round and starts screaming again.'

'I'll do that. For a runt, he's got some lungs, don't he just.'
Cord reached down and carefully slid his hand between the burning strands to tap a finger against the bloodsword. 'So here's one of the famed wooden swords. So hard it breaks Aren steel.'

'Look at the edge,' Shard said. 'It's that resin they use that makes that edge—'

'And hardens the wood itself, aye. Ebron, this web of yours, is it causing him pain?'

The sorcerer's reply came from beyond Karsa's line of sight. 'If it was you in that, Cord, you'd be howling to shame the Hounds. For a moment or two, then you'd be dead and sizzling like fat on a hearthstone.'

Cord frowned down at Karsa, then slowly shook his head. 'He ain't even trembling. Hood knows what we could do with five thousand of these bastards in our ranks.'

'Might even manage to clean out Mott Wood, eh, Sergeant?'

'Might at that.' Cord rose and stepped away. 'So what's keeping Bell?'

'Probably can't find no-one,' Shard replied. 'Never seen a whole town take to the boats like that before.'

Boots sounded in the antechamber, and Karsa listened to the arrival of at least a half-dozen newcomers.

A soft voice said, 'Thank you, Sergeant, for recovering my property—'

'Ain't your property any more,' Cord replied. 'He's a prisoner of the Malazan Empire, now. He killed Malazan soldiers, not to mention damaging imperial property by kicking in that door there.'

'You cannot be serious—'

'I'm always serious, Silgar,' Cord quietly drawled. 'I can guess what you got in mind for this giant. Castration, a cutout tongue, hobbling. You'll put him on a leash and travel the towns south of here, drumming up replacements for your bounty hunters. But the Fist's position on your slaving activities is well enough known. This is occupied territory — this is part of the Malazan Empire now, like it or not, and we ain't at war with these so-called Teblor. Oh, I'll grant you, we don't appreciate renegades coming down and raiding, killing imperial subjects and all that. Which is why this bastard is now under arrest, and he'll likely be sentenced to the usual punishment: the otataral mines of my dear old homeland.' Cord moved to settle down beside Karsa once more. 'Meaning we'll be seeing a lot of each other, since our detachment's heading home. Rumours of rebellion and such, though I doubt it'll come to much.'

Behind him, the slavemaster spoke. 'Sergeant, the Malazan hold upon its conquests on this continent is more than precarious at the moment, now that your principal army is bogged down outside the walls of Pale. Do you truly wish for an incident here? To so flout our local customs—'

'Customs? Still gazing down at Karsa, Cord bared his teeth. 'The Nathii custom has been to run and hide when the Teblor raid. Your studious, deliberate corruption of the Sunyd is unique, Silgar. Your destruction of that tribe was a business venture on your part. Damned successful it was, too. The only flouting going on here is yours, with Malazan law.' He looked up, his smile broadening. 'What in Hood's name do you think our company's doing here, you perfumed piece of scum?'

All at once tension filled the air as hands settled on sword-grips.

'Rest easy, I'd advise,' Ebron said from one side. 'I know you're a Mael priest, Silgar, and you're right on the edge of your warren right now, but I'll turn you into a lumpy puddle if you make so much as a twitch for it.'

'Order your thugs back,' Cord said, 'or this Teblor will have company on his way to the mines.'

'You would not dare—'

' Wouldn't I?'

'Your captain would—'
'No, he wouldn't.'

'I see. Very well. Damisk, take the men outside for a moment.'

Karsa heard receding footsteps.

'Now then, Sergeant,' Silgar continued after a moment, 'how much?'

'Well, I admit I was considering some kind of exchange. But then the town's bells stopped. Which tells me we're out of time. Alas. Captain's back – there, the sound of the horses, coming fast. All of this means we're all official, now, Silgar. Of course, maybe I was stringing you along all the time, until you finally went and offered me a bribe. Which, as you know, is a crime.'

The Malazan troop had arrived at the corral, Karsa could hear. A few shouts, the stamping of hoofs, a brief exchange of words with Damisk and the other guards standing outside, then heavy boots on the floorboards.

Cord turned. 'Captain—'

A rumbling voice cut him off. 'I thought I'd left you under house guard. Ebron, I don't recall granting you permission to rearm these drunken louts...' Then the captain's words trailed away.

Karsa sensed the smile on Cord's face as he said, 'The Teblor attempted an assault on our position, sir—'

'Which no doubt sobered you up quick.'

'That it did, sir. Accordingly, our clever sorcerer here decided to give us back our weapons, so that we could effect the capture of this overgrown savage. Alas, Captain, matters have since become somewhat more complicated.'

Silgar spoke. 'Captain Kindly, I came here to request the return of my slave and was met with overt hostility and threats from this squad here. I trust their poor example is not indicative of the depths to which the entire Malazan army has fallen—'

'That they're definitely not, Slavemaster,' Captain Kindly replied.

'Excellent. Now, if we could—'

'He tried to bribe me, sir,' Cord said in a troubled, distressed tone.

There was silence, then the captain said, 'Ebron? Is this true?'

'Affraid it is, Captain.'

There was cool satisfaction in Kindly's voice as he said, 'How unfortunate. Bribery is a crime, after all...'

'I was just saying the same thing, sir,' Cord noted.

'I was invited to make an offer!' Silgar hissed.

'No you wasn't,' Ebron replied.

Captain Kindly spoke. 'Lieutenant Pores, place the slavemaster and his hunters under arrest. Detach two squads to oversee their incarceration in the town gaol. Put them in a separate cell from that bandit leader we captured on the way back – the infamous Knuckles is likely to have few friends locally. Barring those we strung up beside the road east of here, that is. Oh, and send in a healer for Limp – Ebron seems to have made something of a mess in his efforts on the unfortunate man.'

'Well,' Ebron snapped, 'I ain't Denul, you know.'

'Watch your tone, Mage,' the captain calmly warned.

'Sorry, sir.'
'I admit to some curiosity, Ebron,' Kindly continued. 'What is the nature of this spell you have inflicted on this warrior?'

'Uh, a shaping of Ruse—'

'Yes, I know your warren, Ebron.'

'Yes, sir. Well, it's used to snare and stun dhenrabi in the seas—'

'Dhenrabi? Those giant sea-worms?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, why in Hood's name isn't this Teblor dead?'

'Good question, Captain. He's a tough one, he is, ain't he just.'

'Beru fend us all.'

'Aye, sir.'

'Sergeant Cord.'

'Sir?'

'I have decided to drop the charges of drunkenness against you and your squad. Grief for lost ones. An understandable reaction, all things considered. This time. The next abandoned tavern you stumble into, however, is not to be construed as an invitation to licentiousness. Am I understood?'

'Perfectly, sir.'

'Good. Ebron, inform the squads that we are departing this picturesque town. As soon as possible. Sergeant Cord, your squad will see to the loading of supplies. That will be all, soldiers.'

'What of this warrior?' Ebron asked.

'How long will this sorcerous net last?'

'As long as you like, sir. But the pain—'

'He seems to be bearing up. Leave him as he is, and in the meantime think of a way to load him onto the bed of a wagon.'

'Yes, sir. We'll need long poles—'

'Whatever,' Captain Kindly muttered, striding away.

Karsa sensed the sorcerer staring down on him. The pain had long since faded, no matter what Ebron's claims, and indeed, the steady, slow tensing and easing of the Teblor's muscles had begun to weaken it.

Not long, now ...
'I missed you, Karsa Orlong.'

Torvald Nom's face was mottled blue and black, his right eye swollen shut. He had been chained to the wagon's forward wall and was slouched down amidst rotting straw, watching as the Malazan soldiers levered the Teblor onto the bed using stripped-down saplings that had been inserted beneath the limbs of the huge, net-wrapped warrior. The wagon shifted and groaned as Karsa's weight settled on it.

'Pity the damned oxen,' Shard said, dragging one of the saplings free, his breath harsh and his face red with exertion.

A second wagon stood nearby, just within the field of Karsa's vision as he lay motionless on the weathered boards. In its back sat Silgar, Damisk, and three other Nathii low-landers. The slavemaster's face was white and patchy, the blue and gold trim of his expensive clothes stained and wrinkled. Seeing him, Karsa laughed.

Silgar's head snapped around, dark eyes fixing like knives on the Uryd warrior.

'Taker of slaves!' Karsa sneered.

The Malazan soldier, Shard, climbed onto the wagon's wall and leaned over to study Karsa for a moment, then he shook his head. 'Ebron!' he called out. 'Come look. That web ain't what it was.'

The sorcerer clambered up beside him. His eyes narrowed. 'Hood take him,' he muttered. 'Get us some chains, Shard. Heavy ones, and lots of them. Tell the captain, too, and hurry.'

The soldier dropped out of sight.

Ebron scowled down at Karsa. 'You got otataral in your veins? Nerruse knows, that spell should have killed you long ago. What's it been, three days now. Failing that, the pain should have driven you mad. But you're no madder than you were a week ago, are you?' His scowl deepened. 'There's something about you ... something ...'

Soldiers were suddenly clambering up on all sides, some dragging chains whilst others held back slightly with crossbows cocked.

'Can we touch this?' one asked, hesitating over Karsa.

'You can now,' Ebron replied, then spat.

Karsa tested the magical constraints in a single, concerted surge that forced a bellow from his throat. Strands snapped.

Answering shouts. Wild panic.

As the Uryd began dragging himself free, his sword still in his right hand, something hard cracked into the side of his head.

Blackness swept over him.
He awoke lying on his back, spread-eagled on the bed of the wagon as it rocked and jolted beneath him. His limbs were wrapped in heavy chains that had been spiked to the boards. Others crisscrossed his chest and stomach. Dried blood crusted the left side of his face, sealing the lid of that eye. He could smell dust, wafting up from between the boards, as well as his own bile.

Torvald spoke from somewhere beyond Karsa's head. 'So you're alive after all. Despite what the soldiers were saying, you looked pretty much dead to me. You certainly smell that way. Well, almost. In case you're wondering, friend, it's been six days. That gold-toothed sergeant hit you hard. Broke the shovel's shaft.'

A sharp, throbbing pain bloomed in Karsa's head as soon as he tried to lift it clear of the foul-smelling boards. He grimaced, settling once more. 'Too many words, lowlander. Be quiet.'

'Quiet's not in my nature, alas. Of course, you don't have to listen. Now, you might think otherwise, but we should be celebrating our good fortune. Prisoners of the Malazans is an improvement over being Silgar's slaves. Granted, I might end up getting executed as a common criminal – which is, of course, precisely what I am – but more likely we're both off to work in the imperial mines in Seven Cities. Never been there, but even so, it's a long trip, land and sea. There might be pirates. Storms. Who knows? Might even be the mines aren't so bad as people say. What's a little digging? I can't wait for the day they put a pickaxe in your hands – oh my, won't you have some fun? Lots to look forward to, don't you think?''

'Including cutting out your tongue.'

'Humour? Hood take me, I didn't think you had it in you, Karsa Orlong. Anything else you want to say? Feel free.'

'I'm hungry.'

'We'll reach Culvern Crossing by tonight – the pace has been torturously slow, thanks to you, since it appears you weigh more than you should, more even than Silgar and his four thugs. Ebron says you don't have normal flesh – same for the Sunyd, of course – but with you it's even more so. Purer blood, I suppose. Meaner blood, that's for sure. I remember, once, in Darujhistan, I was just a lad, a troop arrived with a grey bear, all chained up. Had it in a huge tent just outside Worrytown, charged a sliver to see it. First day, I was there. The crowd was huge. Everyone'd thought grey bears had died out centuries ago—' 

'Then you are all fools,' Karsa growled.

'So we were, because there it was. Collared, chained down, with red in its eyes. The crowd rushed in, me in it, and that damned thing went wild. Broke loose like those chains were braids of grass. You wouldn't believe the panic. I got trampled on, but managed to crawl out from under the tent with my scrawny but lovely body mostly intact. That bear – bodies were flying from its path. It charged straight for the Gadorbi Hills and was never seen again. Sure, there's rumours to this day that the bastard's still there, eating the occasional herder . . . and herd. Anyway, you remind me of that grey bear, Uryd. The same look in your eyes. A look that says: Chains will not hold me. And that's what has me so eager to see what will happen next.'

'I shall not hide in the hills, Torvald Nom.'

'Didn't think you would. Do you know how you will be loaded onto the prison ship? Shard told me. They'll take the wheels off this wagon. That's it. You'll be riding this damned bed all the way to Seven Cities.'

The wagon's wheels slid down into deep, stony ruts, the jarring motion sending waves of pain through Karsa's head.

'You still here?' Torvald asked after a moment.

Karsa remained silent.

'Oh well,' the Daru sighed.

Lead me, Warleader.
This was not the world he had expected. The lowlanders were both weak and strong, in ways he found difficult to comprehend. He had seen huts built one atop another; he had seen watercraft the size of entire Teblor houses.

Expecting a farmstead, they had found a town. Anticipating the slaughter of fleeing cowards, they had instead been met with fierce opponents who stood their ground.

And Sunyd slaves. The most horrifying discovery of all. Teblor, their spirits broken. He had not thought such a thing was possible.

_I shall snap those chains on the Sunyd. This, I vow before the Seven. I shall give the Sunyd lowlander slaves in turn – no. To do such would be as wrong as what the lowlanders have done to the Sunyd, have done, indeed, to their own kin. No, his sword's gathering of souls was a far cleaner, a far purer deliverance._

He wondered about these Malazans. They were, it was clear, a tribe that was fundamentally different from the Nathii. Conquerors, it seemed, from a distant land. Holders to strict laws. Their captives not slaves, but prisoners, though it had begun to appear that the distinction lay in name only. He would be set to work.

Yet he had no desire to work. Thus, it was punishment, intended to bow his warrior spirit, to – in time – break it. In this, a fate to match that of the Sunyd.

_But that shall not happen, for I am Uryd, not Sunyd. They shall have to kill me, once they realize that they cannot control me. And so, the truth is before me. Should I hasten that realization, I shall never see release from this wagon._

_Torvald Nom spoke of patience – the prisoner's code. Urugal, forgive me, for I must now avow to that code. I must seem to relent._

Even as he thought it, he knew it would not work. These Malazans were too clever. They would be fools to trust a sudden, inexplicable passivity. No, he needed to fashion a different kind of illusion.

_Delum Thord. You shall now be my guide. Your loss is now my gift. You walked the path before me, showing me the steps. I shall awaken yet again, but it shall not be with a broken spirit, but with a broken mind._

Indeed, the Malazan sergeant had struck him hard. The muscles of his neck had seized, clenched tight around his spine. Even breathing triggered lancing stabs of pain. He sought to slow it, shifting his thoughts away from the low roar of his nerves.

The Teblor had lived in blindness for centuries, oblivious of the growing numbers – and growing threat – of the lowlanders. Borders, once defended with vicious determination, had for some reason been abandoned, left open to the poisoning influences from the south. It was important, Karsa realized, to discover the cause of this moral failing. The Sunyd had never been among the strongest of the tribes, yet they were Teblor none the less, and what befell them could, in time, befall all the others. This was a difficult truth, but to close one's eyes to it would be to walk the same path yet again.

There were failings that must be faced. Pahlk, his own grandfather, had been something far less than the warrior of glorious deeds that he pretended to be. Had Pahlk returned to the tribe with truthful tales, then the warnings within them would have been heard. A slow but inexorable invasion was under way, one step at a time. A war on the Teblor that assailed their spirit as much as it did their lands. Perhaps such warnings would have proved sufficient to unite the tribes.

He considered this, and darkness settled upon his thoughts. No. Pahlk's failing had been a deeper one; it was not his lies that were the greatest crime, it was his lack of courage, for he had shown himself unable to wrest free of the strictures binding the Teblor. His people's rules of conduct, the narrowly crafted confines of expectations – its innate conservatism that crushed dissent with the threat of deadly isolation – these were what had defeated his grandfather's courage.

_Yet not, perhaps, my father's._
The wagon jolted once more beneath him.

*I saw your mistrust as weakness. Your unwillingness to participate in our tribe's endless, deadly games of pride and retribution — I saw this as cowardice. Even so, what have you done to challenge our ways? Nothing. Your only answer was to hide yourself away — and to belittle all that I did, to mock my zeal.*

*Preparing me for this moment.*

*Very well, Father, I can see the gleam of satisfaction in your eyes, now. But I tell you this, you delivered naught but wounds upon your son. And I have had enough of wounds.*

Urugal was with him. All the Seven were with him. Their power would make him impervious to all that besieged his Teblor spirit. He would, one day, return to his people, and he would shatter their rules. He would unite the Teblor, and they would march behind him ... down into the lowlands.

Until that moment, all that came before -- all that afflicted him now -- was but preparation. He would be the weapon of retribution, and it was the enemy itself that now honed him.

*Blindness curses both sides, it seems. Thus, the truth of my words shall be shown.*

Such were his last thoughts before consciousness once more faded away.

Excited voices awoke him. It was dusk and the air was filled with the smell of horses, dust and spiced foods. The wagon was motionless under him, and he could now hear, mingled with the voices, the sounds of many people and a multitude of activities, underscored by the rush of a river.

'Ah, awake once more,' Torvald Nom said.

Karsa opened his eyes but did not otherwise move.

'This is Culvern Crossing,' the Daru went on, 'and it's a storm swirling with the latest news from the south. All right, a small storm, given the size of this latrine pit of a town. The scum of the Nathii, which is saying a lot. The Malazan company's pretty excited, though. Pale's just fallen, you see. A big battle, lots of sorcery, and Moon's Spawn retreated -- likely headed to Darujhistan, in fact. Beru take me, I wish I was there right now, watching it crossing the lake, what a sight that'd be. The company, of course, are wishing they'd been there for the battle. Idiots, but that's soldiers for you—'

'And why not?' Shard's voice snapped as the wagon rocked slightly and the man appeared. 'The Ashok Regiment deserves better than to be stuck up here hunting bandits and slavers.'

'The Ashok Regiment is you, I presume,' Torvald said.

'Aye. Damned veterans, too, one and all.'

'So why aren't you down south, Corporal?' Shard made a face, then turned away with narrowed eyes. 'She don't trust us, that's why,' he murmured. 'We're Seven Cities, and the bitch don't trust us.'

'Excuse me,' Torvald said, 'but if she -- and by that I take you to mean your Empress -- doesn't trust you, then why is she sending you home? Isn't Seven Cities supposedly on the edge of rebellion? If there's a chance of you turning renegade, wouldn't she rather have you here on Genabackis?'

Shard stared down at Torvald Nom. 'Why am I talking to you, thief? You might damn well be one of her spies. A Claw, for all I know.'

'If I am, Corporal, you haven't been treating me very well. A detail I'd be sure to put in my report -- this secret one, the one I'm secretly writing, that is. *Shard,* wasn't it? As in a piece of broken glass, yes? And you called the Empress "bitch"—'
'Shut up,' the Malazan snarled.

'Just making a rather obvious point, Corporal.'

'That's what you think,' Shard sneered as he dropped back down from the side of the wagon and was lost from sight.

Torvald Nom said nothing for a long moment, then, 'Karsa Orlong, do you have any idea what that man meant by that last statement?'

Karsa spoke in a low voice, 'Torvald Nom, listen well. A warrior who followed me, Delum Thord, was struck on the head. His skull cracked and leaked thought-blood. His mind could not walk back up the path. He was left helpless, harmless. I, too, have been struck on the head. My skull is cracked and I have leaked thought-blood—'

'Actually, it was drool—'

'Be quiet. Listen. And answer, when you will, in a whisper. I have awakened now, twice, and you have observed—'

Torvald interjected in a soft murmur. 'That your mind's lost on the trail or something. Is that what I have observed? You babble meaningless words, sing childhood songs and the like. All right, fine. I'll play along, on one condition.'

'What condition?'

'That whenever you manage to escape, you free me as well. A small thing, you might think, but I assure you —'

'Very well. I, Karsa Orlong of the Uryd, give my word.'

'Good. I like the formality of that vow. Sounds like it's real.'

'It is. Do not mock me, else I kill you once I have freed you.'

'Ah, now I see the hidden caveat. I must twist another vow from you, alas—'

The Teblor growled with impatience, then relented and said, 'I, Karsa Orlong, shall not kill you once I have freed you, unless given cause.'

'Explain the nature of those causes—'

'Are all Daru like you?'

'It needn't be an exhaustive list. "Cause" being, say, attempted murder, betrayal, and mockery of course. Can you think of any others?'

'Talking too much.'

'Well, with that one we're getting into very grey, very murky shades, don't you think? It's a matter of cultural distinctions—'

'I believe Darujhistan shall be the first city I conquer—'

'I've a feeling the Malazans will get there first, I'm afraid. Mind you, my beloved city has never been conquered, despite its being too cheap to hire a standing army. The gods not only look down on Darujhistan with a protective eye, they probably drink in its taverns. In any case – oh, shhh, someone's coming.'

Bootsteps neared, then, as Karsa watched through slitted eyes, Sergeant Cord clambered up into view and glared for a long moment at Torvald Nom. 'You sure don't look like a Claw ...' he finally said. 'But maybe that's the whole point.'
'Perhaps it is.'

Cord's head began turning towards Karsa and the Teblor closed his eyes completely. 'He come around yet?'

'Twice. Doing nothing but drooling and making animal sounds. I think you went and damaged his brain, assuming he has one.'

Cord grunted. ' Might prove a good thing, so long as he doesn't die on us. Now, where was I?'

'Torvald Nom, the Claw.'

'Right. OK. Even so, we're still treating you as a bandit – until you prove to us you're something otherwise – and so you're off to the otataral mines with everyone else. Meaning, if you are a Claw, you'd better announce it before we leave Genabarids.'

'Assuming, of course,' Torvald smiled, 'my assignment does not require me to assume the disguise of a prisoner in the otataral mines.'

Cord frowned, then, hissing a curse, he dropped down from the side of the wagon.

They heard him shout, 'Get this damned wagon on that ferry! Now!'

The wheels creaked into sudden motion, the oxen lowing.

Torvald Nom sighed, leaning his head against the wall and closing his eyes.

'You play a deadly game,' Karsa muttered.

The Daru propped one eye open. 'A game, Teblor? Indeed, but maybe not the game you think.'

Karsa grunted his disgust.

'Be not so quick to dismiss—'

'I am,' the warrior replied, as the oxen dragged the wagon onto a ramp of wooden boards. 'My causes shall be "attempted murder, betrayal, mockery, and being one of these Claws".'

'And talking too much?'

'It seems I shall have to suffer that curse.'

Torvald slowly cocked his head, then he grinned. 'Agreed.'

In a strange way, the discipline of maintaining the illusion of mindlessness proved Karsa's greatest ally in remaining sane. Days, then weeks lying supine, spread-eagled and chained down to the bed of a wagon was a torture unlike anything the Teblor could have imagined possible. Vermin crawled all over his body, covering him in bites that itched incessantly. He knew of large animals of the deep forest being driven mad by blackflies and midges, and now he understood how such an event could occur.

He was washed down with buckets of icy water at the end of each day, and was fed by the drover guiding the wagon, an ancient foul-smelling Nathii who would crouch down beside his head with a smoke-blackened iron pot filled with some kind of thick, seed-filled stew. He used a large wooden spoon to pour the scalding, malty cereal and stringy meat into Karsa's mouth – the Teblor's lips, tongue and the insides of his cheeks were terribly blistered, the feedings coming too often to allow for healing.

Meals became an ordeal, which was alleviated only when Torvald Nom talked the drover into permitting the Daru to take over the task, ensuring that the stew had cooled sufficiently before it was poured into Karsa's mouth. The blisters were gone within a few days.

The Teblor endeavoured to keep his muscles fit through sessions, late at night, of flexing and unflexing, but
all his joints ached from immobility, and for this he could do nothing.

At times, his discipline wavered, his thoughts travelling back to the demon he and his comrades had freed. That woman, the Forkassal, had spent an unimaginable length of time pinned beneath that massive stone. She had managed to achieve some movement, had no doubt clung to some protracted sense of progress as she clawed and scratched against the stone. Even so, Karsa could not comprehend her ability to withstand madness and the eventual death that was its conclusion.

Thoughts of her left him humbled, his spirit weakened by his own growing frailty in these chains, in the wagon bed's rough-hewn planks that had rubbed his skin raw, in the shame of his soiled clothes, and the simple, unbearable torment of the lice and fleas.

Torvald took to talking to him as he would a child, or a pet. Calming words, soothing tones, and the curse of talking too much was transformed into something Karsa could hold on to, his desperate grip ever tightening. The words fed him, kept his spirit from starving. They measured the cycle of days and nights that passed, they taught him the language of the Malazans, they gave him an account of the places they travelled through. After Culvern Crossing, there had been a larger town, Ninsano Moat, where crowds of children had clambered onto the wagon, poking and prodding him until Shard arrived to drive them away. Another river had been crossed there. Onward to Malybridge, a town of similar proportions to Ninsano Moat, then, seventeen days later, Karsa stared up at the arched stone gateway of a city – Tanys – passing over him, and on either side, as the wagon made its rocking way down a cobbled street, huge buildings of three, even four levels. And all around, the sounds of people, more lowlanders than Karsa had thought possible.

Tanys was a port, resting on tiered ridges rising from the east shore of the Malyn Sea, where the water was brackish with salt – such as was found in a number of springs near the Rathyd borderlands. Yet the Malyn Sea was no turgid, tiny pool; it was vast, for the journey across it to the city called Malynataes consumed four days and three nights.

It was the transferring onto the ship that resulted in Karsa's being lifted upright – unwheeled wagon bed included – for the first time, creating a new kind of torture as the chains took his full weight. His joints screamed within him and gave voice as Karsa's shrieks filled the air, continuing without surcease until someone poured a fiery, burning liquid down his throat, enough to fill his stomach, after which his mind sank away.

When he awoke he found that the platform that held him remained upright, strapped to what Torvald called the main mast. The Daru had been chained nearby, having assumed the responsibility for Karsa's care. The ship's healer had rubbed salves into Karsa's swollen joints, deadening the pain. But a new agony had arrived, raging behind his eyes.

'Hurting?' Torvald Nom murmured. 'That's called a hangover, friend. A whole bladder of rum was poured into you, lucky bastard that you are. You heaved half of it back up, of course, but it had sufficiently worsened in the interval to enable me to refrain from licking the deck, leaving my dignity intact. Now, we both need some shade or we'll end up fevered and raving – and believe me, you've done enough raving for both of us already. Fortunately in your Teblor tongue, which few if any aboard understand. Aye, we've parted ways with Captain Kindly and his soldiers, for the moment. They're crossing on another ship. By the way, who is Dayliss? No, don't tell me. You've made quite a list of rather horrible things you've got planned for this Dayliss, whoever he or she is. Anyway, you should have your sea-legs by the time we dock in Malynataes, which should prepare you somewhat for the horrors of Meningalle Ocean. I hope.

'Hungry?'

The crew, mostly Malazans, gave Karsa's position wide berth. The other prisoners had been locked below, but the wagon bed had proved too large for the cargo hatch, and Captain Kindly had been firm on his instructions not to release Karsa, in any circumstances, despite his apparent feeble-mindedness. Not a sign of scepticism, Torvald had explained in a whisper, just the captain's legendary sense of caution, which was reputedly extreme even for a soldier. The illusion seemed to have, in fact, succeeded – Karsa had been bludgeoned into a harmless ox, devoid of any glimmer of intelligence in his dull eyes, his endless, ghastly smile evincing permanent incomprehension. A giant, once warrior, now less than a child, comforted only by the
shackled bandit, Torvald Nom, and his incessant chatter.

'Eventually, they'll have to unchain you from that wagon bed,' the Daru once muttered in the darkness as the ship rolled on towards Malyntaeas. 'But maybe not until we arrive at the mines. You'll just have to hold on, Karsa Orlong – assuming you're still pretending you've lost your mind, and these days I admit you've got even me convinced. You are still sane, aren't you?'

Karsa voiced a soft grunt, though at times he himself was unsure. Some days had been lost entirely, simply blank patches in his memory – more frightening than anything else he'd yet to experience. Hold on? He did not know if he could.

The city of Malyntaeas had the appearance of having been three separate cities at one time. It was midday when the ship drew into the harbour, and from his position against the main mast Karsa's view was mostly unobstructed. Three enormous stone fortifications commanded three distinct rises in the land, the centre one set back further from the shoreline than the other two. Each possessed its own peculiar style of architecture. The keep to the left was squat, robust and unimaginative, built of a golden, almost orange limestone that looked marred and stained in the sunlight. The centre fortification, hazy through the woodsmoke rising from the maze of streets and houses filling the lower tiers between the hills, appeared older, more decrepit, and had been painted – walls, domes and towers – in a faded red wash. The fortification on the right was built on the very edge of the coastal cliff, the sea below roaring amidst tumbled rocks and boulders, the cliff itself rotted, pockmarked and battle-scarred. Ship-launched projectiles had battered the keep's sloped walls at some time in the past; deep cracks radiated from the wounds, and one of the square towers had slumped and shifted and now leaned precariously outward. Yet a row of pennants fluttered beyond the wall.

Around each keep, down the slopes and in the flat, lowest stretches, buildings crowded every available space, mimicking its particular style. Borders were marked by wide streets, winding inland, where one style faced the other down their crooked lengths.

Three tribes had settled here, Karsa concluded as the ship eased its way through the crowds of fisherboats and traders in the bay.

Torvald Nom rose to his feet in a rustle of chains, scratching vigorously at his snarled beard. His eyes glittered as he gazed at the city. 'Malyntaeas,' he sighed. 'Nathii, Genabarri and Korhivi, side by side by side. And what keeps them from each other's throats? Naught but the Malazan overlord and three companies from the Ashok Regiment. See that half-ruined keep over there, Karsa? That's from the war between the Nathii and the Korhivi. The whole Nathii fleet filled this bay, flinging stones at the walls, and they were so busy with trying to kill each other that they didn't even notice when the Malazan forces arrived. Dujek Onearm, three legions from the 2nd, the Bridgeburners, and two High Mages. That's all Dujek had, and by day's end the Nathii fleet was on the bay's muddy bottom, the Genabarri royal line holed up in their blood-red castle were all dead, and the Korhivi keep had capitulated.'

The ship was approaching a berth alongside a broad, stone pier, sailors scampering about on all sides.

Torvald was smiling. 'All well and good, you might be thinking. The forceful imposition of peace and all that. Only, the city's Fist is about to lose two of his three companies. Granted, replacements are supposedly on the way. But when? From where? How many? See what happens, my dear Teblor, when your tribe gets too big? Suddenly, the simplest things become ungainly, unmanageable. Confusion seeps in like fog, and everyone gropes blind and dumb.'

A voice cackled from slightly behind and to Karsa's left. A bandy-legged, bald officer stepped into view, his eyes on the berth closing ahead, a sour grin twisting his mouth. In Nathii, he said, 'The bandit chief pontificates on politics, speaking from experience no doubt, what with having to manage a dozen unruly highwaymen. And why are you telling this brainless fool, anyway? Ah, of course, a captive and uncomplaining audience.'

'Well, there is that,' Torvald conceded. 'You are the First Mate? I was wondering, sir, about how long we'd be staying here in Malyntaeas—'

'You were wondering, were you? Fine, allow me to explain the course of events for the next day or two. One. No prisoners leave this ship. Two. We pick up six squads of the 2nd Company. Three, we sail on to Genabarri.'
You're then shipped off and I'm done with you.'

'I sense a certain unease in you, sir,' Torvald said. 'Have you security concerns regarding fair Malyntaeas?'

The man's head slowly turned. He regarded the Daru for a moment, then grunted. 'You're the one might be a Claw. Well, if you are, add this to your damned report. There's Crimson Guard in Malyntaeas, stirring up the Korhivi. The shadows ain't safe, and it's getting so bad that the patrols don't go anywhere unless there's two squads at the minimum. And now two-thirds of them are being sent home. The situation in Malyntaeas is about to get very unsettled.'

'The Empress would certainly be remiss to discount the opinions of her officers,' Torvald replied.

The First Mate's eyes narrowed. 'She would at that.'

He then strode ahead, bellowing at a small group of sailors who'd run out of things to do.

Torvald tugged at his beard, glanced over at Karsa and winked. 'Crimson Guard. That's troubling indeed. For the Malazans, that is.'

Days vanished. Karsa became aware once again as the wagon bed pitched wildly under him. His joints were afire, as his weight was shifted, chains snapping taut to jolt his limbs. He was being wheeled through the air, suspended from a pulley beneath a creaking framework of beams. Ropes whipped about, voices shouting from below. Overhead, seagulls glided above masts and rigging. Figures clung to that rigging, staring down at the Teblor.

The pulley squealed, and Karsa watched the sailors get smaller. Hands gripped the bed's edges on all sides, steadying it. The end nearest his feet dropped further, drawing him slowly upright.

He saw before him the mid- and foredecks of a huge ship, over which swarmed haulers and stevedores, sailors and soldiers. Supplies were piled everywhere, the bundles being shifted below decks through gaping hatches.

The bed's bottom end scraped the deck. Shouts, a flurry of activity, and the Teblor felt the bed lifted slightly, swinging free once more, then it was lowered again, and this time Karsa could both hear and feel the top edge thump against the main mast. Ropes were drawn through chains to bind the platform in place. Workers stepped away, then, staring down at the Karsa.

Who smiled.

Torvald's voice came from one side, 'Aye, it's a ghastly smile, but he's harmless, I assure you all. No need for concern, unless of course you happen to be a superstitious lot—'

There was a solid crack and Torvald Nom's body sprawled down in front of Karsa. Blood poured from his shattered nose. The Daru blinked stupidly, but made no move to rise. A large figure strode to stand over Torvald. Not tall, but wide, and his skin was dusky blue. He glared down at the bandit chief, then studied the ring of silent sailors facing him.

'It's called sticking the knife in and twisting,' he growled in Malazan. 'And he got every damned one of you.' He turned and studied Torvald Nom once more. 'Another stab like that one, prisoner, and I'll see your tongue cut out and nailed to the mast. And if there's any other kind of trouble from you or this giant here, I'll chain you up there beside him then toss the whole damned thing overboard. Nod if you understand me.'

Wiping the blood from his face, Torvald Nom jerked his head in assent.

The blue-skinned man swung his hard gaze up to Karsa. 'Wipe that smile off your face or a knife will kiss it,' he said. 'You don't need lips to eat and the other miners won't care either way.'

Karsa's empty smile remained fixed.
The man's face darkened. 'You heard me ...'
Torvald raised a hesitant hand, 'Captain, sir, if you will. He does not understand you – his brain is addled.'
'Bosun!'
'Sir!'  
'Gag the bastard.'
'Aye, Captain.'
A salt-crusted rag was quickly wrapped about Karsa's lower face, making it difficult to breathe.
'Don't suffocate him, you idiots.'
'Aye, sir.'
The knots were loosened, the cloth pulled down to beneath his nose.
The captain wheeled. 'Now, what in Mael's name are you all standing around for?'
As the workers all scattered, the captain thumping away, Torvald slowly climbed to his feet. 'Sorry, Karsa,' he mumbled through split lips. 'I'll get that off you, I promise. It may take a little time, alas. And when I do, friend, please, don't be smiling...'

Why have you come to me, Karsa Orlong, son of Synyg, grandson of Pahlk?

One presence, and six. Faces that might have been carved from rock, barely visible through a swirling haze. One, and six.
'I am before you, Urugal,' Karsa said, a truth that left him confused.

You are not. Only your mind, Karsa Orlong. It has fled your mortal prison.

'Then, I have failed you, Urugal.'

Failed. Yes. You have abandoned us and so in turn we must abandon you. We must seek another, one of greater strength. One who does not accept surrender. One who does not flee. In you, Karsa Orlong, our faith was misplaced.

The haze thickened, dull colours flashing through it. He found himself standing atop a hill that shifted and crunched beneath him. Chains stretched out from his wrists, down the slopes on all sides. Hundreds of chains, reaching out into the rainbow mists, and at the unseen ends of each one, there was movement. Looking down, Karsa saw bones beneath his feet. Teblor. Lowlander. The entire hill was naught but bones.

The chains slackened suddenly.

Movement in the mists, drawing closer from every direction.

Terror surged through Karsa.

Corpses, many of them headless, staggered into view. The chains that held the horrifying creatures to Karsa penetrated their chests through gaping holes. Withered, long-nailed hands reached towards him. Stumbling on the slopes, the apparitions began climbing.

Karsa struggled, seeking to flee, but he was surrounded. The very bones at his feet held him fast, clattering and shifting tighter about his ankles.

A hiss, a susurration of voices through rotting throats. 'Lead us, Warleader . . .'
He shrieked.

'Lead us, Warleader.'

Climbing closer, arms reaching up, nails clawing the air—

A hand closed about his ankle.

Karsa's head snapped back, struck wood with a resounding crunch. He gulped air that slid like sand down his throat, choking him. Eyes opening, he saw before him the gently pitching decks of the ship, figures standing motionless, staring at him.

He coughed behind his gag, each convulsion a rage of fire in his lungs. His throat felt torn, and he realized that he had been screaming. Enough to spasm his muscles so they now clenched tight, cutting off the flow of his air passages.

He was dying.

The whisper of a voice deep in his mind: Perhaps we will not abandon you, yet. Breathe, Karsa Orlong. Unless, of course, you wish to once more meet your dead.

Breathe.

Someone snatched the gag from his mouth. Cold air flooded his lungs.

Through watering eyes, Karsa stared down at Torvald Nom. The Daru was barely recognizable, so dark was his skin, so thick and matted his beard. He had used the very chains holding Karsa to climb up within reach of the gag, and was now shouting unintelligible words the Teblor barely heard – words flung back at the frozen, fear-stricken Malazans.

Karsa's eyes finally made note of the sky beyond the ship's prow. There were colours there, amidst churning clouds, flashing and blossoming, swirls bleeding out from what seemed huge, open wounds. The storm – if that was what it was – commanded the entire sky ahead. And then he saw the chains, snapping down through the clouds to crack thunderously on the horizon. Hundreds of chains, impossibly huge, black, whipping in the air with explosions of red dust, crisscrossing the sky. Horror filled his soul.

There was no wind. The sails hung limp. The ship lolled on lazy, turgid seas. And the storm was coming.

A sailor approached with a tin cup filled with water, lifted it up to Torvald, who took it and brought it to Karsa's scabbed, crusted lips. The brackish liquid entered his mouth, burning like acid. He drew his head away from the cup.

Torvald was speaking in low tones, words that slowly grew comprehensible to Karsa. '... long lost to us. Only your beating heart and the rise and fall of your chest told us you still lived. It has been weeks and weeks, my friend. You'd keep hardly anything down. There's almost nothing left of you – you're showing bones where no bones should be.

'And then this damned becalming. Day after day. Not a cloud in the sky ... until three bells past. Three bells, when you stirred, Karsa Orlong. When you tilted your head back and began screaming behind your gag. Here, more water – you must drink.

'Karsa, they're saying you've called this storm. Do you understand? They want you to send it away – they'll do anything, they'll unchain you, set you free. Anything, friend, anything at all – just send this unholy storm away. Do you understand?'

Ahead, he could see now, the seas were exploding with each lash of the black, monstrous chains, twisting spouts of water skyward as each chain retreated upward once more. The billowing, heaving clouds seemed to lean forward over the ocean, closing on their position from all sides now.

Karsa saw the Malazan captain descend from the fore-deck, the blue-tinged skin on his face a sickly greyish
'This is no Mael-blessed squall, Daru, meaning it don’t belong.' He jerked a trembling finger at Karsa. 'Tell him he’s running out of time. Tell him to send it away. Once he does that, we can negotiate. Tell him, damn you!'

'I have been, Captain!' Torvald retorted. 'But how in Hood's name do you expect him to send anything away when I'm not even sure he knows where he is? Worse, we don't even know for sure if he's responsible!'

'Let's see, shall we?' The captain spun round, gestured. A score of crewmen rushed forward, axes in hand.

Torvald was dragged down and thrown to the deck.

The axes chopped through the heavy ropes binding the platform to the mast. More crew came forward then. A ramp was laid out, angled up to the starboard gunnel. Log rollers were positioned beneath the platform as it was roughly lowered.

'Wait!' Torvald cried out. 'You can't—'

'We can,' the captain growled.

'At least unchain him!'

'Not a chance, Torvald.' The captain grabbed a passing sailor by the arm. 'Find everything this giant owned – all that stuff confiscated from the slavemaster. It's all going with him. Hurry, damn you!'

Chains ripped the seas on all sides close enough to lift spray over the ship, each detonation causing hull, masts and rigging to tremble.

Karsa stared up at the tumbling stormclouds as the platform was dragged along the rollers, up the ramp.

'Those chains will sink it!' Torvald said.

'Maybe, maybe not.'

'What if it lands wrong way up?'

'Then he drowns, and Mael can have him.'

'Karsa! Damn you! Cease playing your game of mindless-ness! Say something!'

The warrior croaked out two words, but the noise that came from his lips was unintelligible even to him.

'What did he say?' the captain demanded.

'I don't know!' Torvald screamed. 'Karsa, damn you, try again!'

He did, yielding the same guttural noise. He began repeating the same two words, over and over again, as the sailors pushed and pulled the platform up onto the gunnel until it was balanced precariously, half over the deck, half over the sea.

Directly above them, as he uttered his two words once more, Karsa watched the last patch of clear sky vanish, like the closing of a tunnel mouth. A sudden plunge into darkness, and Karsa knew it was too late, even as, in the sudden terror-stricken silence, his words came out clear and audible.

'Go away.'

From overhead, chains snapped down, massive, plunging, reaching directly for – it seemed – Karsa's own chest.

A blinding flash, a detonation, the splintering crackle of masts toppling, spars and rigging crashing down. The entire ship was falling away beneath Karsa, beneath the platform itself, which slid wildly down the length of the gunnel before crunching against the foredeck railing, pivoting, then plunging for the waves below.
He stared down at the water's sickly green, heaving surface.

The entire platform shuddered in its fall as the cargo ship's hull rolled up and struck its edge.

Karsa caught an upside-down glimpse of the ship – its deck torn open by the impact of the huge chains, its three masts gone, the twisted forms of sailors visible in the wreckage – then he was staring up at the sky, at a virulent, massive wound directly overhead.

A fierce impact, then darkness.

His eyes opened to a faint gloom, the desultory lap of waves, the sodden boards beneath him creaking as the platform rocked to someone else's movement. Thumps; low, gasping mutters.

The Teblor groaned. The joints of every limb felt torn inside.

'Karsa?' Torvald Nom crawled into view.

'What – what has happened?'

The shackles remained on the Daru's wrists, the chains connected on the other end to arm-length, roughly broken fragments of the deck. 'Easy for you, sleeping through all the hard work,' he grumbled as he moved into a sitting position, pulling his arms around his knees. 'This sea's a lot colder than you'd think, and these chains didn't help. I've nearly drowned a dozen times, but you'll be glad to know we now have three water casks and a bundle of something that might be food – I've yet to untie its bindings. Oh, and your sword and armour, both of which float, of course.'

The sky overhead looked unnatural, luminous grey shot through with streaks of darker pewter, and the water smelled of clay and silts. 'Where are we?'

'I was hoping you'd know. It's pretty damned clear to me that you called that storm down on us. That's the only explanation for what happened—'

'I called nothing.'

'Those chains of lightning, Karsa – not one missed its target. Not a single Malazan was left standing. The ship was falling apart – your platform had landed right-side up and was drifting away. I was still working free when Silgar and three of his men climbed out of the hold, dragging their chains with them – the hull was riven through, coming apart all around the bastards. Only one had drowned.'

'I am surprised they didn't kill us.'

'You were out of reach, at least to start with. Me, they threw overboard. A short while later, after I'd made it to this platform, I saw them in the lone surviving dory. They were rounding the sinking wreck, and I knew they were coming for us. Then, somewhere on the other side of the ship, beyond my sight, something must have happened, because they never reappeared. They vanished, dory and all. The ship then went down, though a lot of stuff has been coming back up. So, I've been resupplying. Collecting rope and wood, too – everything I could drag over here. Karsa, your platform is slowly sinking. None of the water casks are full, so that's added some buoyancy, and I'll be slipping more planks and boards under it, which should help. Even so…'

'Break my chains, Torvald Nom.'

The Daru nodded, then ran a hand through his dripping, tangled hair. 'I've checked on that, friend. It will take some work.'

'Is there land about?'

Torvald glanced over at the Teblor. 'Karsa, this isn't the Meningalle Ocean. We're somewhere else. Is there land nearby? None in sight. I overheard Silgar talking about a warren, which is one of those paths a sorcerer uses. He said he thought we'd all entered one. There may be no land here. None at all. Hood knows there's no wind and we don't seem to be moving in any direction – the wreckage of the ship is still all around us. In fact, it
almost pulled us under with it. Also, this sea is fresh water – no, I wouldn't want to drink it. It's full of silt. No
fish. No birds. No signs of life anywhere.’

'I need water. Food.'

Torvald crawled over to the wrapped bundle he had retrieved. 'Water, we have. Food? No guarantees. Karsa,
did you call upon your gods or something?'

'No.'

'What started you screaming like that, then?'

'A dream.'

'A dream?'

'Yes. Is there food?'

'Uh, I'm not sure, it's mostly padding ... around a small wooden box.'

Karsa listened to ripping sounds as Torvald pulled away the padding. 'There's a mark branded on it. Looks ...
Moranth, I think.' The lid was pried free. 'More padding, and a dozen clay balls ... with wax plugs on them –
oh, Beru fend—' The Daru backed away from the package. 'Hood's dripping tongue. I think I know what these
are. Never seen one, but I've heard about them – who hasn't? Well... ' He laughed suddenly. 'If Silgar reappears
and comes after us, he's in for a surprise. So's anyone else who might mean trouble.' He edged forward again
and carefully replaced the padding, then the lid.

'What have you found?'

'Alchemical munitions. Weapons of war. You throw them, preferably as far as you can. The clay breaks and
the chemicals within explode. What you don't want to happen is have one break in your hand, or at your feet.
Because then you're dead. The Malazans have been using these in the Genabackan campaign.'

'Water, please.'

'Right. There's a ladle here ... somewhere ... found it.'

A moment later Torvald hovered over Karsa, and the Teblor drank, slowly, all the water the ladle contained.

'Better?'

'Yes.'

'More?'

'Not yet. Free me.'

'I need to get back into the water first, Karsa. I need to push some planks under this raft.'

'Very well.'

There seemed to be no day and no night in this strange place; the sky shifted hue occasionally, as if jostled by
high, remote winds, the streaks of pewter twisting and stretching, but there was no change otherwise. The air
surrounding the raft remained motionless, damp and cool and strangely thick.

The flanges anchoring Karsa's chains were on the underside, holding him in place in a fashion identical to
that in the slave trench at Silver Lake. The shackles themselves had been welded shut. Torvald's only recourse
was to attempt to widen the holes in the planks where the chains went through, using an iron buckle to dig at
the wood.

Months of imprisonment had left him weakened, forcing frequent rests, and the buckle made a bloody mess
of his hands, but once begun the Daru would not relent. Karsa measured the passing of time by the rhythmic crunching and scraping sounds, noting how each pause to rest stretched longer, until Torvald's breathing told him the Daru had fallen into an exhausted sleep. Then, the Teblor's only company was the sullen lap of water as it slipped back and forth across the platform.

For all the wood positioned beneath it, the raft was still sinking, and Karsa knew that Torvald would not be able to free him in time.

He had never before feared death. But now, he knew that Urugal and the other Faces in the Rock would abandon his soul, would leave it to the hungry vengeance of those thousands of ghastly corpses. He knew his dream had revealed to him a fate that was real, and inevitable. And inexplicable. Who had set such horrid creatures upon him? Undead Teblor, undead lowlander, warrior and child, an army of corpses, all chained to him. Why?

*Lead us, Warleader.*

Where?

And now, he would drown. Here, in this unknown place, far from his village. His claims to glory, his vows, all now mocking him, whispering a chorus of muted creaks, soft groans...

Torvald.'

'Uh ... what? What is it?'

'I hear new sounds—'

The Daru sat up, blinking crusted silt from his eyes. He looked around. 'Beru fend!'

'What do you see?'

The Daru's gaze was fixed on something beyond Karsa's head. 'Well, it seems there's currents here after all, though which of us has done the moving? Ships, Karsa. A score or more of them, all dead in the water, like us. Floating wrecks. No movement on them ... that I can see as yet. Looks like there was a battle. With plenty of sorcery being flung back and forth ...'

Some indiscernible shift drew the ghostly flotilla into Karsa's view, an image on its side to his right. There were two distinct styles of craft. Twenty or so were low and sleek, the wood stained mostly black, though where impacts and collisions and other damage had occurred the cedar's natural red showed like gaping wounds. Many of these ships sat low in the water, a few with their decks awash. They were single-masted, square-sailed, the torn and shredded sails also black, shimmering in the pellucid light. The remaining six ships were larger, high-decked and three-masted. They had been fashioned from a wood that was true black – not stained – as was evinced from the gashes and splintered planks marring the broad, bellied hulls. Not one of these latter ships sat level in the water; all leaned one way or the other, two of them at very steep angles.

'We should board a few,' Torvald said. 'There will be tools, maybe even weapons. I could swim over – there, that raider. It's not yet awash, and I see lots of wreckage.'

Karsa sensed the Daru's hesitation. 'What is wrong? Swim.'

'Uh, I am a little concerned, friend. I seem to have not much strength left, and these chains on me ...'

The Teblor said nothing for a moment, then he grunted. 'So be it. No more can be asked of you, Torvald Nom.'

The Daru slowly turned to regard Karsa. 'Compassion, Karsa Orlong? Is it helplessness that has brought you to this?'

'Too many empty words from you, lowlander,' the Teblor sighed. 'There are no gifts that come from being—'

A soft splash sounded, then sputtering and thrashing – the sputtering turning into laughter. Torvald, now
alongside the raft, moved into Karsa's line of sight. 'Now we know why those ships are canted so!' And the Teblor saw that Torvald was standing, the water lapping around his upper chest. 'I can drag us over, now. This also tells us we're the ones who've been drifting. And there's something else.'

'What?'

The Daru had begun pulling the raft along, using Karsa's chains. 'These ships all grounded during the battle – I think a lot of the hand to hand fighting was actually between ships, chest-deep in water.'

'How do you know this?'

'Because there's bodies all around me, Karsa Orlong. Against my shins, rolling about on the sands – it's an unpleasant feeling, let me tell you.'

'Pull one up. Let us see these combatants.'

'All in good time, Teblor. We're almost there. Also, these bodies, they're, uh, rather soft. We might find something more recognizable if there's any on the ship itself. Here' – there was a bump – 'we're alongside. A moment, while I climb aboard.'

Karsa listened to the Daru's grunts and gasps, the slipping scrabble of his bare feet, the rustle of chains, finally followed by a mated thud.

Then silence.

Torvald Nom?'

Nothing.

The raft's end beyond Karsa's head bumped alongside the raider's hull, then began drifting along it. Cool water flowed across the surface, and Karsa recoiled at the contact, but could do nothing as it seeped beneath him. 'Torvald Nom!'

His voice strangely echoed.

No reply.

Laughter rumbled from Karsa, a sound oddly disconnected from the Teblor's own will. In water that, had he been able to stand, would likely rise no higher than his hips, he would drown. Assuming there would be time for that. Perhaps Torvald Nom had been slain – it would be a bizarre battle if there had been no survivors – and even now, beyond his sight, the Teblor was being looked down upon, his fate hanging in the balance.

The raft edged near the ship's prow.

A scuffling sound, then, 'Where? Oh.'

'Torvald Nom?'

Footsteps, half-stumbling, moved alongside from the ship's deck. 'Sorry, friend. I think I must have passed out. Were you laughing a moment ago?'

'I was. What have you found?'

'Not much. Yet. Bloodstains – dried. Trails through it. This ship has been thoroughly stripped. Hood below – you're sinking!'

'And I do not think you will be able to do anything about it, lowlander. Leave me to my fate. Take the water, and my weapons—'

But Torvald had reappeared, rope in his hand, sliding down over the gunnel near the high prow and back into the water. Breathing hard, he fumbled with the rope for a moment before managing to slip it underneath the
chains. He then drew it along and repeated the effort on the other side of the raft. A third time, down near Karsa's left foot, then a fourth loop opposite.

The Teblor could feel the wet, heavy rope being dragged through the chains. 'What are you doing?'

Torvald made no reply. Still trailing the rope, he climbed back onto the ship. There was another long stretch of silence, then Karsa heard movement once more, and the rope slowly tautened.

Torvald's head and shoulders moved into view. The low-lander was deathly pale. 'Best I could do, friend. There may be some more settling, but hopefully not much. I will check again on you in a little while. Don't worry, I won't let you drown. I'm going to do some exploring right now – the bastards couldn't have taken everything.'

He vanished from Karsa's line of sight.

The Teblor waited, racked with shivering as the sea slowly embraced him. The level had reached his ears, muting all sounds other than the turgid swirl of water. He watched the four lengths of rope slowly growing tighter above him.

It was difficult to recall a time when his limbs had been free to move without restraint, when his raw, suppurating wrists had not known the implacable iron grip of shackles, when he had not felt – deep in his withered body – a vast weakness, a frailty, his blood flowing as thin as water. He closed his eyes and felt his mind falling away.

Away...

Urugal, I stand before you once more. Before these faces in the rock, before my gods. Urugal—

'I see no Teblor standing before me. I see no warrior wading through his enemies, harvesting souls. I do not see the dead piled high on the ground, as numerous as a herd of bhederin driven over a cliff. Where are my gifts? Who is this who claims to serve me?'

Urugal. You are a bloodthirsty god—

'A truth a Teblor warrior revels in!'

As I once did. But now, Urugal, I am no longer so sure—

'Who stands before us? Not a Teblor warrior! Not a servant of mine!'

Urugal. What are these 'bhederin' you spoke of? What are these herds? Where among the lands of the Teblor—

'Karsa!'

He flinched. Opened his eyes.

Torvald Nom, a burlap sack over one shoulder, was climbing back down. His feet made contact with the raft, pushing it a fraction deeper. Water stung the outside corners of Karsa's eyes.

The sack made numerous clunking sounds as the Daru set it down and reached inside. 'Tools, Karsa! A shipwright's tools!' He drew forth a chisel and an iron-capped mallet.

The Teblor felt his heart begin pounding hard in his chest.

Torvald set the chisel against a chain link, then began hammering.

A dozen swings, the concussions pealing loudly in the still, murky air, then the chain snapped. Its own weight swiftly dragged it through the iron ring of Karsa's right wrist shackle. Then, with a soft rustle, it was gone beneath the sea's surface. Agony lanced through his arm as he attempted to move it. The Teblor grunted, even as consciousness slipped away.
He awoke to the sounds of hammering, down beside his right foot, and thundering waves of pain, through which he heard, dimly, Torvald's voice.

'... heavy, Karsa. You'll need to do the impossible. You'll need to climb. That means rolling over, getting onto your hands and knees. Standing. Walking – oh, Hood, you're right, I'll need to think of something else. No food anywhere on this damned ship.' There was a loud crack, then the hiss of a chain falling away. 'That's it, you're free. Don't worry, I've retied the ropes to the platform itself – you won't sink. Free. How's it feel? Never mind – I'll ask that a few days from now. Even so, you're free, Karsa. I promised, didn't I? Let it not be said that Torvald Nom doesn't hold to his – well, uh, let it not be said that Torvald Nom isn't afraid of new beginnings.'

'Too many words,' Karsa muttered.

'Aye, far too many. Try moving, at least.'

'I am.'

'Bend your right arm.'

'I am trying.'

'Shall I do it for you?'

'Slowly. Should I lose consciousness, do not cease. And do the same for the remaining limbs.'

He felt the lowlander's hands grip his right arm, at the wrist and above the elbow, then, once again, mercifully, blackness swallowed him.

When he came to once more, bundles of sodden cloth had been propped beneath his head, and he was lying on his side, limbs curled. There was dull pain in every muscle, every joint, yet it seemed strangely remote. He slowly lifted his head.

He was still on the platform. The ropes that held it to the ship's prow had prevented it from sinking further. Torvald Nom was nowhere in sight.

'I call upon the blood of the Teblor,' Karsa whispered. 'All that is within me must be used now to heal, to gift me strength. I am freed. I did not surrender. The warrior remains. He remains...’ He tried to move his arms. Throbs of pain, sharp, but bearable. He shifted his legs, gasped at the agony flaring in his hips. A moment of lightheadedness, threatening oblivion once again ... that then passed.

He tried to push himself to his hands and knees. Every minuscule shift was torture, but he refused to surrender to it. Sweat streamed down his limbs. Waves of trembling washed through him. Eyes squeezed shut, he struggled on.

He had no idea how much time had passed, but then he was sitting, the realization arriving with a shock. He was sitting, his full weight on his haunches, and the pain was fading. He lifted his arms, surprised and a little frightened by their looseness, horrified by their thinness.

As he rested, he looked about. The shattered ships remained, detritus clumped in makeshift rafts between them. Tattered sails hung in shrouds from the few remaining masts. The prow looming beside him held panels crowded with carvings: figures, locked in battle. The figures were long-limbed, standing on versions of ships closely resembling the raiders on all sides. Yet the enemy in these reliefs were not, it seemed, the ones the ship's owners had faced here, for the craft they rode in were, if anything, smaller and lower than the raiders. The warriors looked much like Teblor, thick-limbed, heavily muscled, though in stature shorter than their foes.

Movement in the water, a gleaming black hump, spike-finned, rising into view then vanishing again. All at once, more appeared, and the surface of the water between the ships was suddenly aswirl. There was life in this sea after all, and it had come to feed.

The platform lurched beneath Karsa, throwing him off balance. His left arm shot out to take his weight as he began toppling. A jarring impact, excruciating pain – but the arm held.
He saw a bloated corpse roll up into view alongside the raft, then a black shape, a broad, toothless mouth, gaping wide, sweeping up and around the corpse, swallowing it whole. A small grey eye behind a spiny whisker flashed into sight as the huge fish swept past. The eye swivelled to track him, then the creature was gone.

Karsa had not seen enough of the corpse to judge whether it was a match to him in size, or to the Daru, Torvald Nom. But the fish could have taken Karsa as easily as it had the corpse.

He needed to stand. Then, to climb.

And – as he watched another massive black shape break the surface alongside another ship, a shape almost as long as the ship itself – he would have to do it quickly.

He heard footsteps from above, then Torvald Nom was at the gunnel beside the prow. 'We've got to – oh, Beru bless you, Karsa! Can you stand up? You've no choice – these catfish are bigger than sharks and likely just as nasty. There's one – just rolled up behind you – it's circling, it knows you're there! Stand up, use the ropes!'

Nodding, Karsa reached up for the nearest stretch of rope.

An explosion of water behind him. The platform shuddered, wood splintering – Torvald screamed a warning – and Karsa knew without looking back over his shoulder that one of the creatures had just risen up, had just thrown itself bodily onto the raft, splitting it in two.

The rope was in his hand. He gripped hard as the sloshing surface beneath him seemed to vanish. A flood of water around his legs, rising to his hips. Karsa closed his other hand on the same rope.

'Urugal! Witness!'

He drew his legs from the foaming water, then, hand over hand, climbed upward. The rope swung free of the platform's fragments, threw him against the ship's hull. He grunted at the impact, yet would not let go.

'Karsa! Your legs!'

The Teblor looked down, saw nothing but a massive mouth, opened impossibly wide, rising up beneath him.

Hands closed on his wrists. Screaming at the pain in his shoulders and hips, Karsa pulled himself upward in a single desperate surge.

The mouth snapped shut in a spray of milky water.

Knees cracking against the gunnel, Karsa scrambled wildly for a moment, then managed to shift his weight over the rail, drawing his legs behind him, to sprawl with a heavy thump on the deck.

Torvald's shrieks continued unabated, forcing the Teblor to roll over – to see the Daru fighting to hold on to what appeared to be some kind of harpoon. Torvald's shouts, barely comprehensible, seemed to be referring to a line. Karsa glanced about, until he saw that the harpoon's butt-end held a thin rope, which trailed down to a coiled pile almost within the Teblor's reach. Groaning, he scrabbled towards it. He found the end, began dragging it towards the prow.

He pulled himself up beside it, looped the line over and around, once, twice – then there was a loud curse from Torvald, and the coil began playing out. Karsa threw the line around one more time, then managed something like a half-hitch.

He did not expect the thin rope to hold. He ducked down beneath it as the last of the coil was snatched from his hands, thrumming taut.

The galley creaked, the prow visibly bending, then the ship lurched into motion, shuddering as it was dragged along the sandy bottom.

Torvald scrambled up beside Karsa. 'Gods below, I didn't think – let's hope it holds!' he gasped. 'If it does,
we won’t go hungry for a long while, no, not a long while!’ He slapped Karsa on the back, then pulled himself up to the prow. His wild grin vanished. ‘Oh.’

Karsa rose.

The harpoon’s end was visible directly ahead, cutting a V through the choppy waves – heading directly for one of the larger, three-masted ships. The grinding sound suddenly ceased beneath the raider, and the craft surged forward.

‘To the stern, Karsa! To the stern!’

Torvald made a brief effort to drag Karsa, then gave up with a curse, running full tilt for the galley’s stern.

Weaving, fighting waves of blackness, the Teblor staggered after the Daru. ‘Could you not have speared a smaller one?’

The impact sent them both sprawling. A terrible splitting sound reverberated down the galley’s spine, and all at once there was water everywhere, foaming up from the hatches, sweeping in from the sides. Planks from the hull on both sides parted like groping fingers.

Karsa found himself thrashing about in waist-deep water. Something like a deck remained beneath him, and he managed to struggle upright. And, bobbing wildly directly in front of him, was his original bloodsword. He snatched at it, felt his hand close about the familiar grip. Exultation soared through him, and he loosed an Uryd warcry.

Torvald sloshed into view beside him. ‘If that didn’t freeze that fish’s tiny heart, nothing will. Come on, we need to get onto that other damned ship. There’s more of those bastards closing in all around us.’

They struggled forward.

The ship they had broadsided had been leaning in the other direction. The galley had plunged into its hull, creating a massive hole before itself shattering, the prow with its harpoon line snapping off and vanishing within the ship’s lower decks. It was clear that the huge ship was solidly grounded, nor had the collision dislodged it.

As they neared the gaping hole, they could hear wild thrashing from somewhere within, deep in the hold.

‘Hood take me!’ Torvald muttered in disbelief. ‘That thing went through the hull first. Well, at least we’re not fighting a creature gifted with genius. It’s trapped down there, is my guess. We should go hunting—’

‘Leave that to me,’ Karsa growled.

‘You? You can barely stand—’

‘Even so, I will kill it.’

‘Well, can’t I watch?’

‘If you insist.’

There were three decks within the ship’s hull, in so far as they could see, the bottom one comprising the hold itself, the other two scaled to suit tall lowlanders. The hold had been half-filled with cargo, which was now tumbling out in the backwash – bundles, bales and casks.

Karsa plunged into waist-deep water, making for the thrashing sounds deeper within. He found the huge fish writhing on the second level, in sloshing, foaming water that barely covered the Teblor’s ankles. Spears of splintered wood jutted from the fish’s enormous head, blood streaming out to stain the foam pink. It had rolled onto its side, revealing a smooth, silvery underbelly.

Clambering across to the creature, Karsa drove his sword into its abdomen. The huge tail twisted round, struck him with the strength of a destrier’s kick. He was suddenly in the air, then the curved wall of the hull
struck his back.

Stunned by the impact, the Teblor slumped in the swirling water. He blinked the drops from his eyes, then, unmoving in the gloom, watched the fish's death-throes.

Torvald climbed into view. 'You're still damned fast, Karsa – left me behind. But I see you've done the deed. There's food among these supplies ...'

But Karsa heard no more, as unconsciousness took him once again.

He awoke to the stench of putrefying flesh that hung heavy in the still air. In the half-light, he could just make out the body of the dead fish opposite him, its belly slit open, a pallid corpse partially tumbled out. There was the distant sound of movement somewhere above him.

Well beyond the fish and to the right, steep steps were visible, leading upward.

Fighting to keep from gagging, Karsa collected his sword and began crawling towards the stairs.

He eventually emerged onto the midship's deck. Its sorcery-scarred surface was sharply canted, sufficient to make traverse difficult. Supplies had been collected and were piled against the downside railing, where ropes trailed over the side. Pausing near the hatch to regain his breath, Karsa looked around for Torvald Nom, but the Daru was nowhere in sight.

Magic had ripped deep gouges across the deck. There were no bodies visible anywhere, no indications of the nature of the ship's owners. The black wood – which seemed to emanate darkness – was of a species the Teblor did not recognize, and it was devoid of any ornamentation, evoking pragmatic simplicity. He found himself strangely comforted.

Torvald Nom clambered into view from the downside rail. He had managed to remove the chains attached to his shackles, leaving only the black iron bands on wrists and ankles. He was breathing hard.

Karsa pushed himself upright, leaning on the sword's point for support.

'Ah, my giant friend, with us once more!'

'You must find my weakness frustrating,' Karsa grumbled.

'To be expected, all things considered,' Torvald said, moving among the supplies now. 'I've found food. Come and eat, Karsa, while I tell you of my discoveries.'

The Teblor slowly made his way down the sloping deck.

Torvald drew out a brick-shaped loaf of dark bread. 'I've found a dory, and oars to go along with a sail, so we won't remain victims to this endless calm. We've water for a week and a half, if we're sparing, and we won't go hungry no matter how fast your appetite comes back ...'

Karsa took the bread from the Daru's hand and began tearing off small chunks. His teeth felt slightly loose, and he was not confident of attempting anything beyond gentle chewing. The bread was rich and moist, filled with morsels of sweet fruit and tasting of honey. His first swallow left him struggling to keep it down. Torvald handed him a skin filled with water, then resumed his monologue.

'The dory's got benches enough for twenty or so – spacious for lowlanders but we'll need to knock one loose to give your legs some room. If you lean over the gunnel you can see it for yourself. I've been busy loading what we'll need. We could explore some of the other ships if you like, though we've more than enough—'

'No need,' Karsa said. 'Let us leave this place as quickly as possible.'

Torvald's eyes narrowed on the Teblor for a moment, then the Daru nodded. 'Agreed. Karsa, you say you did not call upon that storm. Very well. I shall have to believe you – that you've no recollection of having done so, in any case. But I was wondering, this cult of yours, these Seven Faces in the Rock or however they're called. Do they claim a warren for themselves? A realm other than the one you and I live in, where they exist?'
Karsa swallowed another mouthful of bread. 'I had heard nothing of these warrens you speak of, Torvald Nom. The Seven dwell in the rock, and in the dreamworld of the Teblor.'

'Dreamworld...' Torvald waved a hand. 'Does any of this look like that dreamworld, Karsa?'

'No.'

'What if it had been ... flooded?'

Karsa scowled. 'You remind me of Bairoth Gild. Your words make no sense. The Teblor dreamworld is a place of no hills, where mosses and lichens cling to half-buried boulders, where snow makes low dunes sculpted by cold winds. Where strange brown-haired beasts run in packs in the distance ...'

'Have you visited it yourself, then?'

Karsa shrugged. 'These are descriptions given by the shamans.' He hesitated, then said, 'The place I visited ...' He trailed off, then shook his head. 'Different. A place of ... of coloured mists.'

'Coloured mists. And were your gods there?'

'You are not Teblor. I have no need to tell you more. I have spoken too much already.'

'Very well. I was just trying to determine where we were.'

'We are on a sea, and there is no land.'

'Well, yes. But which sea? Where's the sun? Why is there no night? No wind? Which direction shall we choose?'

'It does not matter which direction. Any direction.' Karsa rose from where he had been sitting on a bale. 'I have eaten enough for now. Come, let us finish loading, and then leave.'

'As you say, Karsa.'

He felt stronger with each passing day, lengthening his turns at the oars each time he took over from Torvald Nom. The sea was shallow, and more than once the dory ground up onto shoals, though fortunately these were of sand and so did little to damage the hull. They had seen nothing of the huge catfish, nor any other life in the water or in the sky, though the occasional piece of driftwood drifted past, devoid of bark or leaf.

As Karsa's strength returned, their supply of food quickly dwindled, and though neither spoke of it, despair had become an invisible passenger, a third presence that silenced the Teblor and the Daru, that shackled them as had their captors of old, and the ghostly chains grew heavier.

In the beginning they had marked out days based on the balance of sleep and wakefulness, but the pattern soon collapsed as Karsa took to rowing through Torvald's periods of sleep in addition to relieving the weary Daru at other times. It became quickly evident that the Teblor required less rest, whilst Torvald seemed to need ever more.

They were down to the last cask of water, which held only a third of its capacity. Karsa was at the oars, pulling the undersized sticks in broad, effortless sweeps through the murky swells. Torvald lay huddled beneath the sail, restless in his sleep.

The ache was almost gone from Karsa's shoulders, though pain lingered in his hips and legs. He had fallen into a pattern of repetition empty of thought, unaware of the passage of time, his only concern that of maintaining a straight course – as best as he could determine, given the lack of reference points. He had naught but the dory's own wake to direct him.

Torvald's eyes opened, bloodshot and red-rimmed. He had long ago lost his loquaciousness. Karsa suspected the man was sick – they'd not had a conversation in some time. The Daru slowly sat up.
Then stiffened. 'We've company,' he said, his voice cracking.

Karsa shipped the oars and twisted round in his seat. A large, three-masted, black ship was bearing down on them, twin banks of oars flashing dark over the milky water. Beyond it, on the horizon's very edge, ran a dark, straight line. The Teblor collected his sword then slowly stood.

'That's the strangest coast I've ever seen,' Torvald muttered. 'Would that we'd reached it without the company.'

'It is a wall,' Karsa said. 'A straight wall, before which lies some kind of beach.' He returned his gaze to the closing ship. 'It is like those that had been beset by the raiders.'

'So it is, only somewhat bigger. Flagship, is my guess, though I see no flag.'

They could see figures now, crowding the high forecastle. Tall, though not as tall as Karsa, and much leaner.

'Not human,' Torvald muttered. 'Karsa, I do not think they will be friendly. Just a feeling, mind you. Still...'

'I have seen one of them before,' the Teblor replied. 'Half spilled out from the belly of the catfish.'

'That beach is rolling with the waves, Karsa. It's flotsam. Must be two, three thousand paces of it. The wreckage of an entire world. As I suspected, this sea doesn't belong here.'

'Yet there are ships.'

'Aye, meaning they don't belong here, either.'

Karsa shrugged his indifference to that observation. 'Have you a weapon, Torvald Nom?'

'A harpoon... and a mallet. You will not try to talk first?'

Karsa said nothing. The twin banks of oars had lifted from the water and now hovered motionless over the waves as the huge ship slid towards them. The oars dipped suddenly, straight down, the water churning as the ship slowed, then came to a stop.

The dory thumped as it made contact with the hull on the port side, just beyond the prow.

A rope ladder snaked down, but Karsa, his sword slung over a shoulder, was already climbing up the hull, there being no shortage of handholds. He reached the forecastle rail and swung himself up and over it. His feet found the deck and he straightened.

A ring of grey-skinned warriors faced him. Taller than lowlanders, but still a head shorter than the Teblor. Curved sabres were scabbarded to their hips, and much of their clothing was made of some kind of hide, short-haired, dark and glistening. Their long brown hair was intricately braided, hanging down to frame angular, multihued eyes. Behind them, down amidships, there was a pile of severed heads, a few lowlander but most similar in features to the grey-skinned warriors, though with skins of black.

Ice rippled up Karsa's spine as he saw countless eyes among those severed heads shift towards him.

One of the grey-skinned warriors snapped something, his expression as contemptuous as his tone.

Behind Karsa, Torvald reached the railing.

The speaker seemed to be waiting for some sort of response. As the silence stretched, the faces on either side twisted into sneers. The spokesman barked out a command, pointed to the deck.

'Uh, he wants us to kneel, Karsa,' Torvald said. 'I think maybe we should—'

'I would not kneel when chained,' Karsa growled. 'Why would I do so now?'

'Because I count sixteen of them — and who knows how many more are below. And they're getting angrier—'
'Sixteen or sixty,' Karsa cut in. 'They know nothing of fighting Teblor.'

'How can you—'

Karsa saw two warriors shift gauntleted hands towards sword-grips. The bloodsword flashed out, cut a sweeping horizontal slash across the entire half-circle of grey-skinned warriors. Blood sprayed. Bodies reeled, sprawled backward, tumbling over the low railing and down to the mid-deck.

The forecastle was clear apart from Karsa and, a pace behind him, Torvald Nom.

The seven warriors who had been on the mid-deck drew back as one, then, unsheathing their weapons, they edged forward.

'They were within my reach,' Karsa answered the Daru's question. 'That is how I know they know nothing of fighting a Teblor. Now, witness while I take this ship.' With a bellow he leapt down into the midst of the enemy.

The grey-skinned warriors were not lacking in skill, yet it availed them naught. Karsa had known the loss of freedom; he would not accept such again. The demand to kneel before these scrawny, sickly creatures had triggered in him seething fury.

Six of the seven warriors were down; the last one, shouting, had turned about and was running towards the doorway at the other end of the mid-deck. He paused long enough to drag a massive harpoon from a nearby rack, spinning and flinging it at Karsa.

The Teblor caught it in his left hand.

He closed on the fleeing man, cutting him down at the doorway's threshold. Ducking and reversing the weapons in his hands – the harpoon now in his right and the bloodsword in his left – he plunged into the gloom of the passage beyond the doorway.

Two steps down, into a wide galley with a wooden table in its centre. A second doorway at the opposite end, a narrow passage beyond, lined by berths, then an ornate door that squealed as Karsa shoved it aside.

Four attackers, a fury of blows exchanged, Karsa blocking with the harpoon and counter-attacking with the bloodsword. In moments, four broken bodies dying on the cabin's gleaming wooden floor. A fifth figure, seated in a chair on the other side of the room, hands raised, sorcery swirling into the air.

With a snarl, Karsa surged forward. The magic flashed, sputtered, then the harpoon's point punched into the figure's chest, tore through and drove into the chair's wood backing. A look of disbelief frozen on the grey face, eyes locking with Karsa's own one last time, before all life left them.

'Urugal! Witness a Teblor's rage!'

Silence following his ringing words, then the slow pat of blood dripping from the sorcerer's chair onto the rug. Something cold rippled through Karsa, the breath of someone unknown, nameless, but filled with rage. Growling, he shrugged it off, then looked around. High-ceilinged for lowlanders, the ship's cabin was all of the same black wood. Oil lanterns glimmered from sconces on the walls. On the table were maps and charts, the drawings on them illegible as far as the Teblor was concerned.

A sound from the doorway.

Karsa turned.

Torvald Nom stepped within, scanning the sprawled corpses, then fixing his gaze on the seated figure with the spear still impaling it. 'You needn't worry about the oarsmen,' he said.

'Are they slaves? Then we shall free them.'

'Slaves?' Torvald shrugged. 'I don't think so. They wear no chains, Karsa. Mind you, they have no heads, either. As I said, I don't think we have to concern ourselves with them.' He strode forward to examine the maps
on the table. ‘Something tells me these hapless bastards you just killed were as lost as us—’

‘They were the victors in the battle of the ships.’

‘Little good it did them.’

Karsa shook the blood from his sword, drew a deep breath. ‘I kneel to no-one.’

‘I could’ve knelt twice and that might have satisfied them. Now, we’re as ignorant as we were before seeing this ship. Nor can the two of us manage a craft of this size.’

‘They would have done to us as was done to the oarsmen,’ Karsa asserted.

‘Possibly.’ He swung his attention on one of the corpses at his feet, slowly crouched. ‘Barbaric-looking, these ones – uh, by Daru standards, that is. Sealskin – true seafarers, then – and strung claws and teeth and shells. The one in the captain’s chair was a mage?’

‘Yes. I do not understand such warriors. Why not use swords or spears? Their magic is pitiful, yet they seem so sure of it. And look at his expression—’

‘Surprised, yes,’ Torvald murmured. He glanced back at Karsa. ‘They’re confident because sorcery usually works. Most attackers don’t survive getting hit by magic. It rips them apart.’

Karsa made his way back to the doorway. After a moment Torvald followed.

They returned to the mizzen deck. Karsa began stripping the corpses lying about, severing ears and tongues before tossing the naked bodies overboard.

The Daru watched for a time, then he moved to the decapitated heads. ‘They’ve been following everything you do,’ he said to Karsa, ‘with their eyes. It’s too much to bear.’ He removed the hide wrapping of a nearby bundle and folded it around the nearest severed head, then tied it tight. ‘Darkness would better suit them, all things considered …’

Karsa frowned. ‘Why do you say that, Torvald Nom? Which would you prefer, the ability to see things around you, or darkness?’

‘These are Tiste Andii, apart from a few – and those few look far too much like me.’

‘Who are these Tiste Andii?’

‘Just a people. There are some fighting in Caladan Brood’s liberation army on Genabackis. An ancient people, it’s said. In any case, they worship Darkness.’

Karsa, suddenly weary, sat down on the steps leading to the forecastle. ‘Darkness,’ he muttered. ‘A place where one is left blind – a strange thing to worship.’

‘Perhaps the most realistic worship of all,’ the Daru replied, wrapping another severed head. ‘How many of us bow before a god in the desperate hope that we can somehow shape our fate? Praying to that familiar face pushes away our terror of the unknown – the unknown being the future. Who knows, maybe these Tiste Andii are the only ones among us all who see the truth, the truth being oblivion.’ Keeping his eyes averted, he carefully gathered another black-skinned, long-haired head. ‘It’s a good thing these poor souls have no throats left to utter sounds, else we find ourselves in a ghastly debate.’

‘You doubt your own words, then.’

‘Always, Karsa. On a more mundane level, words are like gods – a means of keeping the terror at bay. I will likely have nightmares about this until my aged heart finally gives out. An endless succession of heads, with all-too-cognizant eyes, to wrap up in sealskin. And with each one I tie up, *pop!* Another appears.’

‘Your words are naught but foolishness.’
'Oh, and how many souls have you delivered unto darkness, Karsa Orlong?'

The Teblor's eyes narrowed. 'I do not think it was darkness that they found,' he replied quietly. After a moment, he looked away, struck silent by a sudden realization. A year ago he would have killed someone for saying what Torvald had just said, had he understood its intent to wound — which in itself was unlikely. A year ago, words had been blunt, awkward things, confined within a simple, if slightly mysterious world. But that flaw had been Karsa's alone — not a characteristic of the Teblor in general — for Bairoth Gild had flung many-edged words at Karsa, a constant source of amusement for the clever warrior though probably dulled by Karsa's own unawareness of their intent.

Torvald Nom's endless words — but no, more than just that — all that Karsa had experienced since leaving his village — had served as instruction on the complexity of the world. Subtlety had been a venomed serpent slithering unseen through his life. Its fangs had sunk deep many times, yet not once had he become aware of their origin; not once had he even understood the source of the pain. The poison itself had coursed deep within him, and the only answer he gave — when he gave one at all — was of violence, often misdirected, a lashing out on all sides.

'Darkness,' and living blind. Karsa returned his gaze to the Daru kneeling and wrapping severed heads, there on the mizzen deck. And who has dragged the cloth from my eyes? Who has awakened Karsa Orlong, son of Synyg? Urugal? No, not Urugal. He knew that for certain, for the otherworldly rage he had felt in the cabin, that icy breath that had swept through him — that had belonged to his god. A fierce displeasure — to which Karsa had found himself oddly ... indifferent.

The Seven Faces in the Rock never spoke of freedom. The Teblor were their servants. Their slaves.

'You look unwell, Karsa,' Torvald said, approaching. 'I am sorry for my last words—'

'There is no need, Torvald Nom,' Karsa said, rising. 'We should return to our—'

He stopped as the first splashes of rain struck him, then the deck on all sides. Milky, slimy rain.

'Uhh!' Torvald grunted. 'If this is a god's spit, he's decidedly unwell.'

The water smelled foul, rotten. It quickly coated the ship decks, the rigging and tattered sails overhead, in a thick, pale grease.

Swearing, the Daru began gathering foodstuffs and watercasks to load into their dory below. Karsa completed one last circuit of the decks, examining the weapons and armour he had pulled from the grey-skinned bodies. He found the rack of harpoons and gathered the six that remained.

The downpour thickened, creating murky, impenetrable walls on all sides of the ship. Slipping in the deepening muck, Karsa and Torvald quickly resupplied the dory, then pushed out from the ship's hull, the Teblor at the oars. Within moments the ship was lost from sight, and around them the rain slackened. Five sweeps of the oars and they were out from beneath it entirely, once again on gently heaving seas under a pallid sky. The strange coastline was visible ahead, slowly drawing closer.

On the forecastle of the massive ship, moments after the dory with its two passengers slipped behind the screen of muddy rain, seven almost insubstantial figures rose from the slime. Shattered bones, gaping wounds bleeding nothing, the figures weaved uncertainly in the gloom, as if barely able to maintain their grip on the scene they had entered.

One of them hissed with anger. 'Each time we seek to draw the knot right—'

'He cuts it,' another finished in a wry, bitter tone.

A third one stepped down to the mizzen deck, kicked desultorily at a discarded sword. 'The failure belonged to the Tiste Edur,' this one pronounced in a rasping voice. 'If punishment must be enacted, it should be in answer to their arrogance.'
‘Not for us to demand,’ the first speaker snapped. ‘We are not the masters in this scheme—’

‘Nor are the Tiste Edur!’

‘Even so, and we are each given particular tasks. Karsa Orlong survives still, and he must be our only concern—’

‘He begins to know doubts.’

‘None the less, his journey continues. It falls to us, now, with what little power we are able to extend, to direct his path onward.’

‘We’ve had scant success thus far!’

‘Untrue. The Shattered Warren stirs awake once more. The broken heart of the First Empire begins to bleed – less than a trickle at the moment, but soon it will become a flood. We need only set our chosen warrior upon the proper current

‘And is that within our power, limited as it still remains?’

‘Let us find out. Begin the preparations. Ber’ok, scatter that handful of otataral dust in the cabin – the Tiste Edur sorcerer’s warren remains open and, in this place, it will quickly become a wound ... a growing wound. The time has not yet come for such unveilings.’

The speaker then lifted its mangled head and seemed to sniff the air. ‘We must work quickly,’ it announced after a moment. ‘I believe we are being hunted.’

The remaining six turned to face the speaker, who nodded in answer to their silent question. ‘Yes. There are kin upon our trail.’

The wreckage of an entire land had drawn up alongside the massive stone wall. Uprooted trees, rough-hewn logs, planks, shingles and pieces of wagons and carts were visible amidst the detritus. The verges were thick with matted grasses and rotted leaves, forming a broad plain that twisted, rose and fell on the waves. The wall was barely visible in places, so high was the flotsam, and the level of the water beneath it.

Torvald Nom was positioned at the bow whilst Karsa rowed. ‘I don’t know how we’ll get to that wall,’ the Daru said. ‘You’d better back the oars now, friend, lest we ground ourselves on that mess – there’s catfish about.’

Karsa slowed the dory. They drifted, the hull nudging the carpet of flotsam. After a few moments it became apparent that there was a current, pulling their craft along the edge.

‘Well,’ Torvald muttered, ‘that’s a first for this sea. Do you think this is some sort of tide?’

‘No,’ Karsa replied, his gaze tracking the strange shoreline in the direction of the current. ‘It is a breach in the wall.’

‘Oh. Can you see where?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

The current was tugging them along faster, now.

Karsa continued, ‘There is an indentation in the shoreline, and many trees and logs jammed where the wall should be – can you not hear the roar?’

‘Aye, now I can.’ Tension rode the Daru’s words. He straightened at the bow. ‘I see it. Karsa, we’d better—’

‘Yes, it is best we avoid this.’ The Teblor repositioned himself at the oars. He drew the dory away from the verge. The hull tugged sluggishly beneath them, began twisting. Karsa leaned his weight into each sweep,
struggling to regain control. The water swirled around them.

'Karsa!' Torvald shouted. 'There's people – near the breach! I see a wrecked boat!'

The breach was on the Teblor's left as he pulled the dory across the current. He looked to where Torvald was pointing, and, after a moment, he bared his teeth. 'The slavemaster and his men.'

'They're waving us over.'

Karsa ceased sweeping with his left oar. 'We cannot defeat this current,' he announced, swinging the craft around. 'The further out we proceed, the stronger it becomes.'

'I think that's what happened to Silgar's boat – they managed to ground it just this side of the mouth, stoving it in, in the process. We should try to avoid a similar fate, Karsa, if we can, that is.'

'Then keep an eye out for submerged logs,' the Teblor said as he angled the dory closer to shore. 'Also, are the lowlanders armed?'

'Not that I can see,' Torvald replied after a moment. 'They look to be in, uh, in pretty bad condition. They're perched on a small island of logs. Silgar, and Damisk, and one other... Borrug, I think. Gods, Karsa, they're starved.'

'Take a harpoon,' the Teblor growled. 'That hunger could well drive them to desperation.'

'A touch shoreward, Karsa, we're almost there.'

There was a soft crunch from the hull, then a grinding, stuttering motion as the current sought to drag them along the verge. Torvald clambered out, ropes in one hand and harpoon in the other. Beyond him, Karsa saw as he turned about, huddled the three Nathii lowlanders, making no move to help and, if anything, drawing back as far as they could manage on the tangled island. The breach's roar was a still-distant thundering, though closer at hand were ominous cracks, tearing and shifting noises – the logjam was coming loose.

Torvald made fast the dory with a skein of lines tied to various branches and roots. Karsa stepped ashore, drawing his bloodsword, his eyes levelling on Silgar.

The slavemaster attempted to retreat further.

Near the three emaciated lowlanders lay the remains of a fourth, his bones picked clean.

'Teblor!' Silgar implored. 'You must listen to me!'

Karsa slowly advanced.

'I can save us!'

Torvald tugged at Karsa's arm. 'Wait, friend, let's hear the bastard.'

'He will say anything,' Karsa growled.

'Even so—'

Damisk Greydog spoke. 'Karsa Orlong, listen! This island is being torn apart – we all need your boat. Silgar's a mage – he can open a portal. But not if he's drowning. Understand? He can take us from this realm!'

'Karsa,' Torvald said, weaving as the logs shifted under him, his grip on the Teblor's arm tightening.

Karsa looked down at the Daru beside him. 'You trust Silgar?'

'Of course not. But we've no choice – we'd be unlikely to survive plunging through that breach in the dory. We don't even know this wall's height – the drop on the other side could be endless. Karsa, we're armed and they're not – besides, they're too weak to cause us trouble, you can see that, can't you?'
Silgar screamed as a large section of the logjam sank away immediately behind him.

Scowling, Karsa sheathed his sword. 'Begin untying the boat, Torvald.' He waved at the lowlanders. 'Come, then. But know this, Slavemaster, any sign of treachery from you and your friends will be picking your bones next.'

Damisk, Silgar and Borrug scrambled forward.

The entire section of flotsam was pulling away, breaking up along its edges as the current swept it onward. Clearly, the breach was expanding, widening to the pressure of an entire sea.

Silgar climbed in and crouched down beside the dory's prow. 'I shall open a portal,' he announced, his voice a rasp. 'I can only do so but once—'

'Then why didn't you leave a long time ago?' Torvald demanded, as he slipped the last line loose and clambered back aboard.

'There was no path before – out on the sea. But now, here – someone has opened a gate. Close. The fabric is... weakened. I've not the skill to do such a thing myself. But I can follow.'

The dory scraped free of the crumbling island, swung wildly into the sweeping current. Karsa pushed and pulled with the oars to angle their bow into the torrential flow.

'Follow?' Torvald repeated. 'Where?'

To that Silgar simply shook his head.

Karsa abandoned the oars and made his way to the stern, taking the tiller in both hands.

They rode the tumbling, churning sea of wreckage towards the breach. Where the wall had given way there was an ochre cloud of mist as vast and high as a thunderhead. Beyond it, there seemed to be nothing at all.

Silgar was making gestures with both hands, snapping them out as would a blind man seeking a door latch. Then he jabbed a finger to the right. 'There!' he shrieked, swinging a wild look on Karsa. 'There! Angle us there!'

The place Silgar pointed towards looked no different from anywhere else. Immediately beyond it, the water simply vanished – a wavering line that was the breach itself. Shrugging, Karsa pushed on the tiller. Where they went over mattered little to him. If Silgar failed they would plunge over, falling whatever distance, to crash amidst a foaming maelstrom that would kill them all.

He watched as everyone but Silgar hunkered down, mute with terror.

The Teblor smiled. 'Urugal!' he bellowed, half rising as the dory raced for the edge.

Darkness swallowed them.

And then they were falling.

A loud, explosive crack. The tiller's handle split under Karsa's hands, then the stern hammered into him from behind, throwing the Teblor forward. He struck water a moment later, the impact making him gasp – taking in a mouthful of salty sea – before plunging into the chill blackness.

He struggled upward until his head broke the surface, but there was no lessening of the darkness, as if they'd fallen down a well, or had appeared within a cave. Nearby, someone was coughing helplessly, whilst a little farther off another survivor was thrashing about.

Wreckage brushed up against Karsa. The dory had shattered, though the Teblor was fairly certain that the fall had not been overly long – they had arrived at a height of perhaps two adult warriors combined. Unless the boat had struck something, it should have survived.
'Karsa!'

Still coughing, Torvald Nom arrived alongside the Teblor. The Daru had found the shaft of one of the oars, over which he had draped his arms. 'What in Hood's name do you think happened?'

'We passed through that sorcerous gate,' Karsa explained. 'That should be obvious, for we are now somewhere else.'

'Not as simple as that,' Torvald replied. 'The blade of this oar – here, look at the end.'

Finding himself comfortably buoyant in this salty water, it took only a moment for Karsa to swim to the end of the shaft. It had been cut through, as if by a single blow from an iron sword such as the lowlanders used. He grunted.

The distant thrashing sounds had drawn closer. From much farther away, Damisk's voice called out.

'Here!' Torvald shouted back.

A shape loomed up beside them. It was Silgar, clinging to one of the water casks.

'Where are we?' Karsa asked the slavemaster.

'How should I know?' the Nathii snapped. 'I did not fashion the gate, I simply made use of it – and it had mostly closed, which is why the floor of the boat did not come with us. It was sheared clean off. None the less, I believe we are in a sea, beneath an overcast sky. Were there no ambient light, we'd not be able to see each other right now. Alas, I can hear no coast, though it's so calm there might be no waves to brush the shoreline.'

'Meaning we could be within a dozen strokes and not know it.'

'Yes. Fortunately for us, it is a rather warm sea. We must simply await dawn—'

'Assuming there is one,' Torvald said.

'There is,' Silgar asserted. 'Feel the layers in this water. It's colder down where our feet are. So a sun has looked down upon this sea, I am certain of it.'

Damisk swam into view, struggling with Borrug, who seemed to be unconscious. As he reached out to take hold of the water cask Silgar pushed him back, then kicked himself further away.

'Slavemaster!' Damisk gasped.

'This cask barely holds my weight as it is,' Silgar hissed. 'It's near filled with fresh water – which we're likely to need. What is the matter with Borrug?'

Torvald moved along to give Damisk a place at the oar shaft. The tattooed guard attempted to drape Borrug's arms over it as well and Torvald drew closer once more to help.

'I don't know what's wrong with him,' Damisk said. 'He may have struck his head, though I can find no wound. He was babbling at first, floundering about, then he simply fell unconscious and nearly slipped under. I was lucky to reach him.'

Borrug's head kept lolling beneath the surface.

Karsa reached out and collected the man's wrists. 'I will take him,' he snarled, turning about and dragging the man's arms around his neck.

'A light!' Torvald suddenly shouted. 'I saw a light – there!'

The others swung round.

'I see nothing,' Silgar growled.
'I did,' Torvald insisted. 'It was dim. Gone now. But I saw it—'

'Likely an overwrought imagination,' Silgar said. 'Had I the strength, I'd open my warren—'

'I know what I saw,' the Daru said.

'Lead us, then, Torvald Nom,' Karsa said.

'It could be in the wrong direction!' Silgar hissed. 'We are safer to wait—'

'Then wait,' Karsa replied.

'I have the fresh water, not you—'

'A good point. I shall have to kill you, then, since you have decided to stay here. We might need that water, after all. You won't, because you will be dead.'

'Teblor logic,' Torvald chuckled, 'is truly wonderful.'

'Very well, I will follow,' Silgar said.

The Daru set off at a slow but steady pace, kicking beneath the surface as he pulled the oar shaft along. Damisk kept one hand on the length of wood, managing a strange motion with his legs that resembled that of a frog.

Gripping Borrug's wrists in one hand, Karsa moved into their wake. The unconscious lowlander's head rested on his right shoulder, his knees bumping against the Teblor's thighs.

Off to one side, feet thrashing, Silgar propelled the water cask along. Karsa could see that the cask was far less filled than the slavemaster had claimed – it could have easily borne them all.

The Teblor himself felt no need. He was not particularly tired, and it seemed that he possessed a natural buoyancy superior to that of the lowlanders. With each indrawn breath, his shoulders, upper arms and the upper half of his chest rose above the water. And apart from Borrug's knees constantly fouling Karsa's kicking, the lowlander's presence was negligible ...

There was, he realized, something odd about those knees. He paused, reached down.

Both legs were severed clean just beneath the kneecaps, the water warm in their immediate wakes.

Torvald had glanced back. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

'Do you think there are catfish in these waters?'

'I doubt it,' the Daru replied. 'That was fresh water, after all.'

'Good,' Karsa grunted, resuming his swim.

There was no recurrence of the light Torvald had seen. They continued on in the unrelieved darkness, through perfectly calm water.

'This is foolish,' Silgar pronounced after a time. 'We exhaust ourselves for no purpose—'

Torvald called, 'Karsa, why did you ask about the catfish?'

Something huge and rough-skinned rose up to land on Karsa's back, its massive weight driving him under. Borrug's wrists were torn from his grip, the arms whipping back and vanishing. Pushed more than a warrior's height beneath the surface, Karsa twisted round. One of his kicking feet collided with a solid, unyielding body. He used the contact to propel himself away and back towards the surface.

Even as he reached it – bloodsword in his hands – he saw, less than a body length distant, an enormous grey fish, its jagged-toothed mouth closing about the little that remained visible of Borrug. Lacerated head,
shoulders and flopping arms. The fish's wide head thrashed wildly back and forth, its strange saucer-like eyes flashing as if lit from within.

There was screaming behind Karsa and he turned. Both Damisk and Silgar were kicking wildly in an effort to escape. Torvald was on his back, the oar held tight in his hands, his legs kicking beneath the surface – he alone was making no noise, though his face was twisted with fear.

Karsa faced the fish once more. It seemed to be having trouble swallowing Borrug – one of the man's arms was lodged crossways. The fish itself was positioned close to vertical in the water, ripping its head back and forth.

Growling, Karsa swam towards it.

Borrug's arm came free even as the Teblor arrived, the corpse disappearing within the maw. Taking a deep breath and kicking hard, Karsa half rose out of the water, his bloodsword a curving spray as it chopped down into the fish's snout.

Warm blood spattered Karsa's forearms.

The fish seemed to fling its entire body backward.

Karsa lunged closer, closing his legs around the creature's body just beneath the flanking flippers. The fish twisted away at the contact, but could not drag itself free of Karsa's tightening grip.

The Teblor reversed his sword and plunged it deep into the beast's belly, ripped it downward.

The water was suddenly hot with blood and bile. The fish's body became a dead weight, dragging Karsa downward. He sheathed his sword; then, as he and the fish sank beneath the surface, he reached down into the gaping wound. One hand closed on the thigh of Borrug – a shredded mass of flesh – and the fingers dug in to close around bone.

Karsa pulled the lowlander through a cloud of milky, eye-stinging fluid, then, drawing the body with him, returned to the surface.

Torvald was shouting now. Turning, Karsa saw the Daru, standing in waist-deep water, both arms waving. Near him, Silgar and Damisk were wading their way onto some kind of shore.

Dragging Borrug with him, Karsa made his way forward. A half-dozen strokes and his feet thumped and scraped on a sandy bottom. He stood, still holding one of Borrug's legs. Moments later, he was on the beach.

The others sat or knelt on the pale strip of sand, regaining their breaths.

Dropping the body onto the beach, Karsa remained standing, his head tilted back as he sniffed the warm, sultry air. There was heavy, lush foliage beyond the strand's shell-cluttered high-tide line. The buzz and whine of insects, a faint rustle as something small moved across dry seaweed.

Torvald crawled close. 'Karsa, the man's dead. He was dead when the shark took him—'

'So that was a shark. The sailors on the Malazan ship spoke of sharks.'

'Karsa, when a shark swallows someone you don't go after the poor bastard. He's finished—'

'He was in my care,' Karsa rumbled. 'The shark had no right to him, whether he was dead or alive.'

Silgar was on his feet a few paces away. At Karsa's words he laughed, the sound high-pitched, then said, 'From a shark's belly to seagulls and crabs! Borrug's pathetic spirit no doubt thanks you, Teblor!'

'I have delivered the lowlander,' Karsa replied, 'and now return him to your care, Slavemaster. If you wish to leave him for seagulls and crabs, that is for you to decide.' He faced the dark sea once more, but could see no sign of the dead shark.
'No-one would believe me,' Torvald muttered.

'Believe what, Torvald Nom?'

'Oh, I was imagining myself as an old man, years from now, sitting in Quip's Bar in Darujhistan, telling this tale. I saw it with my own eyes, and even I am having trouble believing it. You were halfway out of the water when you swung that sword down – helps having four lungs, I suppose. Even so ...' he shook his head.

Karsa shrugged. 'The catfish were worse,' he said. 'I did not like the catfish.'

'I suggest,' Silgar called out, 'we get some sleep. Come the dawn, we will discover what there is to discover of this place. For now, thank Mael that we are still alive.'

'Forgive me,' Torvald said, 'but I'd rather give thanks to a stubborn Teblor warrior than to any sea god.'

'Then your faith is sorely misplaced,' the slavemaster sneered, turning away.

Torvald slowly climbed upright. 'Karsa,' he murmured, 'you should know that Mael's chosen beast of the sea is the shark. I've no doubt at all that Silgar was indeed praying hard while we were out there.'

'It does not matter,' Karsa replied. He drew a deep breath of jungle-scented air, slowly released it. 'I am on land, and I am free, and now I shall walk along this beach, and so taste something of this new land.'

'I will join you, then, friend, for I believe the light I saw was to our right, slightly above this beach, and I would investigate.'

'As you like, Torvald Nom.'

They began walking along the strand.

'Karsa, neither Silgar nor Damisk possesses a shred of decency. I, however, do. A small shred, granted, but one none the less. Thus: thank you.'

'We have saved each other's lives, Torvald Nom, and so I am pleased to call you friend, and to think of you as a warrior. Not a Teblor warrior, of course, but a warrior even so.'

The Daru said nothing for a long time. They had moved well out of sight of Silgar and Damisk. The shelf of land to their right was rising in layers of pale stone, the wave-sculpted wall webbed with creepers from the thick growth clinging to the overhang. A break in the clouds overhead cast faint starlight down, reflecting on the virtually motionless water on their left. The sand underfoot was giving way to smooth, undulating stone.

Torvald touched Karsa's arm and stopped, pointing upslope. 'There,' he whispered.

The Teblor softly grunted. A squat, misshapen tower rose above the tangle of brush. Vaguely square and sharply tapering to end at a flat roof, the tower hunched over the beach, a gnarled black mass. Three-quarters of the way up its seaward-facing side was a deeply inset triangular window. Dull yellow light outlined the shutter's warped slats.

A narrow footpath was visible winding down to the shore, and nearby – five paces beyond the high tide line – lay the collapsed remnants of a fisherboat, the sprung ribs of the hull jutting out to the sides wrapped in seaweed and limned in guano.

'Shall we pay a visit?' Torvald asked.

'Yes,' Karsa replied, walking towards the footpath.

The Daru quickly moved up beside him. 'No trophies, though, right?'

Shrugging, the Teblor said, 'That depends on how we are received.'

'Strangers on a desolate beach, one of them a giant with a sword almost as tall as me. In the dead of night.
Pounding on the door. If we're met with open arms, Karsa, it will be a miracle. Worse yet, there's not much likelihood of us sharing a common language—'

'Too many words,' Karsa cut in.

They had reached the base of the tower. There was no entrance on the seaward side. The trail curved round to the other side, a well-trod path of limestone dust. Huge slabs of the yellow rock lay in heaps – many of them appearing to have been dragged in from other places and bearing chisel and cut marks. The tower itself was constructed of identical material, though its gnarled aspect remained a mystery until Karsa and Torvald drew closer.

The Daru reached out and ran his fingers along one of the cornerstones. 'This tower is nothing but fossils,' he murmured.

'What are fossils?' Karsa asked, studying the strange shapes embedded in the stone.

'anoi, my education was sporadic and, uh, poorly received. Look, this one – it's a massive shell of some sort. And there, those look like vertebrae, from some snake-like beast...'

'They are naught but carvings,' Karsa asserted.

A deep rumbling laugh made them swing round. The man standing at the bend in the path ten paces ahead was huge by lowlander standards, his skin so dark as to seem black. He wore no shirt, only a sleeveless vest of heavy mail stiffened by rust. His muscles were vast, devoid of fat, making his arms, shoulders and torso look like they had been fashioned of taut ropes. He wore a belted loincloth of some colourless material. A hat that seemed made of the torn remnant of a hood covered his head, but Karsa could see thick, grey-shot beard covering the lower half of the man's face.

No weapons were visible, not even a knife. His teeth flashed in a smile. 'Screams from the sea, and now a pair of skulkers jabbering in Daru in my tower's front yard.' His head tilted upward slightly to regard Karsa for a moment. 'At first I'd thought you a Fenn, but you're no Fenn, are you?'

'I am Teblor—'

'Teblor! Well, lad, you're a long way from home, aren't you?'

Torvald stepped forward. 'Sir, your command of Daru is impressive, though I am certain I detect a Malazan accent. More, by your colour, I'd hazard you are Napan. Are we then on Quon Tali?'

'You don't know?'

'Alas, sir, I am afraid not.'

The man grunted, then turned back up the trail, 'Carvings, ha!'

Torvald glanced back at Karsa, then, with a shrug, set off after the man.

Karsa followed.

The door was situated on the inland side. The path forked in front of it, one trail leading to the tower and the other to a raised road that ran parallel to the coastline, beyond which was a dark band of forest.

The man pushed open the door and ducked inside.

Both Torvald and Karsa had involuntarily paused at the fork, staring up at the enormous stone skull that formed the lintel above the low doorway. It was as long as the Teblor was tall, running the entire width of the wall. The rows of dagger-like teeth dwarfed even that of a grey bear.

The man reappeared. 'Aye, impressive, isn't it? I've collected most of the bastard's body, too – I should've guessed it would be bigger than I'd first thought, but it was the forearms I found, you see, and they're puny, so
there I was picturing a beast no taller than you, Teblor, but with a head of equal size. No wonder they died out, I told myself. Of course, it's mistakes like these that teach a man to be humble, and Hood knows, this one's humbled me good. Come inside; I'm brewing some tea.'

Torvald grinned up at Karsa. 'See what happens when you live alone?'

The two entered the tower.

And were stunned by what awaited them. The tower was hollow, with only a flimsy scaffold projecting out from the seaside wall, just below the lone window. The floor was a thick, crunching carpet of stone chips. Weathered poles reared up on all sides at various angles, joined by crossbeams here and there and festooned with ropes. This wooden framework surrounded the lower half of a stone skeleton, standing upright on two thick-boned legs – reminiscent of a bird's – with three-toed, hugely taloned feet. The tail was a chain of vertebrae, snaking up one of the walls.

The man was seated near a brick-lined hearth beneath the scaffold, stirring one of the two pots resting in the coals. 'See my problem? I built the tower thinking there'd be plenty of room to reconstruct this leviathan. But I kept uncovering more and more of those Hood-damned ribs – I can't even attach the shoulder blades, much less the forearms, neck and head. I was planning on dismantling the tower eventually, anyway, so I could get at the skull. But now all my plans are awry, and I'm going to have to extend the roof, which is tricky. Damned tricky.'

Karsa moved over to the hearth, bent down to sniff at the other pot, wherein a thick, soupy liquid bubbled. 'Wouldn't try that,' the man said. 'It's what I use to fix the bones together. Sets harder than the stone itself, takes any weight once it's cured.' He found some extra clay cups and ladled the herbal tea into them. 'Makes good dishware, too.'

Torvald dragged his eyes from the huge skeleton looming over them and approached to collect his cup. 'I am named Torvald Nom—'

'Nom? Of the House of Nom? Darujhistan? Odd, I'd figured you for a bandit – before you became a slave, that is.'

Torvald threw Karsa a grimace. 'It's these damned shackle scars – we need a change of clothes, something with long sleeves. And moccasins that go up to the knees.'

'Plenty of escaped slaves about,' the Napan said, shrugging. 'I wouldn't worry too much about it.'

'Where are we?'

'North coast of Seven Cities. The sea yonder is the Otataral Sea. The forest covering this peninsula is called the A'rath. Nearest city is Ehrlitan, about fifteen days on foot west of here.'

'And what is your name, if I may ask?'

'Well, Torvald Nom, there's no easy answer to that question. Locally, I'm known as Ba'ienrok, which is Ehrlii for "Keeper". Beyond that, in the fierce and unpleasant world, I'm not known at all, except as someone who died long ago, and that's how I plan on keeping it. So, Ba'ienrok or Keeper, take your pick.'

'Keeper, then. What is in this tea? There are flavours I do not recognize, and from someone born and raised in Darujhistan, that detail alone is close to impossible.'

'A collection of local plants,' Keeper replied. 'Don't know their names, don't know their properties, but I like their taste. I long ago weeded out the ones that made me sick.'

'Delighted to hear that,' Torvald said. 'Well, you seem to know a lot about that fierce and unpleasant world out there. Daru, Teblor... That wrecked boat down below, was that yours?'

Keeper slowly rose. 'Now you're making me nervous, Torvald. It's not good when I get nervous.'

'Uh, I'll ask no more questions, then.'
Keeper jabbed a fist against Torvald's shoulder, rocking the Daru back a step. 'Wise choice, lad. I think I can get along with you, though I'd feel better if your silent friend said a thing or two.'

Rubbing at his shoulder, Torvald turned to Karsa.

The Teblor bared his teeth. 'I have nothing to say.'

'I like men with nothing to say,' Keeper said.

'Lucky for you,' Karsa growled. 'For you would not wish me as an enemy.'

Keeper refilled his cup. 'I've had worse than you, Teblor, in my day. Uglier and bigger and meaner. Of course, they're mostly all dead, now.'

Torvald cleared his throat. 'Alas, age takes us all, eventually.'

'That it does, lad,' Keeper said. 'Too bad none of them had the chance to see for themselves. Now, I expect you're hungry. But to eat my food, you've got to do something to earn it first. And that means helping me dismantle the roof. Shouldn't take more than a day or two.'

Karsa looked around. 'I will not work for you. Digging up bones and putting them together is a waste of time. It is pointless.'

Keeper went perfectly still. 'Pointless?' He barely breathed the word.

'It's that woeful streak of Teblor pragmatism,' Torvald said hastily. 'That and a warrior's blunt manners, which often come across as unintentionally rude—'

'Too many words,' Karsa cut in. 'This man wastes his life with stupid tasks. When I decide I am hungry, I will take food.'

Though the Teblor was anticipating a violent reaction from Keeper, and though Karsa's hand was close to the grip of his bloodsword, he was unable to avoid the blurred fist that lashed out, connecting with his lower ribs on his right side. Bones cracked. The air in his lungs exploded outward. Sagging, Karsa staggered back, incapable of drawing breath, a flood of pain darkening his vision.

He had never been hit so hard in his life. Not even Bairoth Gild had managed to deliver such a blow. Even as consciousness slipped from him, he swung a look of astonished, unfeigned admiration on Keeper. Then he collapsed.

When he awoke, sunlight was streaming through the open doorway. He found himself lying in the stone chips. The air was filled with mortar dust, descending from above. Groaning with the pain of cracked ribs, Karsa slowly sat up. He could hear voices from up near the tower's ceiling.

The bloodsword still hung from its straps on his back. The Teblor leaned against the stone leg bones of the skeleton as he climbed to his feet. Glancing up, he saw Torvald and Keeper, balanced in the wood framework directly beneath the ceiling, which had already been partly dismantled. The Daru looked down.

'Karsa! I would invite you up but I suspect this scaffold wouldn't manage your weight. We've made good progress in any case—'

Keeper interrupted with, 'It'll take his weight. I winched up the entire spine and that weighs a lot more than a lone Teblor. Get up here, lad, we're ready to start on the walls.'

Karsa probed the vaguely fist-shaped bruise covering his lower ribs on his right side. It was painful to draw breath; he was unsure whether he would be able to climb, much less work. At the same time, he was reluctant to show weakness, particularly to that muscle-knotted Napan. Grimacing, he reached up to the nearest crossbeam.

The climb was agonizing, torturously slow. High above, the two lowlanders watched in silence. By the time Karsa reached the walkway beneath the ceiling, dragging himself alongside Keeper and Torvald, he was
sheathed in sweat.

Keeper was staring at him. 'Hood take me,' he muttered, 'I was surprised that you managed to stand at all, Teblor. I know that I broke ribs – damn' – he lifted a splinted, bandage-swathe hand – 'I broke bones of my own. It's my temper, you see. It's always been a problem. I don't take insults too well. Best just sit there – we'll manage.'

Karsa sneered. 'I am of the Uryd tribe. Think you that a lowlander's tap concerns me?' He straightened. The ceiling had been a single slab of limestone, slightly projecting beyond the walls. Its removal had involved chiselling away the mortar at the joins, then simply sliding it to one side until it toppled, crashing into pieces down at the foot of the tower. The mortar around the wall's large, rough blocks had been cut away down to the edge of the scaffold. Karsa set his shoulder against one side and pushed.

Both men snatched at the bloodsword's straps as the Teblor toppled forward, a huge section of wall vanishing in front of him. A thunderous concussion from below shook the tower. There was a moment when it seemed that Karsa's weight would drag all three of them over, then Keeper hooked a leg around a pole, grunting as the straps drew taut at the end of one arm. All hung in balance for a heartbeat, then the Napan slowly curled his arm, drawing Karsa back onto the platform.

The Teblor could do nothing to help – he had come close to fainting when he had pushed the stones over, and pain roared through his skull. He slowly sank to his knees.

Gasping, Torvald pulled his hands free of the straps, sat down on the warped boards with a thump.

Keeper laughed. 'Well, that was easy. Good enough, you've both earned breakfast.'

Torvald coughed, then said to Karsa, 'In case you were wondering, I went back down to the beach at dawn, to retrieve Silgar and Damisk. But they weren't where we'd left them. I don't think the slavemaster planned on travelling with us – he likely feared for his life in your company, Karsa, which you have to admit is not entirely unreasonable. I followed their tracks up onto the coast road. They had headed west, suggesting that Silgar knew more of where we are than he'd let on. Fifteen days to Ehrlitan, which is a major port. If they'd gone east, it would have been a month or more to the nearest city."

'You talk too much,' Karsa said.

'Aye,' Keeper agreed, 'he does. You two have had quite a journey – I now know more of it than I'd care to. No cause for worry, though, Teblor. I only believed half of it. Killing a shark, well, the ones that frequent this coast are the big ones, big enough to prove too much for the dhenrabi. All the small ones get eaten, you see. I've yet to see one offshore here that's less than twice your height in length, Teblor. Splitting one's head open with a single blow? With a wooden sword? In deep water? And what's that other one? Catfish big enough to swallow a man whole? Hah, a good one.'

Torvald stared at the Napan. 'Both true. As true as a flooded world and a ship with headless Tiste Andii at the oars!'

'Well, I believe all that, Torvald. But the shark and the catfish? Do you take me for a fool? Now, let's climb down and cook up a meal. Let me get a harness on you, Teblor, in case you decide to go to sleep halfway down. We'll follow.'

The flatfish that Keeper cut up and threw into a broth of starchy tubers had been smoked and salted. By the time Karsa finished his two helpings he was desperately thirsty. Keeper directed them to a natural spring close to the tower, where both he and Torvald went to drink deep of the sweet water.

The Daru then splashed his face and settled down with his back to a fallen palm tree. 'I have been thinking, friend,' he said.

'You should do more of that, instead of talking, Torvald Nom.'

'It's a family curse. My father was even worse. Oddly enough, some lines of the Nom House are precisely
opposite – you couldn't get a word out of them even under torture. I have a cousin, an assassin—'

'I thought you had been thinking.'

'Oh, right. So I was. Ehrlitan. We should head there.'

'Why? I saw nothing of value in any of the cities we travelled through on Genabackis. They stink, they're too loud, and the lowlanders scurry about like cliff-mice.'

'It's a port, Karsa. A Malazan port. That means there are ships setting out from it, heading for Genabackis. Isn't it time to go home, friend? We could work for our passage. Me, I'm ready to enter the embrace of my dear family, the long-lost child returned, wiser, almost reformed. As for you, I'd think your tribe would be, uh, delighted to have you back. You've knowledge now, and they are in dire need of that, unless you want what happened to the Sunyd to happen to the Uryd.'

Karsa frowned at the Daru for a moment, then he looked away. 'I shall indeed return to my people. One day. But Urugal guides my steps still – I can feel him. Secrets have power so long as they remain secret. Bairoth Gild's words, to which I gave little thought at the time. But now, that has changed. I am changed, Torvald Nom. Mistrust has taken root in my soul, and when I find Urugal's stone face in my mind, when I feel his will warring with my own, I feel my own weakness. Urugal's power over me lies in what I do not know, in secrets – secrets my own god would keep from me. I have ceased fighting this war within my soul. Urugal guides me and I follow, for our journey is to truth.'

Torvald studied the Teblor with lidded eyes. 'You may not like what you find, Karsa.'

'I suspect you are right, Torvald Nom.'

The Daru stared for a moment longer, then he climbed to his feet and brushed sand from his ragged tunic. 'Keeper has the opinion that it isn't safe around you. He says it's as if you're dragging a thousand invisible chains behind you, and whatever's on the ends of each one of them is filled with venom.'

Karsa felt his blood grow cold within him.

Torvald must have noted a change in the Teblor's expression, for he raised both hands. 'Wait! He only spoke in passing, it was nothing really, friend. He was simply telling me to be careful in your company – as if I didn't already know that. You are Hood's own lodestone – to your enemies, that is. In any case, Karsa, I'd advise you not to cross that man. Pound for pound he's the strongest man I've ever met – and that includes you. Besides, while you've regained some of your old strength, you've a half-dozen broken ribs—'

'Enough words, Torvald Nom. I do not intend to attack Keeper. His vision troubles me, that is all. For I have shared it, in my dreams. Now you understand why I must seek out the truth.'

'Very well.' Torvald lowered his hands, then sighed. 'Still, I'd advise Ehrlitan. We need clothes and—'

'Keeper spoke the truth when he said I am dangerous to be around, Torvald Nom. And that danger is likely to increase. I will join you on the journey to Ehrlitan. Then, I will see to it that you find a ship, so that you may return to your family. When this is done, we shall part ways. I shall, however, keep the truth of your friendship with me.'

The Daru grinned. 'It's settled, then. Ehrlitan. Come, let us return to the tower, so we may give our thanks to Keeper for his hospitality.'

They began making their way along the trail. 'Rest assured,' Torvald continued, 'that I shall hold the truth of your friendship in me as well, though it's a truth no-one else is likely to believe.'

'Why is that?' Karsa asked.

'I was never very good at acquiring friends. Acquaintances, minions and the like – that was easy. But my big mouth—'
'Sends potential friends fleeing. Yes, I understand. Clearly.'

'Ah, now I see. You want to throw me on the first ship just to get away from me.'

'There is that,' Karsa replied.

'In keeping with the pathetic state of my life, it makes sense all right.'

After a moment, as they rounded a bend and came within sight of the tower, Karsa scowled and said, 'Making light of words is still difficult—'

'All that talk of friendship made for a momentary discomfort. You did well to slide away from it.'

'No, for what I would say is this. On the ship, when I hung in chains from the mast, you were my only hold on this world. Without you and your endless words, Torvald Nom, the madness I had feigned would have become a madness in truth. I was a Teblor warleader. I was needed, but I myself did not need. I had followers, but not allies, and only now do I understand the difference. And it is vast. And from this, I have come to understand what it is to possess regrets. Bairoth Gild. Delum Thord. Even the Rathyd, whom I have greatly weakened. When I return on my old path, back into the lands of the Teblor, there are wounds that I shall need to mend. And so, when you say it is time to return to your family, Torvald Nom, I understand and my heart is gladdened.'

Keeper was sitting on a three-legged stool outside the tower's doorway. A large sack with shoulder-straps rested at his feet, along with two stoppered gourds glittering with condensation. He had in his unbandaged hand a small bag, which he tossed towards Torvald as the two men arrived.

The bag jingled as the Daru caught it. Brows lifting, Torvald asked, 'What—'

'Silver jakatas, mostly,' Keeper said. 'Some local coin, too, but those are of very high denomination, so be careful of showing them. Ehrlitan's cutpurses are legendary.'

'Keeper—'

The Napan waved a hand. 'Listen, lad. When a man arranges his own death, he needs to plan ahead. A life of anonymity doesn't come as cheap as you'd imagine. I emptied half of Aren's treasury a day before my tragic drowning. Now, you might manage to kill me and try to find it, but it'd be hopeless. So thank me for my generosity and get on your way.'

'One day,' Karsa said, 'I shall return here and repay you.'

'For the coin or the broken ribs?'

The Teblor simply smiled.

Keeper laughed, then rose and ducked through the doorway. A moment later, they could hear him climbing the frame.

Torvald collected the pack, drawing the straps over his shoulders, then handed one of the gourds to Karsa.

They set off down the road.
There were villages on the coastal road, usually set on the inland side, as if the inhabitants sought nothing from the sea. A scattering of adobe dwellings, flimsy corrals, goats, dogs and dark-skinned figures hidden within swaths of full-length, sun-bleached cloth. Shadowed faces tracked the Teblor and the Daru from doorways but otherwise made no move.

On the fourth day, in the fifth of such villages, they found a merchant's wagon drawn up in the virtually empty market square, and Torvald managed to purchase, for a handful of silver, an antique sword, top-heavy and sharply curved. The merchant had bolts of cloth for sale as well, but nothing already made into clothing. The sword's handle fell apart shortly afterwards.

'I need to find a wood-carver,' Torvald said after a lengthy and rather elaborate string of curses. They were once more walking down the road, the sun overhead fiercely hot in a cloudless sky. The forest had thinned to either side, low, straggly and dusty, allowing them a view of the turquoise water of the Otataral Sea to their right, and the dun tones of the undulating horizon inland. 'And I'd swear that merchant understood Malazan – even as bad as I speak it. He just wouldn't admit to that fact.'

Karsa shrugged. 'The Malazan soldiers in Genabarisi said the Seven Cities was going to rebel against their occupiers. This is why the Teblor do not make conquests. Better that the enemy keeps its land, so that we may raid again and again.'

'Not the imperial way,' the Daru responded, shaking his head. 'Possession and control, the two are like insatiable hungers for some people. Oh, no doubt the Malazans have thought up countless justifications for their wars of expansion. It's well known that Seven Cities was a rat's warren of feuds and civil wars, leaving most of the population suffering and miserable and starving under the heels of fat warlords and corrupt priest-kings. And that, with the Malazan conquest, the thugs ended up spiked to the city walls or on the run. And the wilder tribes no longer sweep down out of the hills to deliver mayhem on their more civilized kin. And the tyranny of the priesthoods was shattered, putting an end to human sacrifice and extortion. And of course the merchants have never been richer, or safer on these roads. So, all in all, this land is rife for rebellion.'

Karsa stared at Torvald for a long moment, then said, 'Yes, I can see how that would be true.'

The Daru grinned. 'You're learning, friend.'

'The lessons of civilization.'

'Just so. There's little value in seeking to find reasons for why people do what they do, or feel the way they feel. Hatred is a most pernicious weed, finding root in any kind of soil. It feeds on itself.'

'With words.'

'Indeed, with words. Form an opinion, say it often enough and pretty soon everyone's saying it right back at you, and then it becomes a conviction, fed by unreasoning anger and defended with weapons of fear. At which point, words become useless and you're left with a fight to the death.'

Karsa grunted. 'A fight beyond death, I would say.'
'True enough. Generation after generation.'

'Are all the people of Darujhistan like you, Torvald Nom?'

'More or less. Contentious bastards. We thrive on argument, meaning we never go past the stage of using words. We love words, Karsa, as much as you love cutting off heads and collecting ears and tongues. Walk down any street, in any district, and everyone you speak to will have a different opinion, no matter what the subject. Even the possibility of being conquered by the Malazans. I was thinking a moment ago – that shark, choking on Borrug's body. I suspect, should Darujhistan ever become part of the Malazan Empire, the empire will be like that shark, and Darujhistan like Borrug. We'll choke the beast that swallows us.'

'The shark did not choke for very long.'

'That's because Borrug was too dead to say anything about it.'

'An interesting distinction, Torvald Nom.'

'Well of course. Us Daru are a subtle folk.'

They were approaching another village, this one distinct from the others they had walked through for having a low stone wall encircling it. Three large limestone buildings rose from its centre. Nearby was a pen crowded with goats, loudly complaining in the heat.

'You'd think they'd be out wandering,' Torvald commented as they came closer.

'Unless they are about to be slaughtered.'

'All of them?'

Karsa sniffed the air. 'I smell horses.'

'I don't see any.'

The road narrowed at the wall, spanning a trench before passing through a crumbling, leaning arch. Karsa and Torvald crossed the bridge and passed under the arch, emerging onto the village's main street.

There was no-one in sight. Not entirely unusual, as the locals usually retreated into their homes at the Teblor's arrival, although in this case the doors of those dwellings were firmly shut, the windows shuttered.

Karsa drew his bloodsword. 'We have walked into an ambush,' he said.

Torvald sighed. 'I think you are right.' He had wrapped his sword's tang in spare leather strapping taken from the pack – a temporary and not entirely successful effort to make the weapon useful. The Daru now slid the scimitar from its cracked wooden scabbard.

At the far end of the street, beyond the large buildings, horsemen now appeared. A dozen, then two, then three. They were covered from head to toe in loose, dark blue clothing, their faces hidden behind scarves. Short, recurved bows, arrows nocked, were trained on Karsa and Torvald.

Horse hoofs from behind made them turn, to see a score more riders coming through the archway, some with bows, others with lances.

Karsa scowled. 'How effective are those tiny bows?' he asked the Daru beside him.

'Sufficient to punch arrows through chain,' Torvald replied, lowering his sword. 'And we're wearing no armour in any case.'

A year ago and Karsa would have attacked none the less. Now, he simply reslung his bloodsword.

The riders behind them closed, then dismounted. A number approached with chains and shackles.

'Beru fend,' Torvald muttered, 'not again.'
Karsa shrugged.

Neither resisted as the shackles were fitted onto their wrists and ankles. There was some difficulty in dealing with the Teblor in this matter – when the shackles clicked into place, they were so tight as to cut off the blood flow to Karsa's hands and feet.

Torvald, watching, said in Malazan, 'Those will need to be changed, lest he lose his appendages—'

'Hardly a consideration,' said a familiar voice from the entrance to one of the larger buildings. Silgar, trailed by Damisk, emerged onto the dusty street. 'You will indeed lose your hands and feet, Karsa Orlong, which should effectively put an end to the threat you pose. Of course, that will do much to diminish your value as a slave, but I am prepared to accept the loss.'

'Is this how you repay saving your miserable lives?' Torvald demanded.

'Why, yes, it is. Repayment. For the loss of most of my men. For the arrest by the Malazans. For countless other outrages which I won't bother listing, since these dear Arak tribesmen are rather far from home, and, given that they're somewhat less than welcome in this territory, they are impatient to depart.'

Karsa could no longer feel his hands and feet. As one of the Arak tribesmen pushed him forward he stumbled, then fell to his knees. A thick knout cracked into the side of his head. Sudden rage gripped the Teblor. He lashed out his right arm, ripping the chain from an Arak's hands, and swung it full into the face of his attacker. The man screamed.

The others closed in then, wielding their knouts – clubs made from black, braided hair – until Karsa fell senseless to the ground.

When he finally regained consciousness, it was dusk. He had been tied to some sort of travois, which was in the process of being unhitched from a train of long-legged, lean horses. Karsa's face was a mass of bruises, his eyes almost swollen shut, his tongue and the inside of his mouth cut and nicked by his own teeth. He looked down at his hands. They were blue, the fingertips darkening to black. They were dead weights at the ends of his limbs, as were his feet.

The tribesmen were making camp a short distance from the coastal road. To the west, at the horizon's very edge, was the dull yellow glow of a city.

A half-dozen small, virtually smokeless fires had been lit by the Arak, using some sort of dung for fuel. Karsa saw, twenty paces distant, the slavemaster and Damisk seated among a group of the tribesmen. The hearth closest to the Teblor was being used to cook suspended skewers of tubers and meat.

Torvald sat nearby, working on something in the gloom. None of the Arak seemed to be paying the two slaves any attention.

Karsa hissed.

The Daru glanced over. 'Don't know about you,' he whispered, 'but I'm damned hot. Got to get out of these clothes. I'm sure you are as well. I'll come over and help you in a moment.' There was the faint sound of ripping seams. 'At last,' Torvald murmured, dragging his tunic free. Naked, he began edging closer to Karsa. 'Don't bother trying to say anything, friend. I'm surprised you can even breathe, with the way they beat you. In any case, I need your clothes.'

He came up alongside the Teblor, spared a glance towards the tribesmen – none of whom had noticed him – then reached up and began tugging at Karsa's tunic. There was but a single seam, and it had already been stretched and sundered in places. As he worked, Torvald continued whispering. 'Small fires. Smokeless. Camping in a basin, despite the insects. Talking in mumbles, very quiet. And Silgar's words earlier, that stupid gloat – had the Arak understood him they would probably have skinned the idiot on the spot. Well, from his stupidity was born my brilliance, as you'll soon see. It'll likely cost me my life, but I swear I'll be here even as a ghost, just to see what comes. Ah, done. Stop shivering, you're not helping things at all.'

He pulled the tattered tunic from Karsa, then took it with him back to his original position. He then tore
handfuls of grasses from the ground, until he had two large piles. Bundling both pieces of tunic, he then stuffed
them with the grass. Flashing Karsa a grin, he crawled over to the nearest hearth, bundles in tow.

He pushed them up against the glowing fragments of dung, then retreated.

Karsa watched as first one caught fire, then the other. Flames flared into the night, a roar of sparks and
snake-like blades of grass lifting high.

Shouts from the Arak, figures rushing over, scrambling for handfuls of earth, but there was little of that in
the basin, only pebbles and hard, sun-dried clay. Horse-blankets were found, thrown over the roaring flames.

The panic that then swept through the tribesmen left the two slaves virtually ignored, as the Arak rushed to
break camp, repack supplies, saddle their horses. Through it all, Karsa heard a single word repeated numerous
times, a word filled with fear.

_Gral._

Silgar appeared as the Arak gathered their horses. His face was filled with fury. 'For that, Torvald Nom, you
have just forfeited your life—'

'You won't make it to Ehrlitan,' the Daru predicted with a hard grin.

Three tribesmen were approaching, hook-bladed knives in their hands.

'I will enjoy watching your throat cut,' Silgar said.

'The Gral have been after these bastards all this time, Slavemaster. Hadn't you realized that? Now, I've never
heard of the Gral, but your Arak friends have one and all pissed onto their hearths, and even a Daru like me
knows what that means – they don't expect to live through the night, and not one of them wants to spill his
bladder when he dies. Seven Cities taboo, I gather—'

The first Arak reached Torvald, one hand snapping out to take the Daru by the hair, pushing Torvald's head
back and lifting the knife.

The ridgeline behind the Arak was suddenly swarming with dark figures, silently sweeping down into the
camp.

The night was broken by screams.

The Arak crouched before Torvald snarled and tore the knife across the Daru's throat. Blood spattered the
hard clay. Straightening, the tribesman wheeled to run for his horse. He managed not a single step, for a half-
dozen shapes came out of the darkness, silent as wraiths. There was a strange whipping sound, and Karsa saw
the Arak's head roll from his shoulders. His two companions were both down.

Silgar was already fleeing. As a figure rose before him, he lashed out. A wave of sorcery struck the attacker,
dropped the man to the ground, where he writhed in the grip of crackling magic for a moment, before his flesh
exploded.

Ululating cries pealed through the air. The same whipping sound sang in the darkness from all sides. Horses
screamed.

Karsa dragged his gaze from the scene of slaughter and looked over at Torvald's slumped body. To his
amazement, the Daru was still moving, feet kicking furrows in the pebbles, both hands up at his throat.

Silgar returned to Karsa's position, his lean face gleaming with sweat. Damisk appeared behind him and the
slave-master gestured the tattooed guard forward.

Damisk held a knife. He quickly cut at the bindings holding Karsa to the travois. 'No easy out for you,' he
hissted. 'We're leaving. By warren, and we're taking you with us. Silgar's decided to make you his plaything. A
lifetime of torture—'
'Enough babbling!' Silgar snapped. 'They're almost all dead! Hurry!'  

Damisk cut the last rope.  

Karsa laughed, then managed to form words. 'What would you have me do now? Run?'  

Snarling, Silgar moved closer. There was a flare of blue light, then the three of them were plunging into fetid, warm water.  

Unable to swim, the weight of his chains dragging him down, Karsa sank into the midnight depths. He felt a tug on his chains, then saw a second flash of lurid light.  

His head, then his back, struck hard cobbles. Dazed, he rolled onto his side. Silgar and Damisk, both coughing, knelt nearby. They were on a street, flanked on one side by enormous warehouses, and on the other by stone jetties and moored ships. At the moment, there was no-one else in sight.  

Silgar spat, then said, 'Damisk, get those shackles off him – he bears no criminal brand, so the Malazans won't see him as a slave. I won't be arrested again – not after all this. The bastard is ours, but we've got to get him off the street. We've got to hide.'  

Karsa watched Damisk crawl to his side, fumbling with keys. Watched as the Nathii unlocked the shackles on his wrists, then his ankles. A moment later, the pain struck as blood flowed back into near-dead flesh. The Teblor screamed.  

Silgar unleashed magic once more, a wave that descended on the Teblor like a blanket – that he tore off with unthinking ease, his shrieks slicing into the night air, echoing back from nearby buildings, ringing out across the crowded harbour.  

'You there!' Malazan words, a bellow, then the swiftly approaching clash and clatter of armoured soldiers.  

'An escaped slave, sirs!' Silgar said hastily. 'We have – as you can see – just recaptured him—'  

'Escaped slave? Let's see his brand—'  

The last words Karsa registered, as the pain in his hands and feet sent him plummeting into oblivion.  

He awoke to Malazan words being spoken directly above him. '... extraordinary. I've never seen natural healing such as this. His hands and feet – those shackles were on for some time, Sergeant. On a normal man I'd be cutting them off right now.'  

Another voice spoke, 'Are all Fenn such as this one?'  

'Not that I've ever heard. Assuming he's Fenn.'  

'Well, what else would he be? He's as tall as two Dal Honese put together.'  

'I wouldn't know, Sergeant. Before I was posted here, the only place I knew well was six twisting streets in Li Heng. Even the Fenn was just a name and some vague description about them being giants. Giants no-one's seen for decades at that. The point is, this slave was in bad shape when you first brought him in. Beaten pretty fierce, and someone punched him in the ribs hard enough to crack bones – wouldn't want to cross whoever that was. For all that, the swelling's already down on his face – despite what I've just done to it – and the bruises are damned near fading in front of our eyes.'  

Continuing to feign unconsciousness, Karsa listened to the speaker stepping back, then the sergeant asking, 'So the bastard's not in danger of dying, then.'  

'Not that I can see.'  

'Good enough, Healer. You can return to the barracks.'
'Aye, sir.'

Various movement, boots on flagstones, the clang of an iron-barred door; then, as these echoes dwindled, the Teblor heard, closer by, the sound of breathing.

In the distance there was some shouting, faint and muted by intervening walls of stone, yet Karsa thought he recognized the voice as belonging to the slavemaster, Silgar. The Teblor opened his eyes. A low, smoke-stained ceiling – not high enough to permit him to stand upright. He was lying on a straw-littered, greasy floor. There was virtually no light, apart from a dim glow reaching in from the walkway beyond the barred door.

His face hurt, a strange stinging sensation prickling on his cheeks, forehead and along his jaw.

Karsa sat up.

There was someone else in the small, windowless cell, hunched in a dark corner. The figure grunted and said something in one of the languages of the Seven Cities.

A dull ache remained in Karsa's hands and feet. The inside of his mouth was dry and felt burnt, as if he'd just swallowed hot sand. He rubbed at his tingling face.

A moment later the man tried Malazan, 'You'd likely understand me if you were Fenn.'

'I understand you, but I am not one of these Fenn.'

'I said it sounds like your master isn't enjoying his stay in the stocks.'

'He has been arrested?'

'Of course. The Malazans like arresting people. You'd no brand. At the time. Keeping you as a slave is therefore illegal under imperial law.'

'Then they should release me.'

'Little chance of that. Your master confessed that you were being sent to the otataral mines. You were on a ship out of Genabarish that you'd cursed, said curse then leading to the ship's destruction and the deaths of the crew and the marines. The local garrison is only half-convinced by that tale, but that's sufficient – you're on your way to the island. As am I.'

Karsa rose. The low ceiling forced him to stand hunched over. He made his way, hobbling, to the barred door.

'Aye, you could probably batter it down,' the stranger said. 'But then you'll be cut down before you manage three steps from this gaol. We're in the middle of the Malazan compound. Besides, we're about to be taken outside in any case, to join the prisoners' line chained to a wall. In the morning, they'll march us down to the imperial jetty and load us onto a transport.'

'How long have I been unconscious?'

'The night you were carried in, the day after, the next night. It's now midday.'

'And the slavemaster has been in the stocks all this time?'

'Most of it.'

'Good,' Karsa growled. 'What of his companion? The same?'

'The same.'

'And what crime have you committed?' Karsa asked.

'I consort with dissidents. Of course,' he added, 'I am innocent.'
'Can you not prove that?'

'Prove what?'

'Your innocence.'

'I could if I was.'

The Teblor glanced back at the figure crouched in the corner. 'Are you, by any chance, from Darujhistan?'

'Darujhistan? No, why do you ask?'

Karsa shrugged. He thought back to Torvald Nom’s death. There was a coldness surrounding the memory, but he could sense all that it held at bay. The time for surrender, however, was not now.

The barred door was set in an iron frame, the frame fixed to the stone blocks with large iron bolts. The Teblor gave it a shake. Dust sifted out from around the bolts, pattered onto the floor.

'I see you're a man who ignores advice,' the stranger observed.

'These Malazans are careless.'

'Overconfident, I'd suggest. Then again, perhaps not. They’ve had dealings with Fenn, with Trell, Barghast – a whole host of oversized barbarians. They’re tough, and sharper than they let on. They put an otataral anklet on that slavemaster – no magic from him any more—'

Karsa turned. 'What is this "otataral" everyone speaks of?'

'A bane to magic.'

'And it must be mined.'

'Yes. It’s usually a powder, found in layers, like sandstone. Resembles rust.'

'We scrape a red powder from cliffsides to make our blood-oil,' the Teblor murmured.

'What is blood-oil?'

'We rub it into our swords, and into our armour. To bring on battle madness, we taste it.'

The stranger was silent for a moment, though Karsa could feel the man’s eyes on him. 'And how well does magic work against you?'

'Those who attack me with sorcery usually reveal surprise on their faces ... just before I kill them.'

'Well now, that is interesting. It is believed that otataral is only found on the single large island east of here. The empire controls its production. Tightly. Their mages learned the hard way during the conquest, in the battles before the T’lan Imass got involved. If not for the T’lan Imass, the invasion would have failed. I have some more advice for you. Reveal nothing of this to the Malazans. If they discover there is another source of otataral, a source they do not control, well, they will send into your homeland – wherever that is – every regiment they possess. They will crush your people. Utterly.'

Karsa shrugged. 'The Teblor have many enemies.'

The stranger slowly sat straighter. 'Teblor? That is what you call yourselves? Teblor?' After a moment, he leaned back again, and softly laughed.

'What do you find so amusing?'

An outer door clanged open, and Karsa stepped back from the barred door as a squad of soldiers appeared. The three at the front had unsheathed their swords, while the four behind them held large, cocked crossbows. One of the swordsmen stepped up to the door. He paused upon seeing Karsa. 'Careful,' he called to his
companions, 'the savage has awakened.' He studied the Teblor and said, 'Do nothing stupid, Fenn. It matters nothing to us whether you live or die – the mines are crowded enough for them not to miss you. Understand me?'

Karsa bared his teeth, said nothing.

'You there, in the corner, on your feet. It's time for some sunshine.'

The stranger slowly straightened. He was wearing little more than rags. Lean and dark-skinned, his eyes were a startling light blue. 'I demand a proper trial, as is my right under imperial law.'

The guardsman laughed. 'Give it up. You've been identified. We know precisely who you are. Aye, your secret organization is not as seamless as you might think. Betrayed by one of your own – how does that feel? Let's go, you come out first. Jibb, you and Gullstream keep your crossbows on that Fenn – I don't like his smile. Especially now,' he added.

'Oh look,' another soldier said, 'you've confused the poor ox. Bet he doesn't even know his entire face is one big tattoo. Scrawl did good work, though. Best I've seen in a long while.'

'Right,' another drawled, 'and how many escaped prisoner tattoos have you seen, Jibb?'

'Just one, and it's a work of art.'

The source of the stinging sensation on Karsa's face was revealed now. He reached up, seeking to feel something of the pattern, and slowly began tracing lines of slightly raised, damp strips of raw skin. They were not contiguous. He could make no sense of what the tattoo portrayed.

'Shattered,' the other prisoner said as he walked over to the door, which the first guard unlocked and swung open. 'The brand makes your face look like it's been shattered.'

Two guards escorted the man outside, whilst the others, nervously eyeing Karsa, waited for their return. One of the crossbowmen, whose high forehead revealed white blotches – leading the Teblor to speculate that he was the one named Gullstream – leaned back against the opposite wall and said, 'I don't know, I'm thinking Scrawl made it too big – he was ugly enough to start with, now he looks damned terrifying.'

'So what?' another guard drawled. 'There's plenty of hill-grubbing savages that carve up their own faces to frighten weak-kneed recruits like you, Gullstream. Barghast and Semk and Khundryl, but they all break against a Malazan legion just the same.'

'Well, ain't none of them being routed these days, though, are they?'

'That's only because the Fist's cowering in his keep and wants us all to put 'im to bed every night. noble-born officers – what do you expect?'

'Might change when the reinforcements arrive,' Gullstream suggested. 'The Ashok Regiment knows these parts—'

'And that's the problem,' the other retorted. 'If this rebellion actually happens this time, who's to say they won't turn renegade? We could get smilin' throats in our own barracks. It's bad enough with the Red Blades stirrin' things up in the streets ...'

The guards returned.

'You, Fenn, now it's your turn. Make it easy for us and it'll be easy for you. Walk. Slow. Not too close. And trust me, the mines ain't so bad, considering the alternatives. All right, come forward now.'

Karsa saw no reason to give them trouble.

They emerged onto a sunlit compound. Thick, high walls surrounded the broad parade ground. A number of squat, solid-looking buildings projected out from three of the four walls; along the fourth wall there was a line of prisoners shackled to a heavy chain that ran its entire length, bolted to the foundation stones at regular
intervals. Near the heavily fortified gate was a row of stocks, of which only two were occupied – Silgar and Damisk. On the slave-master’s right ankle there glinted a copper-coloured ring.

Neither man had lifted his head at Karsa’s appearance, and the Teblor considered shouting to attract their attention; instead, he simply bared his teeth at seeing their plight. As the guards escorted him to the line of chained prisoners, Karsa turned to the one named Jibb and spoke in Malazan. ‘What will be the slavemaster's fate?’

The man’s helmed head jerked up in surprise. Then he shrugged. ‘Ain’t been decided yet. He claims to be rich back in Genabackis.’

Karsa sneered. ‘He can buy his way out from his crimes, then.’

‘Not under imperial law – if they're serious crimes, that is. Might be he'll just be fined. He may be a merchant who deals in flesh, but he's still a merchant. Always best to bleed ‘em where it hurts most.’

‘Enough jawing, Jibb,’ another guard growled.

They approached one end of the line, where oversized shackles had been attached. Once more, Karsa found himself in irons, though these were not tight enough to cause him pain. The Teblor noted that he was beside the blue-eyed native.

The squad checked the fittings one more time, then marched away.

There was no shade, though buckets of well-water had been positioned at intervals down the line. Karsa remained standing for a time, then finally settled down to sit with his back against the wall, matching the position of most of the other prisoners. There was little in the way of conversation as the day slowly dragged on. Towards late afternoon shade finally reached them, though the relief was momentary, as biting flies soon descended.

As the sky darkened overhead, the blue-eyed native stirred, then said in a low voice, ‘Giant, I have a proposal for you.’

Karsa grunted. ‘What?’

‘It’s said that the mining camps are corrupt, meaning one can carve out favours – make life easier. The kind of place where it pays to have someone guarding your back. I suggest a partnership.’

Karsa thought about it, then he nodded. ‘Agreed. But if you attempt to betray me, I will kill you.’

‘I could see no other answer to betrayal,’ the man said.

‘I am done talking,’ Karsa said.

‘Good, so am I.’

He thought to ask the man’s name, but there would be time enough for that later. For now, he was content to stretch the silence, to give space for his thoughts. It seemed Urugal was willing him to these otataral mines after all. Karsa would have preferred a more direct – a simpler – journey, such as the one the Malazans had originally intended. Too many blood-soaked digressions, Urugal. Enough.

Night arrived. A pair of soldiers appeared with lanterns and sauntered down the line of prisoners, checking the fetters one more time, before heading off to the barracks. From where he slumped, Karsa could see a handful of soldiers stationed at the gate, whilst at least one patrolled the walkway along each wall. Two more stood outside the steps of the headquarters.

The Teblor settled his head against the stone wall and closed his eyes.

Some time later he opened them again. He had slept. The sky was overcast, the compound a mottled pattern of light and darkness. Something had awoken him. He made to stand but a hand stayed him. He looked over to see the native huddled motionless beside him – head lowered as if still asleep. The hand on the Teblor’s arm
tightened a moment, then withdrew.

Frowning, Karsa settled back. And then he saw.

The guards at the gate were gone, as were those outside the headquarters. Along the wall walkways . . . no-one.

Then, alongside a nearby building – movement, a figure sliding through shadows in silence, followed by another, padding along with far less stealth, one gloved hand reaching up to steady itself every now and then.

The two were making directly for Karsa.

Swathed in black cloth, the lead figure halted a few paces from the wall. The other moved up alongside it, then edged past. Hands lifted, slipped back a black hood—

Torvald Nom.

Bloodstained bandages encircling his neck, the face above it deathly pale and gleaming with sweat, but the Daru was grinning.

He drew up to Karsa's side. 'Time to go, friend,' he whispered, raising something that looked very much like a shackle key.

'Who is with you?' Karsa whispered back.

'Oh, a motley collection indeed. Gral tribesmen here doing the sneaky work, and agents from their main trading partner here in Ehrlitan . . .' His eyes glittered. 'The House of Nom, no less. Oh, aye, the thread of blood between us is thin as a virgin's hair, but it is being honoured none the less. Indeed, with delighted vigour. Now, enough words – as you are wont to say – we don't want to wake anyone else—'

'Too late,' murmured the man chained beside Karsa.

The Gral behind Torvald moved forward, but halted at a strange, elaborate series of gestures from the prisoner.

Torvald grunted. 'That damned silent language.'

'It is agreed,' the prisoner said. 'I will be going with you.'

'And if you wasn't, you'd be sounding the alarm.'

The man said nothing.

After a moment, Torvald shrugged. 'So be it. All this talk and I'm surprised everyone else in this line isn't awake—'

'They would be, only they're all dead.' The prisoner beside Karsa slowly straightened. 'No-one likes criminals. Gral have a particular hatred for them, it seems.'

A second tribesman, who had been moving along the line, reached them. A large, curved knife was in one hand, slick with blood. More hand gestures, then the newcomer sheathed his weapon.

Muttering under his breath, Torvald crouched to unlock Karsa's shackles.

'You are as hard to kill as a Teblor,' Karsa murmured.

'Thank Hood that Arak was distracted at the time. Even so, if not for the Gral, I'd have bled to death.'

'Why did they save you?'

'The Gral like to ransom people. Of course, if they turn out worthless, they kill them. The trading partnership with the House of Nom took precedence over all that, of course.'
Torvald moved on to the other prisoner.

Karsa stood, rubbing his wrists. 'What kind of trade?'

The Daru flashed a grin. 'Brokering the ransoms.'

Moments later they were moving through the darkness towards the front gate, skirting the patches of light. Near the gatehouse a half-dozen bodies had been dragged up against the wall. The ground was soaked black with blood.

Three more Gral joined them. One by one, the group slipped through the gateway and into the street beyond. They crossed to an alley and made their way down to the far end, where they halted.

Torvald laid a hand on Karsa's arm. 'Friend, where would you go now? My own return to Genabackis will be delayed awhile. My kin here have embraced me with open arms – a unique experience for me, and I plan on savouring it. Alas, the Gral won't take you – you're too recognizable.'

'He will come with me,' the blue-eyed native said. 'To a place of safety.'

Torvald looked up at Karsa, brows rising.

The Teblor shrugged. 'It is clear that I cannot be hidden in this city; nor will I further endanger you or your kin, Torvald Nom. If this man proves unworthy I need only kill him.'

'How long until the compound guards are changed?' the blue-eyed man asked.

'A bell at least, so you will have plenty—'

Sudden alarms shattered the night, from the direction of the Malazan garrison.

The Gral seemed to vanish before Karsa's eyes, so quickly did they scatter. 'Torvald Nom, for all you have done for me, I thank you—' 

The Daru scurried over to a pile of rubbish in the alley. He swept it aside, then lifted into view Karsa's bloodsword. 'Here, friend.' He tossed the sword into the Teblor's hands. 'Come to Darujhistan in a few years' time.'

A final wave, then the Daru was gone.

The blue-eyed man – who had collected a sword from one of the dead guards – now gestured. 'Stay close. There are ways out of Ehrlitan the Malazans know nothing of. Follow, and quietly.'

He set off. Karsa slipped into his wake.

Their route twisted through the lower city, down countless alleys, some so narrow that the Teblor was forced to sidle sideways along their crooked lengths. Karsa had thought that his guide would lead them towards the docks, or perhaps the outer walls facing onto the wasteland to the south. Instead, they climbed towards the single massive hill at Ehrlitan's heart, and before long were moving through the rubble of countless collapsed buildings.

They arrived at the battered base of a tower, the native not hesitating as he ducked in through the gaping, dark doorway. Following, Karsa found himself in a cramped chamber, its floor uneven with heaved flagstones. A second portal was barely visible opposite the entrance, and at its threshold the man paused.

'Mebra!' he hissed.

There was movement, then: 'Is it you? Dryjhna bless us, I had heard that you had been captured – ah, the alarms down below . . . well done—'

'Enough of that. Do the provisions remain in the tunnels?'
'Of course! Always. Including your own cache—'

'Good, now move aside. I've someone with me.'

Beyond the portal was a rough series of stone steps, descending into even deeper darkness. Karsa sensed the man Mebra's presence as he edged past, heard his sharp intake of breath.

The blue-eyed man below the Teblor halted suddenly. 'Oh, and Mebra, tell no-one you have seen us – not even your fellow servants to the cause. Understand?'

'Of course.'

The two fugitives continued on, leaving Mebra behind. The stairs continued down, until Karsa had begun to think that they were approaching the bowels of the earth. When it finally levelled out, the air was heavy with damp, smelling of salt, and the stones underfoot were wet and streaked in slime. At the tunnel's mouth a number of niches had been carved into the limestone walls, each one holding leather packs and travel gear.

Karsa watched as his companion strode quickly to one niche in particular. After a moment's examination, he dropped the Malazan sword he had been carrying and drew forth a pair of objects that moved with the sound of rustling chain.

'Take that food-pack,' the man instructed, nodding towards a nearby niche. 'And you will find a telaba or two – clothes – and weapon-belts and harnesses – leave the lanterns, the tunnel ahead is long but has no branches.'

'Where does it lead?'

'Out,' the man replied.

Karsa fell silent. He disliked the extent to which his life was in this native's hands, but it seemed that, for the time being, there was nothing he could do about it. Seven Cities was a stranger place than even the Genabackan cities of Malyntaes and Genabaris. The lowlanders filled this world like vermin – more tribes than the Teblor had thought possible, and it was clear that none liked each other. While that was a sentiment Karsa well understood – for tribes should dislike each other – it was also obvious that, among the lowlanders, there was no sense of any other sort of loyalty. Karsa was Uryd, but he was also Teblor. The lowlanders seemed so obsessed with their differences that they had no comprehension of what unified them.

A flaw that could be exploited.

The pace set by Karsa's guide was fierce, and though most of the damage done to the Teblor was well along in healing, his reserves of strength and stamina were not what they had once been. After a time, the distance between the two began to lengthen, and eventually Karsa found himself travelling alone through the impenetrable darkness, one hand on the rough-hewn wall to his right, hearing only the sounds of his own passage. The air was no longer damp, and he could taste dust in his mouth.

The wall suddenly vanished under his hand. Karsa stumbled, drew to a halt.

'You did well,' the native said from somewhere on the Teblor's left. 'Running hunched over as you had to be ... not an easy task. Look up.'

He did, and slowly straightened. There were stars overhead.

'We're in a gully,' the man continued. 'It will be dawn before we climb out of it. Then it's five, maybe six days across the Pan'potsun Odhan. The Malazans will be after us, of course, so we will have to be careful. Rest awhile. Drink some water – the sun is a demon and will steal your life if it can. Our route will take us from one place of water to the next, so we need not suffer.'

'You know this land,' Karsa said. 'I do not.' He raised his sword. 'But know this, I will not be taken prisoner again.'

'That's the spirit,' the lowlander replied.
'That is not what I meant.'

The man laughed. 'I know. If you so wish it, once we are clear of this gully you may go in any direction you like. What I have offered you is the best chance of surviving. There is more than recapture by the Malazans to worry about in this land. Travel with me, and you shall learn how to survive. But as I said, the choice is yours. Now, shall we proceed?'

Dawn arrived to the world above before the two fugitives reached the end of the gully. While they could see bright blue sky overhead, they continued walking through chill shadows. The means of exit was marked by a tumbled scree of boulders where a past flood had undercut one wall sufficiently to trigger a collapse.

Clambering up the slope, they emerged onto a heat-blasted land of weathered crags, sand-filled riverbeds, cacti and thorny bushes, the sun blindingly bright, making the air shimmer in all directions. There was no-one in sight, nor was there any sign that the area was inhabited by anything other than wild creatures.

The lowlander led Karsa southwestward, their route circuitous, making use of every form of cover available and avoiding ridges or hilltops that would set them against the sky. Neither spoke, saving their breath in the enervating heat as the day stretched on.

Late in the afternoon, the lowlander halted suddenly and turned. He hissed a curse in his native language, then said, 'Horsemen.'

Karsa swung round, but could see no-one in the desolate landscape behind them.

'Feel them underfoot,' the man muttered. 'So, Mebra has turned. Well, one day I will answer that betrayal.'

And now Karsa could sense, through the callused soles of his bared feet, the tremble of distant horse hoofs. 'If you'd suspected this Mebra why did you not kill him?'

'If I killed everyone I was suspicious about I'd have scant company. I needed proof, and now I have it.'

'Unless he told someone else.'

'Then he's either a traitor or stupid – both lead to the same fatal consequence. Come, we need to make this a challenge for the Malazans.'

They set off. The lowlander was unerring in choosing paths that left no footprints or other signs of passage. Despite this, the sound of the riders drew ever nearer. 'There's a mage among them,' the lowlander muttered as they raced across yet another stretch of bedrock.

'If we can avoid them until nightfall,' Karsa said, 'then I shall become the hunter and they the hunted.'

'There's at least twenty of them. We're better off using the darkness to stretch the distance between us. See those mountains to the southwest? That is our destination. If we can reach the hidden passes, we will be safe.'

'We cannot outrun horses,' Karsa growled. 'Come dark, I will be done running.'

'Then you attack alone, for it will mean your death.'

'Alone. That is well. I need no lowlander getting underfoot.'

The plunge into night was sudden. Just before the last light failed, the two fugitives, slipping onto a plain crowded with enormous boulders, finally caught sight of their pursuers. Seventeen riders, three spare horses. All but two of the Malazans were in full armour, helmed and armed with either lances or crossbows. The other two riders were easily recognizable to Karsa. Silgar and Damisk.

Karsa suddenly recalled that, the night of their escape from the compound, the stocks had been empty. He'd thought little of it at the time, assuming that the two prisoners had been taken inside for the night.
The pursuers had not seen the two fugitives, who quickly moved behind the cover of the boulders.

'I have led them to an old campground,' the lowlander at Karsa's side whispered. 'Listen. They're making camp. The two who weren't soldiers—'

'Yes. The slavemaster and his guard.'

'They must have taken that otataral anklet off him. He wants you badly, it seems.'

Karsa shrugged. 'And he will find me. Tonight. I am done with those two. Neither will see the dawn, this I swear before Urugal.'

'You cannot attack two squads on your own.'

'Then consider it a diversion and make good your escape, lowlander.' With that the Teblor swung about and made his way towards the Malazan camp.

He was not interested in waiting for them to settle. The crossbowmen had ridden all day with their weapons cocked. They would probably be replacing the wrapped cords at this very moment, assuming they followed the practice that Karsa had seen among the squads of the Ashok Regiment. Others would be removing saddles and tending to the horses, whilst most of the remaining soldiers would be preparing to cook meals and raise tents. At most, there would be two or three guards establishing a picket around the camp.

Karsa paused behind a huge boulder just beyond the Malazans. He could hear them setting up their position for the night. The Teblor collected a handful of sand and dried the sweat from his palms, then he hefted his blood-sword in his right hand and edged forward.

Three fires had been lit using dung, the hearths ringed with large rocks to cut the light cast out by the flickering flames. The horses stood within a rope corral, three soldiers moving among them. A half-dozen crossbowmen sat nearby, their weapons dismantled on their laps. Two guards stood facing the plain of boulders, one positioned slightly behind the other. The soldier closest to Karsa held a drawn short-sword and a round shield, his companion six paces behind him a short bow, arrow nocked.

There were, in fact, more guards at the pickets than Karsa would have liked, one visible on each other flank of the encampment. The bowman was so positioned as to permit him a field of fire for every one of them.

Crouched before a firepit near the centre of the camp were Silgar, Damisk and a Malazan officer, the latter with his back to Karsa.

The Teblor silently worked his way around the boulder. The guard closest to him was looking to the left at the moment. Five paces to close in a charge. The bowman had turned in his restless scanning towards the guard at the far end of the camp.

Now.

The helmed head was swinging back, the weathered face pale beneath its rim.

And then Karsa was alongside him, his left hand snapping out to close around the man's throat. Cartilage collapsed with a dry popping sound.

Enough to make the bowman whirl.

Had his attacker the short legs of a lowlander, he would have had a chance to loose his arrow. As it was, he barely had time to draw before the Teblor reached him.

The man's mouth opened to shout as he tensed to throw himself backward. Karsa's sword flashed outward, sending the helmed head tumbling from shoulders. Armour clattered behind him as the corpse fell to the ground.

Faces swung round. Shouts rang through the night.
Three soldiers rose from a hearth directly in front of the Teblor. Short-swords hissed from scabbards. One Malazan threw himself into Karsa's path in an effort to give his companions time to find their shields. A brave and fatal gesture, for his weapon's reach was no match for the blood-sword. The man shrieked as he lost both forearms to a vicious lateral slash.

One of the next two Malazans had managed to ready his round shield, raising it into the path of Karsa's downward swing. The bronze-banded wood exploded at the impact, the arm holding it shattering beneath it. As the soldier crumpled, the Teblor leapt over him, quickly cutting down the third man.

A blaze of pain along the top of his right thigh as a lance ripped a path to thrum into the dusty ground behind him. Wheeling, he whipped his blade around in time to bat aside another lance which had been about to strike his chest.

Footsteps rushing him from behind and to the left – one of the picket guards – while directly before him, three paces distant, stood Silgar, Damisk and the Malazan officer. The slavemaster's face was twisted with terror, even as sorcery rose into a writhing wave in front of him, then roared towards Karsa.

The magic struck him at the precise moment that the picket guard arrived. Sorcery engulfed them both. The Malazan's scream ripped through the air. Grunting at the writhing, ghostly tendrils seeking to snare him in place, Karsa surged through it – and came face to face with the slavemaster.

Damisk had already fled. The officer had thrown himself to one side, deftly ducking beneath Karsa's side-swing.

Silgar threw his hands up.

Karsa cut them off.

The slavemaster reeled back.

The Teblor chopped down, severing Silgar's right leg just above the ankle. The man toppled onto his upper shoulders, legs in the air. A fourth swing sent the left foot spinning.

Two soldiers rushed Karsa from his right, a third one trailing.

A bellowed command rang through the night, and the Teblor – weapon readied – was surprised to see the three men peel away. By his count there were five others, as well as the officer and Damisk. He spun, glaring, but there was no-one – just the sounds of boots retreating into the darkness. He looked to where the horses had been corralled – the animals were gone.

A lance darted towards him. Snarling, Karsa splintered it as the back of his bloodsword deflected it to one side. He paused, then padded over to Silgar. The slavemaster had curled into a tight ball. Blood flowed from the four stumps. Karsa picked him up by his silk belt and carried him back to the plain of boulders.

As he moved around the first of the massive rocks a voice spoke low and clear from the shadows. 'This way.'

The Teblor grunted. 'You were supposed to have fled.'

'They will regroup, but without the mage we should be able to elude them.'

Karsa followed his companion deeper into the studded plain, then, after fifty or so paces, the man stopped and turned to the Teblor.

'Of course, with your prize leaving a trail of blood, there will be little trouble in following us. Do something with him now.'

Karsa dropped Silgar to the ground, kicked him onto his back. The slavemaster was unconscious.

'He will bleed to death,' the lowlander said. 'You have your revenge. Leave him here to die.'

Instead, the Teblor began cutting strips from Silgar's telaba, tying them tight about the stumps at the ends of
his arms and legs.

'There will still be some leakage—'

'Which we shall have to live with,' Karsa growled. 'I am not yet done with this man.'

'What value senseless torture?'

Karsa hesitated, then he sighed. 'This man enslaved an entire tribe of Teblor. The Sunyd's spirit is broken. The slavemaster is not as a soldier – he has not earned swift death. He is as a mad dog, to be driven into a hut and killed—'

'So kill him.'

'I shall... once I have driven him mad.'

Karsa lifted Silgar once more, throwing him over a shoulder. 'Lead us on, lowlander.'

Hissing under his breath, the man nodded.

Eight days later, they reached the hidden pass through the Pan'potsun Mountains. The Malazans had resumed their pursuit, but had not been seen since two days past, indicating that the efforts to evade them had succeeded.

They ascended the steep, rocky trail through the course of the day. Silgar was still alive, fevered and only periodically aware. He had been gagged to prevent him making any sounds. Karsa carried him on his shoulder.

Shortly before dusk they reached the summit, and came to the southwest edge. The path wound down into a shadowed plain. At the crest they sat down to rest.

'What lies beyond?' Karsa asked as he dropped Silgar to the ground. 'I see naught but a wasteland of sand below.'

'And so it is,' his companion replied in a reverent tone. 'And in its heart, the one I serve.' He glanced over at Karsa. 'She will, I think, be interested in you... she smiled, 'Teblor.'

Karsa scowled. 'Why does the name of my people amuse you so?'

'Amuse? More like appals. The Fenn had fallen far from their past glories, yet they remembered enough to know their old name. You cannot even make that claim. Your kind walked this earth when the T'lan Imass were still flesh. From your blood came the Barghast and the Trell. You are Thelomen Toblakai.'

'These are names I do not know,' Karsa growled, 'even as I do not know yours, lowlander.'

The man returned his gaze to the dark lands below. 'I am named Leoman. And the one I serve, the Chosen One to whom I will deliver you, she is Sha'ik.'

'I am no-one's servant,' Karsa said. 'This Chosen One, she dwells in the desert before us?'

'In its very heart, Toblakai. In Raraku's very heart.'
BOOK TWO

COLD IRON
There are folds in this shadow ...
 hiding entire worlds.

Call to Shadow
 Felisin
CHAPTER FIVE

Woe to the fallen
in the alleys of Aren ...

Anonymous

A single kick from the burly soldier in the lead sent the flimsy door crashing inward. He disappeared into the
gloom beyond, followed by the rest of his squad. From within came shouts, the sound of crashing furniture.

Gamet glanced over at Commander Blistig.

The man shrugged. 'Aye, the door was unlocked – it's an inn, after all, though such a lofty title for this
squalid pit is stretching things somewhat. Even so, it's a matter of achieving the proper effect.'

'You misunderstood me,' Gamet replied. 'I simply cannot believe that your soldiers found him here.'

Unease flitted across Blistig's solid, broad features. 'Aye, well, we've rounded up others in worse places, Fist.
It's what comes of—' he squinted up the street, 'of broken hearts.'

Fist. The title still clambers into my gut like a starving crow. Gamet frowned. 'The Adjunct has no time for
brokenhearted soldiers, Commander.'

'It was unrealistic to arrive here expecting to stoke the fires of vengeance. Can't stoke cold ashes, though
don't take me wrong, I wish her the Lady's luck.'

'Rather more is expected of you than that,' Gamet said drily.

The streets were virtually deserted at this time of day, the afternoon heat oppressive. Of course, even at other
times, Aren was not as it once had been. Trade from the north had ceased. Apart from Malazan warships and
transports, and a few fisherboats, the harbour and river mouth were empty. This was, Gamet reflected, a scarred
populace.

The squad was re-emerging from the inn, carrying with them a rag-clad, feebly struggling old man. He was
smeared in vomit, the little hair he had left hanging like grey strings, his skin patched and grey with filth.
Cursing at the stench, the soldiers of Blistig's Aren Guard hurried their burden towards the cart's bed.

'It was a miracle we found him at all,' the commander said. 'I truly expected the old bastard to up and drown
himself.'

Momentarily unmindful of his new title, Gamet turned and spat onto the cobbles. 'This situation is
contemptible, Blistig. Damn it, some semblance of military decorum – of control, Hood take me – should have
been possible ...'

The commander stiffened at Gamet's tone. The guards gathered at the back of the cart all turned at his words.

Blistig stepped close to the Fist. 'You listen to me and listen well,' he growled under his breath, a tremble
shivering across his scarred cheeks, his eyes hard as iron. 'I stood on the damned wall and watched. As did
every one of my soldiers. Pormqual running in circles like a castrated cat – that historian and those two Wickan
children wailing with grief. I watched – we all watched – as Coltaine and his Seventh were cut down before our
very eyes. And if that wasn't enough, the High Fist then marched out his army and ordered them to disarm! If
not for one of my captains delivering intelligence concerning Mallick Rel being an agent of Sha'ik's, my Guard
would have died with them. Military decorum? Go to Hood with your military decorum, Fist!'

Gamet stood unmoving at the commander's tirade. It was not the first time that he'd felt the snap of this man's
temper. Since he had arrived with Adjunct Tavore's retinue, and was given the liaison role that took him to the
forefront of dealing with the survivors of the Chain of Dogs – both those who had come in with the historian Duiker, and those who had awaited them in the city – Gamet had felt under siege. The rage beneath the mantle of propriety erupted again and again. Hearts not simply broken, but shattered, torn to pieces, trampled on. The Adjunct's hope of resurrecting the survivors – making use of their local experience to steady her legions of untested recruits – was, to Gamet, seeming more and more unrealistic with each day that passed.

It was also clear that Blistig cared little that Gamet made daily reports to the Adjunct, and could reasonably expect his tirades to have been passed on to Tavore, in culpable detail. The commander was doubly fortunate, therefore, that Gamet had as yet said nothing of them to the Adjunct, exercising extreme brevity in his debriefings and keeping personal observations to the minimum.

As Blistig's words trailed away, Gamet simply sighed and approached the cart to look down on the drunken old man lying on its bed. The soldiers backed away a step – as if the Fist carried a contagion.

'So,' Gamet drawled, 'this is Squint. The man who killed Coltaine—'

'Was a mercy,' one of the guards snapped.

'Clearly, Squint does not think so.'

There was no reply to that. Blistig arrived at the Fist's side. 'All right,' he said to his squad, 'take him and get him cleaned up – and under lock and key.'

'Aye, sir.'

Moments later the cart was being pulled away.

Gamet faced Blistig once more. 'Your rather unsubtle plan of getting yourself stripped of rank, shackled in irons, and sent back to Unta on the first ship, will not succeed, Commander. Neither the Adjunct, nor I, care one whit for your fragile state. We are preparing to fight a war, and for that you will be needed. You and every one of your crumple-faced soldiers.'

'Better we'd died with the rest—'

'But you did not. We have three legions of recruits, Commander. Wide-eyed and young but ready to shed Seven Cities blood. The question is, what do you and your soldiers intend to show them?

Blistig glared. 'The Adjunct makes the captain of her House Guard into a Fist, and I'm supposed to—'

'Fourth Army,' Gamet snapped. 'In the 1st Company at its inception. The Wickan Wars. Twenty-three years' service, Commander. I knew Coltaine when you were still bouncing on your mother's knee. I took a lance through the chest but proved too stubborn to die. My commander was kind enough to retire me to what he figured was a safe position back in Unta. Aye, captain of the guard in the House of Paran. But I'd damn well earned it!'

After a long moment, a wry grin twisted Blistig's mouth. 'So you're as happy to be here as I am.'

Gamet grimaced, made no reply.

The two Malazans returned to their horses.

Swinging himself onto the saddle, Gamet said, 'We're expecting the last transport of troops from Malaz Island some time today. The Adjunct wants all the commanders assembled in her council chambers at the eighth bell.'

'To what end?' Blistig asked.

*If I had my way, to see you drawn and quartered.* 'Just be there, Commander.'

The vast mouth of the Menykh River was a brown, turgid swirl that reached half a league out into Aren Bay.
Leaning on the transport's starboard railing just behind the forecastle, Strings studied the roiling water below, then lifted his gaze to the city on the river's north shore.

He rubbed at the bristles on his long jaw. The rusty hue of his beard in youth had given way now to grey ... which was a good thing as far as he was concerned.

The city of Aren had changed little in the years since he had last seen it, barring the paucity of ships in the harbour. The same pall of smoke hanging over it, the same endless stream of sewage crawling the currents into the Seeker's Deep – through which the broad-beamed, sluggish transport now sailed.

The newly issued leather cap chafed the back of his neck; it had damned near broken his heart to discard his old one, along with his tattered leather surcoat, and the sword-belt he'd stripped from a Falah'dan guard who no longer needed it. In fact, he had retained but one possession from his former life, buried down in the bottom of his kit bag in his berth below decks, and he had no intention of permitting its discovery by anyone.

A man came alongside him, leaned casually on the rail and stared out over the water to the city drawing ever nearer.

Strings offered no greeting. Lieutenant Ranal embodied the worst of Malazan military command. noble-born, commission purchased in the city of Quon, arrogant and inflexible and righteous and yet to draw a sword in anger. A walking death sentence to his soldiers, and it was the Lord's luck that Strings was one of those soldiers.

The lieutenant was a tall man, his Quon blood the purest it could be; fair-skinned, fair-haired, his cheekbones high and wide, his nose straight and long, his mouth full. Strings had hated him on sight.

'It is customary to salute your superior,' Ranal said with affected indifference.

'Saluting officers gets them killed, sir.'

'Here on a transport ship?'

'Just getting into the habit,' Strings replied.

'It has been plain from the start that you have done this before, soldier.' Ranal paused to examine the supple, black knuckles of his gloved hands. 'Hood knows, you're old enough to be the father of most of those marines sitting on the deck behind us. The recruiting officer sent you straight through – you've not trained or sparred once, yet here I am, expected to accept you as one of my soldiers.'

Strings shrugged, said nothing.

'That recruiting officer,' Ranal went on after a moment, his pale blue eyes fixed on the city, 'said she saw from the start what you'd been trying to hide. Oddly, she considered it – you, to be more precise – a valuable resource, even so much as to suggesting I make you a sergeant. Do you know why I find that odd?'

'No, sir, but I am sure you will tell me.'

'Because I think you were a deserter.'

Strings leaned far forward and spat down into the water. 'I've met more than a few, and they've all got their reasons and no two of them alike. But there's one thing they all have in common.'

'And what is that?'

'You'll never find them in an enlistment line, Lieutenant. Enjoy the view, sir.' He turned away and wandered back to where the other marines sprawled on the midship deck. Most had long since recovered from their seasickness, yet their eagerness to disembark was palpable. Strings sat down, stretched out his legs.

'Lieutenant wants your head on a plate,' a voice murmured beside him.

Strings sighed and closed his eyes, lifting his face to the afternoon sun. 'What the lieutenant wants and what
he gets ain't the same thing, Koryk.'

'What he'll get is the bunch of us right here,' the Seti half-blood replied, rolling his broad shoulders, strands of his long black hair whipping across his flat-featured face.

'The practice is to mix recruits with veterans,' Strings said. 'Despite everything you've heard, there's survivors of the Chain of Dogs in yon city over there. A whole shipload of wounded marines and Wickans made it through, I've heard. And there's the Aren Guard, and the Red Blades. A number of coastal marine ships straggled in as well. Finally, there's Admiral Nok's fleet, though I imagine he'll want to keep his own forces intact.'

'What for?' another recruit asked. 'We're heading for a desert war, aren't we?'

Strings glanced over at her. Frighteningly young, reminding him of another young woman who'd marched alongside him a while ago. He shivered slightly, then said, 'The Adjunct would have to be a fool to strip the fleet. Nok's ready to begin the reconquest of the coast cities – he could've started months ago. The empire needs secure ports. Without them we're finished on this continent.'

'Well,' the young woman muttered, 'from what I've heard, this Adjunct might be just what you said, old man. Hood knows, she's noble-born, ain't she?'

Strings snorted, but said nothing, closing his eyes once more. He was worried the lass might be right. Then again, this Tavore was sister to Captain Paran. And Paran had shown some spine back in Darujhistan. At the very least, he was no fool.

'Where'd you get the name "Strings", anyway?' the young woman asked after a moment.

Fiddler smiled. 'That tale's too long to tell, lass.'

Her gauntlets thudded down onto the tabletop, raising a cloud of dust. Armour rustling, sweat soaking the under-padding between her breasts, she unstrapped her helmet and – as the wench arrived with the tankard of ale – dragged out the rickety chair and sat down.

Street urchin messenger. Delivering a small strip of green silk which bore, written in a fine hand, the Malazan words: Dancer's Tavern, dusk. Lostara Yil was more irritated than intrigued.

The interior of Dancer's Tavern consisted of a single room, the four walls making some ancient claim to whitewashed plaster, remnants of which now clung to the adobe bricks in misshapen, wine-stained patches, like a map of a drunkard's paradise. The low ceiling was rotting before the very eyes of owner and patron, dust sifting down in clouds lit by the low sun that cast streams of light through the front window's shutters. Already, the foam-threaded surface of the ale in the tankard before her sported a dull sheen.

There were but three other patrons, two bent over a game of slivers at the table closest to the window, and a lone, mumbling, semi-conscious man slumped against the wall beside the piss trench.

Although early, the Red Blade captain was already impatient to see an end to this pathetic mystery, if mystery it was meant to be. She'd needed but a moment to realize who it was who had set up this clandestine meeting. And while a part of her was warmed by the thought of seeing him again – for all his affectations and airs he was handsome enough – she had sufficient responsibilities to wrestle with as Tene Baralta's aide. Thus far, the Red Blades were being treated as a company distinct from the Adjunct's punitive army, despite the fact that there were few soldiers available with actual fighting experience ... and even fewer with the backbone to put that experience to use.

The disordered apathy rife in Blistig's Aren Guard was not shared by the Red Blades. Kin had been lost in the Chain of Dogs, and that would be answered.

If...

The Adjunct was Malazan – an unknown to Lostara and the rest of the Red Blades; even Tene Baralta,
had met her face to face on three occasions, remained unable to gauge her, to take her measure. Did Tavore trust the Red Blades?

*Maybe the truth is already before us. She's yet to give our company anything. Are we part of her army? Will the Red Blades be permitted to fight the Whirlwind?*

Questions without answers.

And here she sat, wasting time—

The door swung open.

A shimmering grey cloak, green-tinted leathers, dark, sun-burnished skin, a wide, welcoming smile. 'Captain Lostara Yil! I am delighted to see you again.' He strode over, dismissing the approaching serving wench with a casual wave of one gloved hand. Settling into the chair opposite her, he raised two crystal goblets that seemed to appear from nowhere and set them on the dusty table. A black bottle, long-necked and glistening, followed. 'I strongly advise against the local ale in this particular establishment, my dear. This vintage suits the occasion far better. From the sun-drenched south slopes of Gris, where grow the finest grapes this world has seen. Is mine an informed opinion, you are wondering? Most assuredly so, lass, since I hold a majority interest in said vineyards—'

'What is it you want with me, Pearl?'

He poured the magenta-hued wine into the goblets, his smile unwavering. 'Plagued as I am with sentimentality, I thought we might raise our glasses to old times. Granted, they were rather harrowing times; none the less, we survived, did we not?'

'Oh yes,' Lostara replied. 'And you went your way, on to greater glory no doubt. Whilst I went mine – straight into a cell.'

The Claw sighed. 'Ah well, poor Pormqual's advisers failed him dearly, alas. But I see now that you and your fellow Red Blades are free once more, your weapons returned to you, your place in the Adjunct's army secure —'

'Not quite.'

Pearl arched an elegant brow.

Lostara collected the goblet and drank a mouthful, barely noticing its taste. 'We have had no indication of the Adjunct's wishes towards us.'

'How strange!'

Scowling, the captain said, 'Enough games – you surely know far more about it than we do—'

'Alas, I must disabuse you of that notion. The new Adjunct is as unfathomable to me as she is to you. My failure was in making assumptions that she would hasten to repair the damage done to your illustrious company. To leave unanswered the question of the Red Blades' loyalty ...' Pearl sipped wine, then leaned back. 'You have been released from the gaols, your weapons returned to you – have you been barred from leaving the city? From headquarters?'

'Only her council chambers, Pearl.'

The Claw's expression brightened. 'Ah, but in that you are not alone, my dear. From what I have heard, apart from the select few who have accompanied her from Unta, the Adjunct has hardly spoken with anyone at all. I believe, however, that the situation is about to change.'

'What do you mean?'

'Why, only that there will be a council of war tonight, one to which your commander, Tene Baralta, has no doubt been invited, as well as Commander Blistig and a host of others whose appearance will likely surprise
one and all.' He fell silent then, his green eyes holding on her.

Lostara slowly blinked. 'That being the case, I must needs return to Tene Baralta—'

'A fair conclusion, lass. Unfortunately wrong, I am afraid.'

'Explain yourself, Pearl.'

He leaned forward once more and topped up her drink. 'Delighted to. As recalcitrant as the Adjunct has been, I did manage to have occasion to present to her a request, which she has approved.'

Lostara's voice was flat. 'What kind of request?'

'Well, sentimentality is my curse, as I mentioned earlier. Fond are my memories of you and me working together. So fond, in fact, that I have requested you as my, uhm, my aide. Your commander has of course been informed—'

'I am a captain in the Red Blades!' Lostara snapped. 'Not a Claw, not a spy, not a mur—' She bit the word back.

Pearl's eyes widened. 'I am deeply hurt. But magnanimous enough this evening to excuse your ignorance. Whilst you may find no distinction between the art of assassination and the crude notion of murder, I assure you that one exists. Be that as it may, permit me to allay your fears – the task awaiting you and me will not involve the ghastlier side of my calling. No indeed, lass, my need for you in this upcoming endeavour depends entirely upon two of your numerous qualities. Your familiarity as a native of Seven Cities, for one. And the other – even more vital – your unquestioned loyalty to the Malazan Empire. Now, while you could in no way argue the veracity of the former, it now falls to you to reassert your claim to the latter.'

She stared at him for a long moment, then slowly nodded. 'I see. Very well, I am at your disposal.'

Pearl smiled once more. 'Wonderful. My faith in you was absolute.'

'What is this mission we are to embark upon?'

'Details will be forthcoming once we have our personal interview with the Adjunct this evening.'

She straightened. 'You have no idea, do you?'

His smile broadened. 'Exciting, yes?'

'So you don't know if it will involve assassination—'

'Assassination? Who knows? But murder? Assuredly not. Now, drink up, lass. We must needs march to the palace of the late High Fist. I have heard that the Adjunct has little toleration for tardiness.'

Everyone had arrived early. Gamet stood near the door through which the Adjunct would appear, his back to the wall, his arms crossed. Before him, stationed in the long, low-ceilinged council chamber, were the three commanders who had been assembled for this evening's first set of meetings. The next few bells, with all the orchestration directing them, promised to be interesting. None the less, the once-captain of House Paran was feeling somewhat intimidated.

He had been a common soldier years back, not one to find himself in councils of war. There was little comfort in this new mantle of Fist, for he knew that merit had had nothing to do with acquiring the title. Tavore knew him, had grown used to commanding him, to leaving to him the tasks of organization, the arranging of schedules ... but for a noble household. Yet it seemed she intended to use him in an identical manner, this time for the entire Fourteenth Army. Which made him an administrator, not a Fist. A fact of which no-one present in this room was unaware.

He was unused to the embarrassment he felt, and recognized that the bluster he often displayed was nothing more than a knee-jerk reaction to his own sense of inadequacy. For the moment, however, he did not feel
capable of managing even so much as diffidence, much less bluster.

Admiral Nok was standing a half-dozen paces away, in quiet conversation with the imposing commander of the Red Blades, Tene Baralta. Blistig sat sprawled in a chair at the far end of the map table, farthest from where the Adjunct would seat herself once the meeting commenced.

Gamet's eyes were drawn again and again to the tall admiral. Apart from Dujek Onearm, Nok was the last of the commanders from the Emperor's time. The only admiral who didn't drown. With the sudden deaths of the Napan brothers, Urko and Crust, Nok had been given overall command of the imperial fleets. The Empress had sent him and a hundred and seven of his ships to Seven Cities when the rumours of rebellion had reached fever pitch. Had the High Fist in Aren not effectively impounded that fleet in the harbour, Coltaine's Chain of Dogs could have been prevented; indeed, the rebellion might well be over. Now, the task of reconquest promised to be a drawn-out, bloody endeavour. Whatever feelings the admiral might have regarding all that had occurred and all that was likely to come, he gave no outward indication, his expression remaining cold and impersonal.

Tene Baralta had his own grievances. The Red Blades had been charged with treason by Pormqual, even as one of their companies fought under Coltaine's command – fought, and was annihilated. Blistig's first order once the High Fist left the city had been their release. As with the survivors of the Chain of Dogs and the Aren Guard, the Adjunct had inherited their presence. The question of what to do with them – what to do with them all – was about to be answered.

Gamet wished he could allay their concerns, but the truth was, Tavore had never been free with her thoughts. The Fist had no idea what this evening would bring.

The door opened.

As was her style, Tavore's clothes were well made, but plain and virtually colourless. A match to her eyes, to the streaks of grey in her reddish, short-cropped hair, to her unyielding, unprepossessing features. She was tall, somewhat broad in the hips, her breasts slightly oversized for her frame. The otataral sword of her office was scabbarded at her belt – the only indication of her imperial title. A half-dozen scrolls were tucked under one arm.

'Stand or sit as you like,' were her first words as she strode to the High Fist's ornate chair.

Gamet watched Nok and Tene Baralta move to chairs at the table, then followed suit.

Back straight, the Adjunct sat. She set the scrolls down. 'The disposition of the Fourteenth Army is the subject of this meeting. Remain in our company, Admiral Nok, please.' She reached for the first scroll and slipped its ties. 'Three legions. The 8th, 9th and 10th. Fist Gamet shall command the 8th. Fist Blistig, the 9th, and Fist Tene Baralta, the 10th. The choice of officers under each respective command is at the discretion of each Fist. I advise you to select wisely. Admiral Nok, detach Commander Alardis from your flagship. She is now in charge of the Aren Guard.' Without pause she reached for a second scroll. 'As to the survivors of the Chain of Dogs and sundry unattached elements at our disposal, their units are now dissolved. They have been reassigned and dispersed throughout the three legions.' She finally looked up – and if she took note of the shock on the faces that Gamet saw, a shock he shared, she hid it well. 'In three days' time, I will review your troops. That is all.'

In numbed silence, the four men slowly rose.

The Adjunct gestured at the two scrolls she had laid out. 'Fist Blistig, take these please. You and Tene Baralta might wish to reconvene in one of the side chambers, in order to discuss the details of your new commands. Fist Gamet, you can join them later. For now, remain with me. Admiral Nok, I wish to speak with you privately later this evening. Please ensure that you are at my disposal.'

The tall, elderly man cleared his throat. 'I shall be in the mess hall, Adjunct.'

'Very good.'

Gamet watched the three men depart.
As soon as the doors closed, the Adjunct rose from her chair. She walked over to the ancient, woven tapestries running the length of one of the walls. 'Extraordinary patterns, Gamet, don't you think? A culture obsessed with intricacies. Well,' she faced him, 'that was concluded with unexpected ease. It seems we have a few moments before our next guests.'

'I believe they were all too shocked to respond, Adjunct. The imperial style of command usually includes discussion, argument, compromise—'

Her only reply was a brief half-smile, then she returned her attention to the weavings. 'What officers will Tene Baralta choose, do you imagine?'

'Red Blades, Adjunct. How the Malazan recruits will take—'

'And Blistig?'

'Only one seemed worthy of his rank – and he's now in the Aren Guard and so not available to Blistig,' Gamet replied. 'A captain, Keneb—'

'Malazan?'

'Yes, though stationed here in Seven Cities. He lost his troops, Adjunct, to the renegade, Korbolo Dom. It was Keneb who warned Blistig about Mallick Rel—'

'Indeed. So, apart from Captain Keneb?'

Gamet shook his head. 'I feel for Blistig at the moment.'

'Do you?'

'Well, I didn't say what I was feeling, Adjunct.'

She faced him again. 'Pity?'

'Some of that,' he allowed after a moment.

'Do you know what bothers Blistig the most, Fist?'

'Witnessing the slaughter—'

'He may well claim that and hope that you believe it, but you are wrong to do so. Blistig disobeyed a High Fist's order. He stands before me, his new commander, and believes I hold no faith in him. From that, he concludes that it would be best for everyone concerned if I were to send him to Unta, to face the Empress.' She turned away again, was silent.

Gamet's thoughts raced, but he finally had to conclude that Tavore's thoughts proceeded on levels too deep for him to fathom. 'What is it you wish me to tell him?'

'You think I wish you to tell him something from me? Very well. He may have Captain Keneb.'

A side door swung open and Gamet turned to see three Wickans enter. Two were children, the third one not much older. While the Fist had yet to meet them, he knew who they must be.

Nether and Nil. The witch and the warlock. And the lad with them is Temul, the eldest among the warrior youths Coltaine sent with the historian.

Only Temul seemed pleased at having been summoned into the Adjunct's presence. Nil and Nether were both unkempt, their feet bare and almost grey with layers of dirt. Nether's long black hair hung in greasy ropes. Nil's deer-hide tunic was scarred and torn. Both held expressions of disinterest. In contrast, Temul's war gear was immaculate, as was the mask of deep red face paint denoting his grief, and his dark eyes glittered like sharp stones as he drew himself to attention before the Adjunct.

But Tavore's attention was on Nil and Nether. 'The Fourteenth Army lacks mages,' she said. 'Therefore, you will now be acting in that capacity.'
'No, Adjunct,' Nether replied.

'This matter is not open for discussion—'

Nil spoke. 'We want to go home,' he said. 'To the Wickan plains.'

The Adjunct studied them for a moment, then, gaze unwavering, said, 'Temul, Coltaine placed you in charge of the Wickan youths from the three tribes present in the Chain of Dogs. What is the complement?'

'Thirty,' the youth replied.

'And how many Wickans were among the wounded delivered by ship to Aren?'

'Eleven survived.'

'Thus, forty-one in all. Are there any warlocks among your company?'

'No, Adjunct.'

'When Coltaine sent you with the historian Duiker, did he attach warlocks to your company at that time?'

Temul's eyes flicked to Nil and Nether for a moment, then his head jerked in a nod. 'Yes.'

'And has your company been officially dissolved, Temul?'

'No.'

'In other words, Coltaine's last command to you still obtains.' She addressed Nil and Nether once more. 'Your request is denied. I have need of both you and Captain Temul's Wickan lancers.'

'We can give you nothing,' Nether replied.

'The warlock spirits within us are silent,' Nil added.

Tavore slowly blinked as she continued to regard them. Then she said, 'You shall have to find a means of awakening them once more. The day we close to battle with Sha'ik and the Whirlwind, I expect you to employ your sorcery to defend the legions. Captain Temul, are you the eldest among the Wickans in your company?'

'No, Adjunct. There are four warriors of the Foolish Dog, who were on the ship bearing the wounded.'

'Do they resent your command?'

The youth drew himself straighter. 'They do not,' he replied, his right hand settling on the grip of one of his long knives.

Gamet winced and looked away.

'You three are dismissed,' the Adjunct said after a moment.

Temul hesitated, then spoke. 'Adjunct, my company wishes to fight. Are we to be attached to the legions?'

Tavore tilted her head. 'Captain Temul, how many summers have you seen?'

'Fourteen.'

The Adjunct nodded. 'At present, Captain, our mounted troops are limited to a company of Seti volunteers, five hundred in all. In military terms, they are light cavalry at best, scouts and outriders at worst. None have seen battle, and none are much older than you. Your own command consists of forty Wickans, all but four younger than you. For our march northward, Captain Temul, your company will be attached to my entourage. As bodyguards. The ablest riders among the Seti will act as messengers and scouts. Understand, I have not the forces to mount a cavalry engagement. The Fourteenth Army is predominantly infantry.'
'Coltaine's tactics—'

'This is no longer Coltaine's war,' Tavore snapped.

Temul flinched as if struck. He managed a stiff nod, then turned on his heel and departed the chamber. Nil and Nether followed a moment later.

Gamet let out a shaky breath. 'The lad wanted to bring good news to his Wickans.'

'To silence the grumbling from the four Foolish Dog warriors,' the Adjunct said, her voice still holding a tone of irritation. 'Aply named indeed. Tell me, Fist, how do you think the discussion between Blistig and Tene Baralta is proceeding at this moment?'

The old veteran grunted. 'Heatedly, I would imagine, Adjunct. Tene Baralta likely expected to retain his Red Blades as a discrete regiment. I doubt he has much interest in commanding four thousand Malazan recruits.'

'And the admiral, who waits below in the mess hall?'

'To that, I have no idea, Adjunct. His taciturnity is legend.'

'Why, do you think, did he not simply usurp High Fist Pormqual? Why did he permit the annihilation of Coltaine and the Seventh, then of the High Fist's own army?'

Gamet could only shake his head.

Tavore studied him for another half-dozen heartbeats, then slowly made her way to the scrolls lying on the table-top. She drew one out and removed its ties. 'The Empress never had cause to question Admiral Nok's loyalty.'

'Nor Dujek Onearm's,' Gamet muttered under his breath.

She heard and looked up, then offered a tight, momentary smile. 'Indeed. One meeting remains to us.' Tucking the scroll under one arm, she strode towards a small side door. 'Come.'

The room beyond was low-ceilinged, its walls virtually covered in tapestries. Thick rugs silenced their steps as they entered. A modest round table occupied the centre, beneath an ornate oil lamp that was the only source of light. There was a second door opposite, low and narrow. The table was the chamber's sole piece of furniture.

Tavore dropped the scroll onto its battered top as Gamet shut the door behind him. When he turned he saw that she was facing him. There was a sudden vulnerability in her eyes that triggered a clutching anxiety in his gut – for it was something he had never before seen from this daughter of House Paran. 'Adjunct?'

She broke the contact, visibly recovered. 'In this room,' she quietly said, 'the Empress is not present.'

Gamet's breath caught, then he jerked his head in a nod.

The smaller door opened, and the Fist turned to see a tall, almost effeminate man, clothed in grey, a placid smile on his handsome features as he took a step into the chamber. An armoured woman followed – an officer of the Red Blades. Her skin was dark and tattooed in Pardu style, her eyes black and large, set wide above high cheekbones, her nose narrow and aquiline. She seemed anything but pleased, her gaze fixing on the Adjunct with an air of calculating arrogance.

'Close the door behind you, Captain,' Tavore said to the Red Blade.

The grey-clad man was regarding Gamet, his smile turning faintly quizzical. 'Fist Gamet,' he said. 'I imagine you are wishing you were still in Unta, that bustling heart of the empire, arguing with horse-traders on behalf of House Paran. Instead, here you are, a soldier once more—'

Gamet scowled and said, 'I am afraid I do not know you—'
'You may call me Pearl,' the man replied, hesitating on the name as if its revelation was the core of some vast joke of which only he was aware. 'And my lovely companion is Captain Lostara Yil, late of the Red Blades but now – happily – seconded into my care.' He swung to the Adjunct and elaborately bowed. 'At your service.'

Gamet could see Tavore's expression tighten fractionally. 'That remains to be seen.'

Pearl slowly straightened, the mockery in his face gone. 'Adjunct, you have quietly – very quietly – arranged this meeting. This stage has no audience. While I am a Claw, you and I are both aware that I have – lately – incurred my master Topper's – and the Empress's – displeasure, resulting in my hasty journey through the Imperial Warren. A temporary situation, of course, but none the less, the consequence is that I am at something of a loose end at the moment.'

'Then one might conclude,' the Adjunct said carefully, 'that you are available, as it were, for a rather more ... private enterprise.'

Gamet shot her a glance. *Gods below! What is this about?*

'One might,' Pearl replied, shrugging.

There was silence, broken at last by the Red Blade, Lostara Yil. 'I am made uneasy by the direction of this conversation,' she grated. 'As a loyal subject of the empire—'

'Nothing of what follows will impugn your honour, Captain,' the Adjunct replied, her gaze unwavering on Pearl. She added nothing more.

The Claw half smiled then. 'Ah, now you've made me curious. I delight in being curious, did you know that? You fear that I will bargain my way back into Laseen's favour, for the mission you would propose to the captain and me is, to be precise, not on behalf of the Empress, nor, indeed, of the empire. An extraordinary departure from the role of Imperial Adjunct. Unprecedented, in fact.'

Gamet took a step forward, 'Adjunct—'

She raised a hand to cut him off. 'Pearl, the task I would set to you and the captain may well contribute, ultimately, to the well-being of the empire—'

'Oh well,' the Claw smiled, 'that is what a good imagination is for, isn't it? One can scrape patterns in the blood no matter how dried it's become. I admit to no small skill in attributing sound justification for whatever I've just done. By all means, proceed—'

'Not yet!' Lostara Yil snapped, her exasperation plain. 'In serving the Adjunct I expect to serve the empire. She is the will of the Empress. No other considerations are permitted her—'

'You speak true,' Tavore said. She faced Pearl again. 'Claw, how fares the Talon?'

Pearl's eyes went wide and he almost rocked back a step. 'They no longer exist,' he whispered.

The Adjunct frowned. 'Disappointing. We are all, at the moment, in a precarious position. If you are to expect honesty from me, then can I not do so in return?'

'They remain,' Pearl muttered, distaste twisting his features. 'Like bot-fly larvae beneath the imperial hide. When we probe, they simply dig deeper.'

'They none the less serve a certain . . . function,' Tavore said. 'Unfortunately, not as competently as I would have hoped.'

'The Talons have found support among the nobility?' Pearl asked, a sheen of sweat now visible on his high brow.

The Adjunct's shrug was almost indifferent. 'Does that surprise you?'

Gamet could almost see the Claw's thoughts racing. Racing on, and on, his expression growing ever more
astonished and ... dismayed. 'Name him,' he said.

'Baudin.'

'He was assassinated in Quon—'

'The father was. Not the son.'

Pearl suddenly began pacing in the small chamber. 'And this son, how much like the bastard who spawned him? Baudin Elder left Claw corpses scattered in alleys throughout the city. The hunt lasted four entire nights ...'

'I had reason to believe,' Tavore said, 'that he was worthy of his father's name.'

Pearl's head turned. 'But no longer?'

'I cannot say. I believe, however, that his mission has gone terribly wrong.'

The name slipped from Gamet's lips unbidden but with a certainty heavy as an anchor-stone: 'Felisin.'

He saw the wince in Tavore's face, before she turned away from all three of them to study one of the tapestries.

Pearl seemed far ahead in his thoughts. 'When was contact lost, Adjunct? And where?'

'The night of the Uprising,' she replied, her back to them still. 'The mining camp called Skullcup. But there had been a ... a loss of control for some weeks before then.' She gestured at the scroll on the table. 'Details, potential contacts. Burn the scroll once you have completed reading it, and scatter the ashes in the bay.' She faced them suddenly. 'Pearl. Captain Lostara Yil. Find Felisin. Find my sister.'

The roar of the mob rose and fell in the city beyond the estate's walk. It was the Season of Rot in Unta, and, in the minds of thousands of denizens, that rot was being excised. The dreaded Cull had begun.

Captain Gamet stood by the gatehouse, flanked by three nervous guards. The estate's torches had been doused, the house behind them dark, its windows shuttered. And within that massive structure huddled the last child of Paran, her parents gone since the arrests earlier that day, her brother lost and presumably dead on a distant continent, her sister — her sister . . . madness had come once again to the empire, with the fury of a tropical storm . . .

Gamet had but twelve guards, and three of those had been hired in the last few days, when the stillness of the air in the streets had whispered to the captain that the horror was imminent. No proclamations had been issued, no imperial edict to fire-lick the commoners' greed and savagery into life. There were but rumours, racing through the city's streets, alleys and market rounds like dust-devils. 'The Empress is displeased.' 'Behind the rot of the imperial army's incompetent command, you will find the face of the nobility.' 'The purchase of commissions is a plague threatening the entire empire. Is it any wonder the Empress is displeased?'

A company of Red Blades had arrived from Seven Cities. Cruel killers, incorruptible and far removed from the poison of noble coin. It was not difficult to imagine the reason behind their appearance.

The first wave of arrests had been precise, almost understated. Squads in the dead of night. There had been no skirmishes with house guards, no estates forewarned to purchase time to raise barricades, or even flee the city.

And Gamet thought he knew how such a thing came to pass.

Tavore was now the Adjunct to the Empress. Tavore knew . . . her kind.

The captain sighed, then strode forward to the small inset door at the gate. He drew the heavy bolt, let the iron bar drop with a clank. He faced the three guards. 'Your services are no longer required. In the murder hole you'll find your pay.'
Two of the three armoured men exchanged a glance, then, one of them shrugging, they walked to the door. The third man had not moved. Gamet recalled that he'd given his name as Kollen – a Quon name and a Quon accent. He had been hired more for his imposing presence than anything else, though Gamet's practised eye had detected a certain... confidence, in the way the man wore his armour, seemingly indifferent to its weight, hinting at a martial grace that belonged only to a professional soldier. He knew next to nothing of Kollen's past, but these were desperate times, and in any case none of the three new hirelings had been permitted into the house itself.

In the gloom beneath the gatehouse lintel, Gamet now studied the motionless guard. Through the tidal roar of the rampaging mob that drew ever closer came shrill screams, lifting into the night a despairing chorus. 'Make this easy, Kollen,' he said quietly. 'There are four of my men twenty paces behind you, crossbows cocked and fixed on your back.'

The huge man tilted his head. 'Nine of you. In less than a quarter-bell several hundred looters and murderers will come calling.' He slowly looked around, as if gauging the estate's walls, the modest defences, then returned his steady gaze to Gamet.

The captain scowled. 'No doubt you would have made it even easier for them. As it is, we might bloody their noses enough to encourage them to seek somewhere else.'

'No, you won't, Captain. Things will simply get... messier.'

'Is this how the Empress simplifies matters, Kollen? An unlocked gate. Loyal guards cut down from behind. Have you honed your knife for my back?'

'I am not here at the behest of the Empress, Captain.'

Gamet's eyes narrowed.

'No harm is to come to her,' the man went on after a moment. 'Provided I have your full co-operation. But we are running out of time.'

'This is Tavore's answer? What of her parents? There was nothing to suggest that their fate would be any different from that of the others who'd been rounded up.'

'Alas, the Adjunct's options are limited. She is under some... scrutiny.'

'What is planned for Felisin, Kollen – or whoever you are?'

'A brief stint in the otataral mines—'

'What?'

'She will not be entirely alone. A guardian will accompany her. Understand, Captain, it is this, or the mob outside.'

Nine loyal guards cut down, blood on the floors and walls, a handful of servants overwhelmed at flimsy barricades outside the child's bedroom door. Then, for the child... no-one. 'Who is this "guardian", then, Kollen?'

The man smiled. 'Me, Captain. And no, my true name is not Kollen.'

Gamet stepped up to him, until their faces were but a hand's width apart. 'If any harm comes to her, I will find you. And I don't care if you're a Claw—'

'I am not a Claw, Captain. As for harm coming to Felisin, I regret to say that there will be some. It cannot be helped. We must hope she is resilient—it is a Paran trait, yes?'

After a long moment, Gamet stepped back, suddenly resigned. 'Do you kill us now or later?'

The man's brows rose. 'I doubt I could manage that, given those crossbows levelled behind me. No, but I am
to ask that you now escort me to a safe house. At all costs, we must not permit the child to fall into the mob's hands. Can I rely upon your help in this, Captain?'

'Where is this safe house?'

'On the Avenue of Souls . . .'

Gamet grimaced. Judgement's Round. To the chains. Oh, Beru guard you, lass. He strode past Kollen. 'I will awaken her.'

Pearl stood at the round table, leaning on both hands, his head lowered as he studied the scroll. The Adjunct had departed half a bell past, her Fist on her heels like a misshapen shadow. Lostara waited, arms crossed, with her back against the door through which Tavore and Gamet had left. She had held silent during the length of Pearl's perusal of the scroll, her anger and frustration growing with each passing moment.

Finally, she'd had enough. 'I will have no part of this. Return me to Tene Baralta's command.'

Pearl did not look up. 'As you wish, my dear,' he murmured, then added: 'Of course I will have to kill you at some point — certainly before you report to your commander. It's the hard rules of clandestine endeavours, I regret to say.'

'Since when are you at the Adjunct's beck and call, Pearl?'

'Why,' he glanced up and met her gaze, 'ever since she unequivocally reasserted her loyalty to the Empress, of course.' He returned his attention to the scroll.

Lostara scowled. 'I'm sorry, I think I missed that part of the conversation.'

'Not surprising,' Pearl replied, 'since it resided in between the words actually spoken.' He smiled at her. 'Precisely where it belonged.'

With a hiss, Lostara began pacing, struggled against an irrational desire to take a knife blade to these damned tapestries and their endless scenes of past glories. 'You will have to explain, Pearl,' she growled.

'And will that relieve your conscience sufficiently to return you to my side? Very well. The resurgence of the noble class in the chambers of imperial power has been uncommonly swift. Indeed, one might say unnaturally so. Almost as if they were receiving help — but who? we wondered. Oh, absurd rumours of the return of the Talons persisted. And every now and then some poor fool who'd been arrested for something completely unrelated went and confessed to being a Talon, but they were young, caught up in romantic notions and the lure of cults and whatnot. They might well call themselves Talons, but they did not even come close to the real organization, to Dancer's own — of which many of us Claw possessed firsthand experience.

'In any case, back to the matter at hand. Tavore is of noble blood, and it's now clear that a truly covert element of Talons has returned to plague us, and has been making use of the nobility. Placing sympathetic agents in the military and administration — a mutually profitable infiltration. But Tavore is now the Adjunct, and as such, her old ties, her old loyalties, must needs be severed.' Pearl paused to tap a finger on the laid-out scroll before him. 'She has given us the Talons, Captain. We will find this Baudin Younger, and from him we will unravel the entire organization.'

Lostara said nothing for a long moment. 'In a sense, then,' she said, 'our mission is not extraneous to the interests of the empire after all.'

Pearl flashed a smile.

'But if so,' Lostara continued, 'why didn't the Adjunct just say so?'

'Oh, I think we can leave that question unanswered for the time being—'

'No, I would have it answered now!'
Pearl sighed. 'Because, my dear, for Tavore, the surrendering of the Talons is secondary to our finding Felisin. And that is extraneous, and not only extraneous, but also damning. Do you think the Empress would smile upon this clever little scheme, the lie behind this all-too-public demonstration of the new Adjunct's loyalty? Sending her sister to the otataral mines! Hood take us all, that's a hard woman! The Empress has chosen well, has she not?'

Lostara grimaced. Chosen well... based on what, though? 'Indeed she has.'

'Aye, I agree. It's a fair exchange in any case – we save Felisin and are rewarded with a principal agent of the Talons. The Empress will no doubt wonder what we were doing out on the Otataral Isle in the first place—'

'You will have to lie to her, won't you?'

Pearl's smile broadened. 'We both will, lass. As would the Adjunct, and Fist Gamet if it came to that. Unless, of course, I take what the Adjunct has offered me. Offered me personally, that is.'

Lostara slowly nodded. 'You are at a loose end. Yes. Out of favour with the Clawmaster and the Empress. Eager to make reparations. An independent mission – you somehow latched onto the rumour of a true Talon, and set off on his trail. Thus, the credit for unravelling the Talons is to be yours, and yours alone.'

'Or ours,' Pearl corrected. 'If you so desire.'

She shrugged. 'We can decide that later. Very well, Pearl. Now,' she moved to his side, 'what are these details with which the Adjunct has so kindly provided us?'

Admiral Nok had been facing the hearth, his gaze on its cold ashes. At the sound of the door opening, he slowly turned, his expression as impassive as ever.

'Thank you,' the Adjunct said, 'for your patience.'

The admiral said nothing, his level gaze shifting to Gamet for a moment.

The midnight bell's muted echoes were only now fading. The Fist was exhausted, feeling fragile and scattered, unable to meet Nok's eyes for very long. This night, he'd been little more than the Adjunct's pet, or worse, a familiar. Tacitly conjoined with her plans within plans, bereft of even so much as the illusion of a choice. When Tavore had first drawn him into her entourage – shortly after Felisin's arrest – Gamet had briefly considered slipping away, vanishing in the time-honoured tradition of Malazan soldiers who found themselves in unwelcome circumstances. But he hadn't, and his reasons for joining the Adjunct's core of advisers – not that they were ever invited to advise – had, upon ruthless self-reflection, proved less than laudable. He had been driven by macabre curiosity. Tavore had ordered the arrests of her parents, had sent her younger sister into the horrors of the otataral mines. For her career's sake. Her brother, Paran, had in some way been disgraced on Genabackis. He had subsequently deserted. An embarrassment, granted, but surely not sufficient to warrant Tavore's reaction. Unless... There were rumours that the lad had been an agent of Adjunct Lorn's, and that his desertion had led, ultimately, to the woman's death in Darujhistan. Yet, if that were true, then why did the Empress turn her royal gaze upon another child of the House of Paran? Why make Tavore the new Adjunct?

'Fist Gamet.'

He blinked. 'Adjunct?'

'Seat yourself, please. I would have some final words with you, but they can wait for the time being.'

Nodding, Gamet glanced around until he spied the lone high-backed chair set against one of the small room's walls. It looked anything but comfortable, which was probably an advantage, given his weariness. Ominous creaks sounded when he settled into the chair and he grimaced. 'No wonder Pormqual didn't send this one off with all the rest,' he muttered.

'It is my understanding,' Nok said, 'that the transport ship in question sank in the harbour of Malaz City, taking the late High Fist's loot with it.'
Gamet's wiry brows rose. 'All that way ... just to sink in the harbour? What happened?'

The admiral shrugged. 'None of the crew reached the shore to tell the tale.'

None?

Nok seemed to note his scepticism, for he elaborated, 'Malaz Harbour is well known for its sharks. A number of dories were found, all awash but otherwise empty.'

The Adjunct had, uncharacteristically, been permitting the exchange to continue, leading Gamet to wonder if Tavore had sensed a hidden significance to the mysterious loss of the transport ship. Now she spoke. 'It remains, then, a peculiar curse – unexplained founderings, empty dories, lost crews. Malaz Harbour is indeed notorious for its sharks, particularly since they seem uniquely capable of eating victims whole, leaving no remnants whatsoever.'

'There are sharks that can do just that,' Nok replied. 'I know of at least twelve ships on the muddy bottom of the harbour in question—'

'Including the Twisted,' the Adjunct drawled, 'the old emperor's flagship, which mysteriously slipped its moorings the night after the assassinations, then promptly plummeted into the deeps, taking its resident demon with it.'

'Perhaps it likes company,' Nok observed. 'The island's fishermen all swear the harbour's haunted, after all. The frequency with which nets are lost—'

'Admiral,' Tavore cut in, her eyes resting on the dead hearth, 'there is you, and three others. All who are left.'

Gamet slowly straightened in his chair. *Three others. High Mage Tayschrenn, Dujek Onearm, and Whiskeyjack. Four . . . gods, is that all now? Tattersail, Bellurdan, Nightchill, Duiker . . . so many fallen—*

Admiral Nok was simply studying the Adjunct. He had stood against the wrath of the Empress, first with Cartheron Crust's disappearance, then Urko's and Ameron's. Whatever answers he had given, he had done so long ago.

'I do not speak for the Empress,' Tavore said after a moment. 'Nor am I interested in ... details. What interests me is ... a matter of personal ... curiosity. I would seek to understand, Admiral, why they abandoned her.'

There was silence, filling the room, growing towards something like an impasse. Gamet leaned back and closed his eyes. *Ah, lass, you ask questions of ... of loyalty, as would someone who has never experienced it. You reveal to this admiral what can only be construed as a critical flaw. You command the Fourteenth Army, Adjunct, yet you do so in isolation, raising the very barricades you must needs take down if you would truly lead. What does Nok think of this, now? Is it any wonder he does not—*

'The answer to your question,' the admiral said, 'lies in what was both a strength and a flaw of the Emperor's ... family. The family that he gathered to raise an empire. Kellanved began with but one companion – Dancer. The two then hired a handful of locals in Malaz City and set about conquering the criminal element in the city – I should point out, that criminal element happened to rule the entire island. Their target was Mock, Malaz Island's unofficial ruler. A pirate, and a cold-blooded killer.'

'Who were these first hirelings, Admiral?'

'Myself, Ameron, Dujek, a woman named Hawl – my wife. I had been First Mate to a corsair that worked the sea lanes around the Napan Isles – which had just been annexed by Unta and were providing a staging point for the Untan king's planned invasion of Kartool. We'd taken a beating and had limped into Malaz Harbour, only to have the ship and its crew arrested by Mock, who was negotiating a trade of prisoners with Unta. Only Ameron and Hawl and I escaped. A lad named Dujek discovered where we were holed up and he delivered us to his new employers. Kellanved and Dancer.'

'Was this before they were granted entry into the Deadhouse?' Gamet asked.
Aye, but only just. Our residency in the Deadhouse rewarded us with – as is now clearly evident – certain gifts. Longevity, immunity to most diseases, and ... other things. The Deadhouse also provided us with an unassailable base of operations. Dancer later bolstered our numbers by recruiting among the refugee Napans who’d fled the conquest: Cartheron Crust and his brother, Urko. And Surly – Laseen. Three more men were to follow shortly thereafter. Toc Elder, Dassem Ultor – who was, like Kellanved, of Dal Honese blood – and a renegade High Septarch of the D'rek Cult, Tayschrenn. And finally, Duiker. He half smiled at Tavore. 'The family. With which Kellanved conquered Malaz Island. Swiftly done, with minimal losses ...'

Minimal... 'Your wife,' Gamet said.

'Yes, her.' After a long moment, he shrugged and continued, 'To answer you, Adjunct. Unknown to the rest of us, the Napans among us were far more than simple refugees. Surly was of the royal line. Crust and Urko had been captains in the Napan fleet, a fleet that would have likely repelled the Untans if it hadn't been virtually destroyed by a sudden storm. As it turned out, theirs was a singular purpose — to crush the Untan hegemony – and they planned on using Kellanved to achieve that. In a sense, that was the first betrayal within the family, the first fissure. Easily healed, it seemed, since Kellanved already possessed imperial ambitions, and of the two major rivals on the mainland, Un'ta was by far the fiercest.'

'Admiral,' Tavore said, 'I see where this leads. Surly's assassination of Kellanved and Dancer shattered that family irrevocably, but that is precisely where my understanding falters. Surly had taken the Napan cause to its penultimate conclusion. Yet it was not you, not Tayschrenn, Duiker, Dassem Ultor or Toc Elder who ... disappeared. It was ... Napans.'

'Barring Ameron,' Gamet pointed out.

The admiral's lined face stretched as he bared his teeth in a humourless grin. 'Ameron was half-Napan.'

'So it was only the Napans who deserted the new Empress?' Gamet stared up at Nok, now as confused as Tavore. 'Yet Surly was of the royal Napan line?'

Nok said nothing for a long time, then he sighed. 'Shame is a fierce, vigorous poison. To now serve the new Empress ... complicity and damnation. Crust, Urko and Ameron were not party to the betrayal ... but who would believe them? Who could not help but see them as party to the murderous plot? Yet, in truth,' his eyes met Tavore's, 'Surly had included none of us in her scheme – she could not afford to. She had the Claw, and that was all she needed.'

'And where were the Talons in all this?' Gamet asked, then cursed himself—ah, gods, too tired—

Nok's eyes widened for the first time that night. 'You've a sharp memory, Fist.'

Gamet clamped his jaws tight, sensing the Adjunct's hard stare fixing on him.

The admiral continued, 'I am afraid I have no answer to that. I was not in Malaz City on that particular night; nor have I made enquiries to those who were. The Talons essentially vanished with Dancer's death. It was widely believed that the Claw had struck them down in concert with the assassinations of Dancer and the Emperor.'

The Adjunct's tone was suddenly curt. 'Thank you, Admiral, for your words this night. I will keep you no longer.'

The man bowed, then strode from the room.

Gamet waited with held breath, ready for her fiercest castigation. Instead, she simply sighed. 'You have much work ahead of you, Fist, in assembling your legion. Best retire now.'

'Adjunct,' he acknowledged, pushing himself to his feet. He hesitated, then with a nod strode to the door.

'Gamet.'

He turned. 'Yes?'
'Where is T'amber?'
'She awaits you in your chambers, Adjunct.'
'Very well. Goodnight, Fist.'
'And to you, Adjunct.'

Buckets of salt water had been sloshed across the cobbled centre aisle of the stables, which had the effect of damping the dust and sending the biting flies into a frenzy, as well as making doubly rank the stench of horse piss. Strings, standing just within the doors, could already feel his sinuses stinging. His searching gaze found four figures seated on bound rolls of straw near the far end. Scowling, the Bridgeburner shifted the weight of the pack on his shoulder, then headed over.

'Who was the bright spark missing the old smells of home?' he drawled as he approached.

The half-Seti warrior named Koryk grunted, then said, 'That would be Lieutenant Ranal, who then had a quick excuse to leave us for a time.' He'd found a flap of hide from somewhere and was cutting long strands from it with a thin-bladed pig-sticker. Strings had seen his type before, obsessed with tying things down, or worse, tying things to their bodies. Not just fetishes, but loot, extra equipment, tufts of grass or leafy branches depending on the camouflage being sought. In this case, Strings half expected to see twists of straw sprouting from the man.

For centuries the Seti had fought a protracted war with the city-states of Quon and Li Heng, defending the barely inhabitable lands that had been their traditional home. Hopelessly outnumbered and perpetually on the run, they had learned the art of hiding the hard way. But the Seti lands had been pacified for sixty years now; almost three generations had lived in that ambivalent, ambiguous border that was the edge of civilization. The various tribes had dissolved into a single, murky nation, with mixed-bloods coming to dominate the population. What had befallen them had been the impetus, in fact, for Coltaine's rebellion and the Wickan Wars – for Coltaine had clearly seen that a similar fate awaited his own people.

It was not, Strings had come to believe, a question of right and wrong. Some cultures were inward-looking. Others were aggressive. The former were rarely capable of mustering a defence against the latter, not without metamorphosing into some other thing, a thing twisted by the exigencies of desperation and violence. The original Seti had not even ridden horses. Yet now they were known as horse warriors, a taller, darker-skinned and more morose kind of Wickan.

Strings knew little of Koryk's personal history, but he felt he could guess. Half-bloods did not lead pleasant lives. That Koryk had chosen to emulate the old Seti ways, whilst joining the Malazan army as a marine rather than a horse warrior, spoke tomes of the clash in the man's scarred soul.

Setting down his pack, Strings stood before the four recruits. 'As much as I hate to confess it, I am now your sergeant. Officially, you're 4th Squad, one of three squads under Lieutenant Ranal's command. The 5th and 6th squads are supposedly on their way over from the tent city west of Aren. We're all in the 9th Company, which consists of three squads of heavy infantry, three of marines, and eighteen squads of medium infantry. Our commander is a man named Captain Keneb – and no, I've not met him and know nothing of him. Nine companies in all, making up the 8th Legion – us. The 8th is under the command of Fist Gamet, who I gather is a veteran who'd retired to the Adjunct's household before she became the Adjunct.' He paused, grimacing at the slightly glazed faces before him. 'But never mind all that. You're in the 4th Squad. We've got one more coming, but even with that one we're undermanned as a squad, but so are all the others and before you ask, I ain't privy to the reasons for that. Now, any questions yet?'

Three men and one young woman sat in silence, staring up at him.

Strings sighed, and pointed to the nondescript soldier sitting to Koryk's left. 'What's your name?' he asked.

A bewildered look, then, 'My real name, Sergeant, or the one the drill sergeant in Malaz City gave me?
By the man's accent and his pale, stolid features, Strings knew him as being from Li Heng. That being the case, his real name was probably a mouthful: nine, ten or even fifteen names all strung together. 'Your new one, soldier.'

'Tarr.'

Koryk spoke up. 'If you'd seen him on the training ground, you'd understand. Once he's planted his feet behind that shield of his, you could hit him with a battering ram and he won't budge.'

Strings studied Tarr's placid, pallid eyes. 'All right. You're now Corporal Tarr—'

The woman, who'd been chewing on a straw, suddenly choked. Coughing, spitting out pieces of the straw, she glared up at Strings with disbelief. 'What? Him? He never says nothing, never does nothing unless he's told, never—'

'Glad to hear all that,' Strings cut in laconically. 'The perfect corporal, especially that bit about not talking.'

The woman's expression tightened, then unveiled a small sneer as she looked away in feigned disinterest.

'And what is your name, soldier?' Strings asked her.

'My real name—'

'I don't care what you used to be called. None of you. Most of us get new ones and that's just the way it is.'

'I didn't,' Koryk growled.

Ignoring him, Strings continued, 'Your name, lass?'

Sour contempt at the word lass.

'Drill sergeant named her Smiles,' Koryk said.

'Smiles?'

'Aye. She never does.'

Eyes narrowing, Strings swung to the last soldier, a rather plain young man wearing leathers but no weapon. 'And yours?'

'Bottle.'

'Who was your drill sergeant?' he demanded to the four recruits.

Koryk leaned back as he replied, 'Braven Tooth—'

'Braven Tooth! That bastard's still alive?'

'It was hard to tell at times,' Smiles muttered.

'Until his temper snapped,' Koryk added. 'Just ask Corporal Tarr there. Braven Tooth spent near two bells pounding on him with a mace. Couldn't get past the shield.'

Strings glared at his new corporal. 'Where'd you learn that skill?'

The man shrugged. 'Don't know. Don't like getting hit.'

'Well, do you ever counter-attack?'

Tarr frowned. 'Sure. When they're tired.'

Strings was silent for a long moment. Braven Tooth – he was dumbfounded. The bastard was grizzled back when ... when the whole naming thing began. It had been Braven who'd started it. Braven who'd named most of
the Bridgeburners. Whiskeyjack. Trotts, Mallet, Hedge, Blend, Picker, Toes ... Fiddler himself had avoided a new name through his basic training; it had been Whiskeyjack who'd named him, on that first ride through Raraku. He shook his head, glanced sidelong at Tarr. 'You should be a heavy infantryman, Corporal, with a talent like that. The marines are supposed to be fast, nimble – avoiding the toe-to-toe whenever possible or, if there's no choice, making it quick.'

'I'm good with a crossbow,' Tarr said, shrugging.

'And a fast loader,' Koryk added. 'It was that that made Braven decide to make him a marine.'

Smiles spoke. 'So who named Braven Tooth, Sergeant?'

_I did, after the bastard left one of his in my shoulder the night of the brawl. The brawl we all later denied happening. Gods, so many years ago, now..._ I have no idea,' he said. He shifted his attention back to the man named Bottle. 'Where's your sword, soldier?'

'I don't use one.'

'Well, what do you use?'

The man shrugged. 'This and that.'

'Well, Bottle, someday I'd like to hear how you got through basic training without picking up a weapon – no, not now. Not tomorrow either, not even next week. For now, tell me what I should be using you for.'

'Scouting. Quiet work.'

'As in sneaking up behind someone. What do you do then? Tap him on the shoulder? Never mind. This _man smells like a mage to me, only he doesn't want to advertise it. Fine, be that way, we'll twist it out of you sooner or later._'

'I do the same kind of work,' Smiles said. She settled a forefinger on the pommel of one of the two thin-bladed knives at her belt. 'But I finish things with these.'

'So there's only two soldiers in this outfit who can actually fight toe-to-toe?'

'You said one more's coming,' Koryk pointed out.

'We can all handle crossbows,' Smiles added. 'Except for Bottle.'

They heard voices from outside the commandeered stables, then figures appeared in the doorway, six in all, burdened with equipment. A deep voice called, 'You put the latrine trench _outside_ the barracks, for Hood's sake! Bastards don't teach ya anything these days?'

'Compliments of Lieutenant Ranal,' Strings said.

The soldier who'd spoken was in the lead as the squad approached. 'Right. Met him.'

_Aye, nothing more need be said on that. I'm Sergeant Strings – we're the 4th._'

'Well hey,' a second soldier said, grinning through his bushy red beard, 'someone can count after all. These marines are full of surprises.'

'Fifth,' the first soldier said. There was a strange, burnished cast to the man's skin, making Strings doubt his initial guess that he was Falari. Then he noted an identical sheen to the red-bearded soldier, as well as on a much younger man. 'I'm Gesler,' the first soldier added. 'Temporarily sergeant of this next-to-useless squad.'

The red-bearded man dropped his pack to the floor. 'We was coastal guards, me and Gesler and Truth. I'm Stormy. But Coltaine made us marines—'

'Not Coltaine,' Gesler corrected. 'Captain Lull, it was, Queen harbour his poor soul.'
Strings simply stared at the two men.

Stormy scowled. ‘Got a problem with us?’ he demanded, face darkening.

‘Adjutant Stormy,’ Strings muttered. ‘Captain Gesler. Hood's rattling bones—’

‘We ain't none of those things any more,’ Gesler said. ‘Like I said, I'm now a sergeant, and Stormy's my corporal. And the rest here ... there's Truth, Tavos Pond, Sands and Pella. Truth's been with us since Hissar, and Pella was a camp guard at the otataral mines – only a handful survived the uprising there, from what I gather.’

‘Strings, is it?’ Stormy's small eyes had narrowed suspiciously. He nudged his sergeant. ‘Hey, Gesler, think we should have done that? Changed our names, I mean. This Strings here is Old Guard as sure as I'm a demon in my dear father's eye.’

‘Let the bastard keep whatever name he wants,’ Gesler muttered. ‘All right, squad, find some place to drop your stuff. The 6th should be showing up any time, and the lieutenant, too. Word is, we're all being mustered out to face the Adjunct's lizard eyes in a day or two.’

The soldier Gesler had named Tavos Pond – a tall, dark, moustached man who was probably Korelri – spoke up. ‘So we should polish our equipment, Sergeant?’

‘Polish whatever you like,’ the man replied disinterestedly, ‘just not in public. As for the Adjunct, if she can't handle a few scuffed up soldiers then she won't last long. It's a dusty world out there, and the sooner we blend in the better.’

Strings sighed. He was feeling more confident already. He faced his own soldiers. ‘Enough sitting on that straw. Start spreading it out to soak up this horse piss.’ He faced Gesler again. ‘A word with you in private?’

The man nodded. ‘Let's head back outside.’

Moments later the two men stood on the cobbled courtyard of the estate that had once housed a well-off local merchant and was now the temporary bivouac for Ranal's squads. The lieutenant had taken the house proper for himself, leaving Strings wondering what the man did with all those empty rooms.

They said nothing for a moment, then Strings grinned. ‘I can picture Whiskeyjack's jaw dropping – the day I tell him you was my fellow sergeant in the new 8th Legion.’

Gesler scowled. ‘Whiskeyjack. He was busted down to sergeant before I was, the bastard. Mind you, I then made corporal, so I beat him after all.’

‘Except now you're a sergeant again. While Whiskeyjack's an outlaw. Try beating that.’

‘I just might,’ Gesler muttered.

‘Got concerns about the Adjunct?’ Strings quietly asked. The courtyard was empty, but even so ...

‘Met her, you know. Oh, she's as cold as Hood's forked tongue. She impounded my ship.’

‘You had a ship?’

‘By rights of salvage, aye. I was the one who brought Coltaine's wounded to Aren. And that's the thanks I get.’

‘You could always punch her in the face. That's what you usually end up doing to your superiors, sooner or later.’

‘I could at that. I'd have to get past Gamet, of course. The point I was making is this: she's never commanded anything more than a damned noble household, and here she's been handed three legions and told to reconquer an entire subcontinent.’ He glanced sidelong at Strings. ‘There wasn't many Falari made it into the Bridgeburners. Bad timing, I think, but there was one.'
'Aye, and I'm him.'

After a moment, Gesler grinned and held out his hand. 'Strings. Fiddler. Sure.'

They clasped wrists. To Strings, the other man's hand and arm felt like solid stone.

'There's an inn down the street,' Gesler continued. 'We need to swap stories, and I guarantee you, mine's got yours beat by far.'

'Oh, Gesler,' Strings sighed, 'I think you're in for a surprise.'
CHAPTER SIX

We came within sight of the island, close enough to gaze into the depths through the ancient cedars and firs. And it seemed there was motion within that gloom, as if the shadows of long dead and long fallen trees still remained, swaying and shifting on ghostly winds ...

Quon Sea Charting Expedition of 1127 Burn's Sleep, Drift Avalli
Hedoranas

The journey home had been enough, if only to return one last time to the place of beginnings, to crumbled reminiscences amidst sea-thrust coral sands above the tide line, the handful of abandoned shacks battered by countless storms into withered skeletons of wood. Nets lay buried in glistening drifts blinding white in the harsh sunlight. And the track that had led down from the road, overgrown now with wind-twisted grasses ... no place from the past survived unchanged, and here, in this small fisher village on the coast of Itko Kan, Hood had walked with thorough and absolute deliberation, leaving not a single soul in his wake.

Barring the one man who had now returned. And the daughter of that man, who had once been possessed by a god.

And in the leaning shack that had once housed them both – its frond-woven roof long since stripped away – with the broad, shallow-draught fisherboat close by now showing but a prow and a stern, the rest buried beneath the coral sand, the father had laid himself down and slept.

Crokus had awakened to soft weeping. Sitting up, he had seen Apsalar kneeling beside the still form of her father. There were plenty of footprints on the floor of the shack from the previous evening's random explorations, but Crokus noted one set in particular, prints large and far apart yet far too lightly pressed into the damp sand. A silent arrival in the night just past, crossing the single chamber to stand square-footed beside Rellock. Where it had gone after that left no markings in the sand.

A shiver rippled through the Daru. It was one thing for an old man to die in his sleep, but it was another for Hood himself – or one of his minions – to physically arrive to collect the man's soul.

Apsalar's grief was quiet, barely heard above the hiss of waves on the beach, the faint whistle of the wind through the warped slats in the shack's walls. She knelt with bowed head, face hidden beneath her long black hair that hung so appropriately like a shawl. Her hands were closed around her father's right hand.

Crokus made no move towards her. In the months of their travelling together, he had come, perversely, to know her less and less. Her soul's depths had become unfathomable, and whatever lay at its heart was otherworldly and ... not quite human.

The god that had possessed her – Cotillion, the Rope, Patron of Assassins within the House of Shadow – had been a mortal man, once, the one known as Dancer who had stood at the Emperor's side, who had purportedly shared Kellanved's fate at Laseen's hands. Of course, neither had died in truth. Instead, they had ascended. Crokus had no idea how such a thing could come to be. Ascendancy was but one of the countless mysteries of the world, a world where uncertainty ruled all – god and mortal alike – and its rules were impenetrable. But, it seemed to him, to ascend was also to surrender. Embracing what to all intents and purposes could be called immortality, was, he had begun to believe, presaged by a turning away. Was it not a mortal's fate – fate, he knew, was the wrong word, but he could think of no other – was it not a mortal's fate, then, to embrace life itself, as one would a lover? Life, with all its fraught, momentary fragility.

And could life not be called a mortal's first lover? A lover whose embrace was then rejected in that fiery crucible of ascendancy?
Crokus wondered how far she had gone down that path – for it was a path she was surely on, this beautiful woman no older than him, who moved in appalling silence, with a killer's terrible grace, this temptress of death.

The more remote she grew, the more Crokus felt himself drawn forward, to that edge within her. The lure to plunge into that darkness was at times overwhelming, could, at a moment's thought, turn frantic the beat of his heart and fierce the fire of the blood in his veins. What made the silent invitation so terrifying to him was the seeming indifference with which she offered it to him.

As if the attraction itself was . . . self-evident. Not worth even acknowledging. Did Apsalar want him to walk at her side on this path to ascendancy – if that was what it was? Was it Crokus she wanted, or simply ... somebody, anybody?

The truth was this: he had grown afraid to look into her eyes.

He rose from his bedroll and quietly made his way outside. There were fisherboats out on the shoals, white sails taut like enormous shark fins plying the sea beyond the breakers. The Hounds had once torn through this area of the coast, leaving naught but corpses, but people had returned – there if not here. Or perhaps they had been returned, forcibly. The land itself had no difficulty absorbing spilled blood; its thirst was indiscriminate, true to the nature of land everywhere.

Crokus crouched down and collected a handful of white sand. He studied the coral pebbles as they slipped down between his fingers.

The land does its own dying, after all. And yet, these are truths we would escape, should we proceed down this path. I wonder, does fear of dying lie at the root of ascendancy?

If so, then he would never make it, for, somewhere in all that had occurred, all that he had survived in coming to this place, Crokus had lost that fear.

He sat down, resting his back against the trunk of a massive cedar that had been thrown up onto this beach – roots and all – and drew out his knives. He practised a sequenced shift of grips, each hand reversing the pattern of the other, and stared down until the weapons – and his fingers – became little more than blurs of motion. Then he lifted his head and studied the sea, its rolling breakers in the distance, the triangular sails skidding along beyond the white line of foam. He made the sequence in his right hand random. Then did the same for his left.

Thirty paces down the beach waited their single-masted runner, its magenta sail reefed, its hull's blue, gold and red paint faint stains in the sunlight. A Korelri craft, paid in debt to a local bookmaker in Kan – for an alley in Kan had been the place where Shadowthrone had sent them, not to the road above the village as he had promised.

The bookmaker had paid the debt in turn to Apsalar and Crokus for a single night's work that had proved, for Crokus, brutally horrifying. It was one thing to practise passes with the blades, to master the deadly dance against ghosts of the imagination, but he had killed two men that night. Granted, they were murderers, in the employ of a man who was making a career out of extortion and terror. Apsalar had shown no compunction in cutting his throat, no qualms at the spray of blood that spotted her gloved hands and forearms.

There had been a local with them, to witness the veracity of the night's work. In the aftermath, as he stood in the doorway and stared down at the three corpses, he'd lifted his head and met Crokus's eyes. Whatever he saw in them had drained the blood from the man's face.

By morning Crokus had acquired a new name. Cutter.

At first he had rejected it. The local had misread all that had been revealed behind the Daru's eyes that night. Nothing fierce. The barrier of shock, fast crumbling to self-condemnation. Murdering killers was still murder, the act like the closing of shackles between them all, joining a line of infinite length, one killer to the next, a procession from which there was no escape. His mind had recoiled from the name, recoiled from all that it signified.

But that had proved a short-lived rectitude. The two murderers had died indeed – at the hands of the man named Cutter. Not Crokus, not the Daru youth, the cut-purse – who had vanished. Vanished, probably never to
The delusion held a certain comfort, as cavernous at its core as Apsalar’s embrace at night, but welcome all the same.

Cutter would walk her path.

_Aye, the Emperor had Dancer, yes? A companion, for a companion was what was needed. Is needed. Now, she has Cutter. Cutter of the Knives, who dances in his chains as if they were weightless threads. Cutter, who, unlike poor Crokus, knows his place, knows his singular task – to guard her back, to match her cold precision in the deadly arts._

And therein resided the final truth. Anyone could become a killer. Anyone at all.

She stepped out of the shack, wan but dry-eyed.

He sheathed his knives in a single, fluid motion, rose to his feet and faced her.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘What now?’

Broken pillars of mortared stone jutted from the undulating vista. Among the half-dozen or so within sight, only two rose as tall as a man, and none stood straight. The plain’s strange, colourless grasses gathered in tufts around their bases, snarled and oily in the grey, grainy air.

As Kalam rode into their midst, the muted thunder of his horse’s hoofs seemed to bounce back across his path, the echoes multiplying until he felt as if he was riding at the head of a mounted army. He slowed his charger’s canter, finally reining in beside one of the battered columns.

These silent sentinels felt like an intrusion on the solitude he had been seeking. He leaned in his saddle to study the one nearest him. It looked old, old in the way of so many things within the Warren of Shadow, forlorn with an air of abandonment, defying any chance he might have of discerning its function. There were no intervening ruins, no foundation walls, no cellar pits or other angular pocks in the ground. Each pillar stood alone, unaligned.

His examination settled on a rusted ring set into the stone near the base, from which depended a chain of seized links vanishing into the tufts of grass. After a moment, Kalam dismounted. He crouched down, reaching out to close his hand on the chain. A slight upward tug. The desiccated hand and forearm of some hapless creature lifted from the grasses. Dagger-length talons, four fingers and two thumbs.

The rest of the prisoner had succumbed to the roots, was half buried beneath dun-coloured, sandy soil. Pallid yellow hair was entwined among the grass blades.

The hand suddenly twitched.

Disgusted, Kalam released the chain. The arm dropped back to the ground. A faint, subterranean keening sound rose from the base of the pillar.

Straightening, the assassin returned to his horse.

Pills, columns, tree stumps, platforms, staircases leading nowhere, and for every dozen there was one among them holding a prisoner. None of whom seemed capable of dying. Not entirely. Oh, their minds had died – most of them – long ago. Raving in tongues, murmuring senseless incantations, begging forgiveness, offering bargains, though not one had yet – within Kalam’s hearing – proclaimed its own innocence.

As if mercy could be an issue without it. He nudged his horse forward once more. This was not a realm to his liking. Not that he’d in truth had much choice in the matter. Bargaining with gods was – for the mortal involved – an exercise in self-delusion. Kalam would rather leave Quick Ben to play games with the rulers of this warren – the wizard had the advantage of enjoying the challenge – no, it was more than that. Quick Ben had left so many knives in so many backs – none of them fatal but none the less sure to sting when tugged, and it was that
tugging the wizard loved so much.

The assassin wondered where his old friend was right now. There'd been trouble – nothing new there – and, since then, naught but silence. And then there was Fiddler. The fool had re-enlisted, for Hood's sake!

Well, at least they're doing something. Not Kalam, oh no, not Kalam. Thirteen hundred children, resurrected on a whim. Shining eyes following his every move, mapping his every step, memorizing his every gesture – what could he teach them? The art of mayhem? As if children needed help in that.

A ridge lay ahead. He reached the base and brought his horse into a gentle canter up the slope.

Besides, Minala seemed to have it all under control. A natural born tyrant, she was, both in public and in private amidst the bedrolls in the half-ruined hovel they shared. And oddly enough, he'd found he was not averse to tyranny. In principle, that is. Things had a way of actually working when someone capable and implacable took charge. And he'd had enough experience taking orders to not chafe at her position of command. Between her and the aptorian demoness, a certain measure of control was being maintained, a host of life skills were being inculcated ... stealth, tracking, the laying of ambushes, the setting of traps for game both two- and four-legged, riding, scaling walls, freezing in place, knife throwing and countless other weapon skills, the weapons themselves donated by the warren's mad rulers – half of them cursed or haunted or fashioned for entirely unhuman hands. The children took to such training with frightening zeal, and the gleam of pride in Minala's eyes left the assassin ... chilled.

An army in the making for Shadowthrone. An alarming prospect, to say the least.

He reached the ridge. And suddenly reined in.

An enormous stone gate surmounted the hill opposite, twin pillars spanned by an arch. Within it, a swirling grey wall. On this side of the gate, the grassy summit flowed with countless, sourceless shadows, as if they were somehow tumbling out from the portal, only to swarm like lost wraiths around its threshold.

'Careful,' a voice murmured beside Kalam.

He turned to see a tall, hooded and cloaked figure standing a few paces away, flanked by two Hounds. Cotillion, and his favoured two, Rood and Blind. The beasts sat on their scarred haunches, lurid eyes – seeing and unseeing – on the portal.

'Why should I be careful?' the assassin asked.

'Oh, the shadows at the gate. They've lost their masters ... but anyone will do.'

'So this gate is sealed?'

The hooded head slowly turned. 'Dear Kalam, is this a flight from our realm? How ... ignoble.'

'I said nothing to suggest—'

'Then why does your shadow stretch so yearningly forward?'

Kalam glanced down at it, then scowled. 'How should I know? Perhaps it considers its chances better in yonder mob.'

'Chances?'

'For excitement.'

'Ah. Chafing, are you? I would never have guessed.'

'Liar,' Kalam said. 'Minala has banished me. But you already know that, which is why you've come to find me.'

'I am the Patron of Assassins,' Cotillion said. 'I do not mediate marital disputes.'
'Depends on how fierce they get, doesn't it?'

'Are you ready to kill each other, then?'

'No. I was only making a point.'

'Which was?'

'What are you doing here, Cotillion?'

The god was silent for a long moment. 'I have often wondered,' he finally said, 'why it is that you, an assassin, offer no obeisance to your patron.'

Kalam's brows rose. 'Since when have you expected it? Hood take us, Cotillion, if it was fanatical worshippers you hungered for, you should never have looked to assassins. By our very natures, we're antithetical to the notion of subservience – as if you weren't already aware of that.' His voice trailed off, and he turned to study the shadow-wreathed figure standing beside him. 'Mind you, you stood at Kellanved's side, through to the end. Dancer, it seems, knew both loyalty and servitude ...'

'Servitude?' There was a hint of a smile in the tone.

'Mere expedience? That seems difficult to countenance, given all that the two of you went through. Out with it, Cotillion, what is it you're asking?'

'Was I asking something?'

'You want me to . . . serve you, as would a minion his god. Some probably disreputable mission. You need me for something, only you've never learned how to ask.'

Rood slowly rose from his haunches, then stretched, long and languorous. The massive head then swung round, lambent eyes settling on Kalam.

'The Hounds are troubled,' Cotillion murmured.

'I can tell,' the assassin replied drily.

'I have certain tasks before me,' the god continued, 'that will consume much of my time for the near future. Whilst at the same time, certain other ... activities ... must be undertaken. It is one thing to find a loyal subject, but another entirely to find one conveniently positioned, as it were, to be of practical use—'

Kalam barked a laugh. 'You went fishing for faithful servants and found your subjects wanting.'

'We could argue interpretation all day,' Cotillion drawled.

There was a detectable irony in the god's voice that pleased Kalam. In spite of his wariness, he admitted that he actually liked Cotillion. Uncle Cotillion, as the child Panek called him. Certainly, between the Patron of Assassins and Shadowthrone, only the former seemed to possess any shred of self-examination – and thus was actually capable of being humbled. Even if the likelihood was in truth remote. 'Agreed,' Kalam replied. 'Very well, Minala has no interest in seeing my pretty face for a time. Leaving me free, more or less—'

'And without a roof over your head.'

'Without a roof over my head, aye. Fortunately it never seems to rain in your realm.'

'Ah,' Cotillion murmured, 'my realm.'

Kalam studied Rood. The beast had not relinquished its steady stare. The assassin was growing nervous under that unwavering attention. 'Is your claim – yours and Shadowthrone's – being contested?'

'Difficult to answer,' Cotillion murmured. 'There have been ... trembles. Agitation...'

'As you said, the Hounds are troubled.'
'They are indeed.'

'You wish to know more of your potential enemy.'

'We would.'

Kalam studied the gate, the swirling shadows at its threshold. 'Where would you have me begin?'

'A confluence to your own desires, I suspect.'

The assassin glanced at the god, then slowly nodded.

In the half-light of dusk, the seas grew calm, gulls wheeling in from the shoals to settle on the beach. Cutter had built a fire from driftwood, more from the need to be doing something than seeking warmth, for the Kanese coast was subtropical, the breeze sighing down off the verge faint and sultry. The Daru had collected water from the spring near the trail head and was now brewing tea. Overhead, the first stars of night flickered into life.

Apsalar's question earlier that afternoon had gone unanswered. Cutter was not yet ready to return to Darujhistan, and he felt nothing of the calm he'd expected to follow the completion of their task. Rellock and Apsalar had, finally, returned to their home, only to find it a place haunted by death, a haunting that had slipped its fatal flavour into the old man's soul, adding yet one more ghost to this forlorn strand. There was, now, nothing for them here.

Cutter's own experience here in the Malazan Empire was, he well knew, twisted and incomplete. A single vicious night in Malaz City, followed by three tense days in Kan that closed with yet more assassinations. The empire was a foreign place, of course, and one could expect a certain degree of discord between it and what he was used to in Darujhistan, but if anything what he had seen of daily life in the cities suggested a stronger sense of lawfulness, of order and calm. Even so, it was the smaller details that jarred his sensibilities the most, that reinforced the fact that he was a stranger.

Feeling vulnerable was not a weakness he shared with Apsalar. She seemed possessed of absolute calm, an ease, no matter where she was – the confidence of the god who once possessed her had left something of a permanent imprint on her soul. Not just confidence. He thought once more of the night she had killed the man in Kan. Deadly skills, and the icy precision necessary when using them. And, he recalled with a shiver, many of the god's own memories remained with her, reaching back to when the god had been a mortal man, had been Dancer. Among those, the night of the assassinations – when the woman who would become Empress had struck down the Emperor ... and Dancer.

She had revealed that much, at least, a revelation devoid of feeling, of sentiment, delivered as casually as a comment about the weather. Memories of biting knives, of dust-covered blood rolling like pellets across a floor ...

He removed the pot from the coals, threw a handful of herbs into the steaming water.

She had gone for a walk, westward along the white beach. Even as dusk settled, he had lost sight of her, and he had begun to wonder if she was ever coming back.

A log settled suddenly, flinging sparks. The sea had grown entirely dark, invisible; he could not even hear the lap of the waves beyond the crackling fire. A cooler breath rode the breeze.

Cutter slowly rose, then spun round to face inland as something moved in the gloom beyond the fire's light. 'Apsalar?'

There was no reply. A faint thumping underfoot, as if the sands trembled to the passage of something huge ...

The Daru drew out his knives, stepping away from the flickering light.
Ten paces away, at a height to match his own, he saw two glowing eyes, set wide, gold and seemingly depthless. The head and the body beneath it were darker stains in the night, hinting at a mass that left Cutter cold.

'Ah,' a voice said from the shadows to his left, 'the Daru lad. Blind has found you, good. Now, where is your companion?'

Cutter slowly sheathed his weapons. 'That damned Hound gave me a start,' he muttered. 'And if it's blind, why is it looking straight at me?'

'Well, her name is something of a misnomer. She sees, but not as we see.' A cloaked figure stepped into the firelight. 'Do you know me?'

'Cotillion,' Cutter replied. 'Shadowthrone is much shorter.'

'Not that much, though perhaps in his affectations he exaggerates certain traits.'

'What do you want?'

'I would speak with Apsalar, of course. There is the smell of death here ... recent, that is—'

'Rellock. Her father. In his sleep.'

'Unfortunate.' The god's hooded head turned, as if scanning the vicinity, then swung back to face Cutter. 'Am I your patron now?' he asked.

 He wanted to answer no. He wanted to back away, to flee the question and all his answer would signify. He wanted to unleash vitriol at the suggestion. 'I believe you might be at that, Cotillion.'

'I am ... pleased, Crokus.'

'I am now named Cutter.'

'Far less subtle, but apt enough, I suppose. Even so, there was the hint of deadly charm in your old Daru name. Are you sure you will not reconsider?'

Cutter shrugged, then said, 'Cokus had no ... patron god.'

'Of course. And one day, a man will arrive in Darujhistan. With a Malazan name, and no-one will know him, except perhaps by reputation. And he will eventually hear tales of the young Crokus, a lad so instrumental in saving the city on the night of the Fete, all those years ago. Innocent, unsullied Crokus. So be it... Cutter. I see you have a boat.'

The change of subject startled him slightly, then he nodded. 'We have.'

'Sufficiently provisioned?'

'More or less. Not for a long voyage, though.'

'No, of course not. Why should it be? May I see your knives?'

Cutter unsheathed them and passed them across to the god, pommels forward.

'Decent blades,' Cotillion murmured. 'Well balanced. Within them are the echoes of your skill, the taste of blood. Shall I bless them for you, Cutter?'

'If the blessing is without magic,' the Daru replied.

'You desire no sorcerous investment?'

'No.'
'Ah. You would follow Rallick Nom's path.'

Cutter's eyes narrowed. *Oh, yes, he would recall him. When he saw through Sony's eyes, at the Phoenix Inn, perhaps. Or maybe Rallick acknowledged his patron . . . though I find that difficult to believe. 'I think I would have trouble following that path, Cotillion. Rallick's abilities are ... were—'*

'Formidable, yes. I do not think you need use the past tense when speaking of Rallick Nom, or Vorcan for that matter. No, I've no news... simply a suspicion.' He handed the knives back. 'You underestimate your own skills, Cutter, but perhaps that is for the best.'

'I don't know where Apsalar's gone,' Cutter said. 'I don't know if she's coming back.'

'As it has turned out, her presence has proved less vital than expected. I have a task for you, Cutter. Are you amenable to providing a service to your patron?'

'Isn't that expected?'

Cotillion was silent for a moment, then he laughed softly. 'No, I shall not take advantage of your ... inexperience, though I admit to some temptation. Shall we begin things on a proper footing? Reciprocity, Cutter. A relationship of mutual exchanges, yes?'

'Would that you had offered the same to Apsalar.' Then he clamped his jaw shut.

But Cotillion simply sighed. 'Would that I had. Consider this new tact the consequence of difficult lessons.'

'You said reciprocity. What will I receive in return for providing this service?'

'Well, since you'll not accept my blessing or any other investment, I admit to being at something of a loss. Any suggestions?'

'I'd like some questions answered.'

'Indeed.'

'Yes. Such as, why did you and Shadowthrone scheme to destroy Laseen and the empire? Was it just a desire for revenge?'

The god seemed to flinch within his robes, and Cutter felt unseen eyes harden. 'Oh my,' Cotillion drawled, 'you force me to reconsider my offer.'

'I would know,' the Daru pressed on, 'so I can understand what you did ... did to Apsalar.'

'You demand that your patron god justify his actions?'

'It wasn't a demand. Just a question.'

Cotillion said nothing for a long moment.

The fire was slowly dying, embers pulsing with the breeze. Cutter sensed the presence of a second Hound somewhere in the darkness beyond, moving restlessly.

'Necessities,' the god said quietly. 'Games are played, and what may appear precipitous might well be little more than a feint. Or perhaps it was the city itself, Darujhistan, that would serve our purposes better if it remained free, independent. There are layers of meaning behind every gesture, every gambit. I will not explain myself any further than that, Cutter.'

'Do – do you regret what you did?'

'You are indeed fearless, aren't you? Regret? Yes. Many, many regrets. One day, perhaps, you will see for yourself that regrets are as nothing. The value lies in how they are answered.'

Cutter slowly turned and stared out into the darkness of the sea. 'I threw Oponn's coin into the lake,' he said.
'And do you now regret the act?'
'I'm not sure. I didn't like their ... attention.'
'I am not surprised,' Cotillion muttered.
'I have one more request,' Cutter said, facing the god again. 'This task you shall set me on – if I am assailed during it, can I call upon Blind?'
'The Hound?' The astonishment was clear in Cotillion's voice.
'Aye,' Cutter replied, his gaze now on the huge beast. 'Her attention ... comforts me.'
'That makes you rarer than you could imagine, mortal. Very well. If the need is dire, call upon her and she will come.'
Cutter nodded. 'Now, what would you have me do on your behalf?'

The sun had cleared the horizon when Apsalar returned. After a few hours' sleep, Cutter had risen to bury Rellock above the tide line. He was checking the boat's hull one last time when a shadow appeared alongside his own.

'You had visitors,' she said.
He squinted up at her, studied her dark, depthless eyes. 'Aye.'
'And do you now have an answer to my question?'
Cutter frowned, then he sighed and nodded. 'I do. We're to explore an island.'
'An island? Is it far?'
'Middling, but getting farther by the moment.'
'Ah. Of course.'

Of course.

Overhead, gulls cried in the morning air on their way out to sea. Beyond the shoals, their white specks followed the wind, angling southwestward.

Cutter set his shoulder to the prow and pushed the craft back out onto the water. Then he clambered aboard. Apsalar joined him, making her way to the tiller.

What now? A god had given him his answer.

There had been no sunset in the realm the Tiste Edur called the Nascent for five months. The sky was grey, the light strangely hued and diffuse. There had been a flood, and then rains, and a world had been destroyed.

Even in the wreckage, however, there was life.

A score of broad-limbed catfish had clambered onto the mud-caked wall, none less than two man-lengths from blunt head to limp tail. They were well-fed creatures, their silvery-white bellies protruding out to the sides. Their skins had dried and fissures were visible in a latticed web across their dark backs. The glitter of their small black eyes was muted beneath the skin's crinkled layer.

And it seemed those eyes were unaware of the solitary T'lan Imass standing over them.

Echoes of curiosity still clung to Onrack's tattered, desiccated soul. Joints creaking beneath the knotted ropes of ligaments, he crouched beside the nearest catfish. He did not think the creatures were dead. Only a short time
ago, these fish had possessed no true limbs. He was witness, he suspected, to a metamorphosis.

After a moment, he slowly straightened. The sorcery that had sustained the wall against the vast weight of the new sea still held along this section. It had crumbled in others, forming wide breaches and foaming torrents of silt-laden water rushing through to the other side. A shallow sea was spreading out across the land on that side. There might come a time, Onrack suspected, when fragments of this wall were this realm’s only islands.

The sea’s torrential arrival had caught them unawares, scattering them in its tumbling maelstrom. Other kin had survived, the T’lan Imass knew, and indeed some had found purchase on this wall, or on floating detritus, sufficient to regain their forms, to link once more so that the hunt could resume.

But Kurald Emurlahn, fragmented or otherwise, was not amenable to the T’lan Imass. Without a Bonecaster beside him, Onrack could not extend his Tellann powers, could not reach out to his kin, could not inform them that he had survived. For most of his kind, that alone would have been sufficient cause for ... surrender. The roiling waters he had but recently crawled from offered true oblivion. Dissolution was the only escape possible from this eternal ritual, and even among the Logros – Guardians of the First Throne itself – Onrack knew of kin who had chosen that path. Or worse ...

The warrior’s contemplation of choosing an end to his existence was momentary. In truth, he was far less haunted by his immortality than most T’lan Imass.

There was always something else to see, after all.

He detected movement beneath the skin of the nearest catfish, vague hints of contraction, of emerging awareness. Onrack drew forth his two-handed, curved obsidian sword. Most things he stumbled upon usually had to be killed. Occasionally in self-defence, but often simply due to an immediate and probably mutual loathing. He had long since ceased questioning why this should be so.

From his massive shoulders hung the rotted skin of an enkar’al, pebbled and colourless. It was a relatively recent acquisition, less than a thousand years old. Another example of a creature that had hated him on first sight. Though perhaps the black rippled blade swinging at its head had tainted its response.

It would be some time, Onrack judged, before the beast crawled out from its skin. He lowered his weapon and stepped past it. The Nascent’s extraordinary, continent-spanning wall was a curiosity in itself. After a moment, the warrior decided to walk its length. Or at least, until his passage was blocked by a breach.

He began walking, hide-wrapped feet scuffling as he dragged them forward, the point of the sword inscribing a desultory furrow in the dried clay as it trailed from his left hand. Clumps of mud clung to his ragged hide shirt and the leather straps of his weapon harness. Silt, soupy water had seeped into the various gashes and punctures on his body and now leaked in trickling runnels with every heavy step he took. He had possessed a helm once, an impressive trophy from his youth, but it had been shattered at the final battle against the Jaghut family in the Jhag Odhan. A single crossways blow that had also shorn away a fifth of his skull, parietal and temporal, on the right side. Jaghut women had deceptive strength and admirable ferocity, especially when cornered.

The sky above him had a sickly cast, but one he had already grown used to. This fragment of the long-fractured Tiste Edur warren was by far the largest he had come across, larger even than the one that surrounded Tremorlor, the Azath Odhanhouse. And this one had known a period of stability, sufficient for civilizations to arise, for savants of sorcery to begin unravelling the powers of Kurald Emurlahn, although those inhabitants had not been Tiste Edur.

Idly, Onrack wondered if the renegade T’lan Imass he and his kin pursued had somehow triggered the wound that had resulted in the flooding of this world. It seemed likely, given its obvious efficacy in obscuring their trail. Either that, or the Tiste Edur had returned, to reclaim what had once been theirs.

Indeed, he could smell the grey-skinned Edur – they had passed this way, and recently, arriving from another warren. Of course, the word ‘smell’ had acquired new meaning for the T’lan Imass in the wake of the Ritual. Mundane senses had for the most part withered along with flesh. Through the shadowed orbits of his eyes, for example, the world was a complex collage of dull colours, heat and cold and often measured by an unerring
sensitivity to motion. Spoken words swirled in mercurial clouds of breath – if the speaker lived, that is. If not, then it was the sound itself that was detectable, shivering its way through the air. Onrack sensed sound as much by sight as by hearing.

And so it was that he became aware of a warm-blooded shape lying a short distance ahead. The wall here was slowly failing. Water spouted in streams from fissures between the bulging stones. Before long, it would give way entirely.

The shape did not move. It had been chained in place.

Another fifty paces and Onrack reached it.

The stench of Kurald Emurlahn was overpowering, faintly visible like a pool enclosing the supine figure, its surface rippling as if beneath a steady but thin rain. A deep ragged scar marred the prisoner's broad brow beneath a hairless pate, the wound glowing with sorcery. There had been a metal tongue to hold down the man's tongue, but that had dislodged, as had the straps wound round the figure's head.

Slate-grey eyes stared up, unblinking, at the T'lan Imass.

Onrack studied the Tiste Edur for a moment longer, then he stepped over the man and continued on.

A ragged, withered voice rose in his wake. 'Wait.'

The undead warrior paused and glanced back.

'I – I would bargain. For my freedom.'

'I am not interested in bargains,' Onrack replied in the Edur language.

'Is there nothing you desire, warrior?'

'Nothing you can give me.'

'Do you challenge me, then?'

Tendons creaking, Onrack tilted his head. 'This section of the wall is about to collapse. I have no wish to be here when it does.'

'And you imagine that I do?'

'Considering your sentiments on the matter is a pointless effort on my part, Edur. I have no interest in imagining myself in your place. Why would I? You are about to drown.'

'Break my chains, and we can continue this discussion in a safer place.'

'The quality of this discussion has not earned such an exercise,' Onrack replied.

'I would improve it, given the time.'

'This seems unlikely.' Onrack turned away.

'Wait! I can tell you of your enemies!' Slowly, the T'lan Imass swung round once more. 'My enemies? I do not recall saying that I had any, Edur.'

'Oh, but you do. I should know. I was once one of them, and indeed that is why you find me here, for I am your enemy no longer.'

'You are now a renegade among your own kind, then,' Onrack observed. 'I have no faith in traitors.'

'To my own kind, T'lan Imass, I am not the traitor. That epithet belongs to the one who chained me here. In any case, the question of faith cannot be answered through negotiation.'
'Should you have made that admission, Edur?'

The man grimaced. 'Why not? I would not deceive you.'

Now, Onrack was truly curious. 'Why would you not deceive me?'

'For the very cause that has seen me Shorn,' the Edur replied. 'I am plagued by the need to be truthful.'

'That is a dreadful curse,' the T'lan Imass said.

'Yes.'

Onrack lifted his sword. 'In this case, I admit to possessing a curse of my own. Curiosity.'

'I weep for you.'

'I see no tears.'

'In my heart, T'lan Imass.'

A single blow shattered the chains. With his free right hand, Onrack reached down and clutched one of the Edur's ankles. He dragged the man after him along the top of the wall.

'I would rail at the indignity of this,' the Tiste Edur said as he was pulled onward, step by scuffing step, 'had I the strength to do so.'

Onrack made no reply. Dragging the man with one hand, his sword with the other, he trudged forward, his progress eventually taking them past the area of weakness on the wall.

'You can release me now,' the Tiste Edur gasped.

'Can you walk?'

'No, but—'

'Then we shall continue like this.'

'Where are you going, then, that you cannot afford to wait for me to regain my strength?'

'Along this wall,' the T'lan Imass replied.

There was silence between them for a time, apart from the creaks from Onrack's bones, the rasp of his hide-wrapped feet, and the hiss and thump of the Tiste Edur's body and limbs across the mud-layered stones. The detritus-filled sea remained unbroken on their left, a festering marshland on their right. They passed between and around another dozen catfish, these ones not quite as large yet fully as limbed as the previous group. Beyond them, the wall stretched on unbroken to the horizon.

In a voice filled with pain, the Tiste Edur finally spoke again. 'Much more ... T'lan Imass ... and you'll be dragging a corpse.'

Onrack considered that for a moment, then he halted his steps and released the man's ankle. He slowly swung about.

Groaning, the Tiste Edur rolled himself onto his side. 'I assume,' he gasped, 'you have no food, or fresh water.'

Onrack lifted his gaze, back to the distant humps of the catfish. 'I suppose I could acquire some. Of the former, that is.'

'Can you open a portal, T'lan Imass? Can you get us out of this realm?'

'No.'
The Tiste Edur lowered his head to the clay and closed his eyes. 'Then I am as good as dead in any case. None the less, I appreciate your breaking my chains. You need not remain here, though I would know the name of the warrior who showed me what mercy he could.'

'Onrack. Clanless, of the Logros.'

'I am Trull Sengar. Also clanless.'

Onrack stared down at the Tiste Edur for a while. Then the T’lan Imass stepped over the man and set off, retracing their path. He arrived among the catfish. A single chop downward severed the head of the nearest one.

The slaying triggered a frenzy among the others. Skin split, sleek four-limbed bodies tore their way free. Broad, needle-fanged heads swung towards the undead warrior in their midst, tiny eyes glistening. Loud hisses from all sides. The beasts moved on squat, muscular legs, three-toed feet thickly padded and clawed. Their tails were short, extending in a vertical fin back up their spines.

They attacked as would wolves closing on wounded prey.

Obsidian blade flashed. Thin blood sprayed. Heads and limbs flopped about.

One of the creatures launched itself into the air, huge mouth closing over Onrack’s skull. As its full weight descended, the T’lan Imass felt his neck vertebrae creak and grind. He fell backward, letting the animal drag him down.

Then he dissolved into dust.

And rose five paces away to resume his killing, wading among the hissing survivors. A few moments later they were all dead.

Onrack collected one of the corpses by its hind foot and, dragging it, made his way back to Trull Sengar.

The Tiste Edur was propped up on one elbow, his flat eyes fixed on the T’lan Imass. 'For a moment,' he said, 'I thought I was having the strangest dream. I saw you, there in the distance, wearing a huge, writhing hat. That then ate you whole.'

Onrack pulled the body up alongside Trull Sengar. 'You were not dreaming. Here. Eat.'

'Might we not cook it?'

The T’lan Imass strode to the seaside edge of the wall. Among the flotsam were the remnants of countless trees, from which jutted denuded branches. He climbed down onto the knotted detritus, felt it shift and roll unsteadily beneath him. It required but a few moments to snap off an armful of fairly dry wood, which he threw back up onto the wall. Then he followed.

He felt the Tiste Edur’s eyes on him as he prepared a hearth.

'Our encounters with your kind,' Trull said after a moment, 'were few and far between. And then, only after your ... ritual. Prior to that, your people fled from us at first sight. Apart from those who travelled the oceans with the Thelomen Toblakai, that is. Those ones fought us. For centuries, before we drove them from the seas.'

'The Tiste Edur were in my world,' Onrack said as he drew out his spark stones, 'just after the coming of the Tiste Andii. Once numerous, leaving signs of passage in the snow, on the beaches, in deep forests.'

'There are far fewer of us now,' Trull Sengar said. 'We came here – to this place – from Mother Dark, whose children had banished us. We did not think they would pursue, but they did. And upon the shattering of this warren, we fled yet again – to your world, Onrack. Where we thrived ...'

'Until your enemies found you once more.'

'Yes. The first of those were ... fanatical in their hatred. There were great wars – unwitnessed by anyone, fought as they were within darkness, in hidden places of shadow. In the end, we slew the last of those first
Andii, but were broken ourselves in the effort. And so we retreated into remote places, into fastnesses. Then, more Andii came, only these seemed less ... interested. And we in turn had grown inward, no longer consumed with the hunger of expansion—'

'Had you sought to assuage that hunger,' Onrack said as the first wisps of smoke rose from the shredded bark and twigs, 'we would have found in you a new cause, Edur.'

Trull was silent, his gaze veiled. 'We had forgotten it all,' he finally said, settling back to rest his head once more on the clay. 'All that I have just told you. Until a short while ago, my people – the last bastion, it seems, of the Tiste Edur – knew almost nothing of our past. Our long, tortured history. And what we knew was in fact false. If only,' he added, 'we had remained ignorant.'

Onrack slowly turned to gaze at the Edur. 'Your people no longer look inward.'

'I said I would tell you of your enemies, T'lan Imass.'

'You did.'

'There are your kind, Onrack, among the Tiste Edur. In league with our new purpose.'

'And what is this purpose, Trull Sengar?'

The man looked away, closed his eyes. 'Terrible, Onrack. A terrible purpose.'

The T'lan Imass warrior swung to the corpse of the creature he had slain, drew forth an obsidian knife. 'I am familiar with terrible purposes,' he said as he began cutting meat.

'I shall tell you my tale now, as I said I would. So you understand what you now face.'

'No, Trull Sengar. Tell me nothing more.'

'But why?'

Because your truth would burden me. Force me to find my kin once more. Your truth would chain me to this world – to my world, once more. And I am not ready for that. 'I am weary of your voice, Edur,' he replied.

The beast's sizzling flesh smelled like seal meat.

A short time later, while Trull Sengar ate, Onrack moved to the edge of the wall facing onto the marsh. The flood waters had found old basins in the landscape, from which gases now leaked upward to drift in pale smears over the thick, percolating surface. Thicker fog obscured the horizon, but the T'lan Imass thought he could sense a rising of elevation, a range of low, humped hills.

'It's getting lighter,' Trull Sengar said from where he lay beside the hearth. 'The sky is glowing in places. There ... and there.'

Onrack lifted his head. The sky had been an unrelieved sea of pewter, darkening every now and then to loose a deluge of rain, though that had grown more infrequent of late. But now rents had appeared, ragged-edged. A swollen orb of yellow light commanded one entire horizon, the wall ahead seeming to drive towards its very heart; whilst directly overhead hung a smaller circle of blurred fire, this one rimmed in blue.

'The suns return,' the Tiste Edur murmured. 'Here, in the Nascent, the ancient twin hearts of Kurald Emurlahn live on. There was no way of telling, for we did not rediscover this warren until after the Breach. The flood waters must have brought chaos to the climate. And destroyed the civilization that existed here.'

Onrack looked down. 'Were they Tiste Edur?'

The man shook his head. 'No, more like your descendants, Onrack. Although the corpses we saw here along the wall were badly decayed.' Trull grimaced. 'They are as vermin, these humans of yours.'

'Not mine,' Onrack replied.
'You feel no pride, then, at their insipid success?'

The T'lan Imass cocked his head. 'They are prone to mistakes, Trull Sengar. The Logros have killed them in their thousands when the need to reassert order made doing so necessary. With ever greater frequency they annihilate themselves, for success breeds contempt for those very qualities that purchased it.'

'It seems you've given this some thought.'

Onrack shrugged in a clatter of bones. 'More than my kin, perhaps, the edge of my irritation with humankind remains jagged.'

The Tiste Edur was attempting to stand, his motions slow and deliberate. 'The Nascent required ... cleansing,' he said, his tone bitter, 'or so it was judged.'

'Your methods,' Onrack said, 'are more extreme than what the Logros would choose.'

Managing to totter upright, Trull Sengar faced the T'lan Imass with a wry grin. 'Sometimes, friend, what is begun proves too powerful to contain.'

'Such is the curse of success.'

Trull seemed to wince at the words, and he turned away. 'I must needs find fresh, clean water.'

'How long had you been chained?'

The man shrugged. 'Long, I suppose. The sorcery within the Shorning was designed to prolong suffering. Your sword severed its power, and now the mundane requirements of the flesh return.'

The suns were burning through the clouds, their combined heat filling the air with humidity. The overcast was shredding apart, vanishing before their very eyes. Onrack studied the blazing orbs once more. 'There has been no night,' he said.

'Not in the summer, no. The winters, it's said, are another matter. At the same time, with the deluge I suspect it is fruitless to predict what will come. Personally, I have no wish to find out.'

'We must leave this wall,' the T'lan Imass said after a moment.

'Aye, before it collapses entirely. I think I can see hills in the distance.'

'If you have the strength, clasp your arms about me,' Onrack said, 'and I will climb down. We can skirt the basins. If any local animals survived, they will be on higher ground. Do you wish to collect and cook more from this beast?'

'No. It is less than palatable.'

'That is not surprising, Trull Sengar. It is a carnivore, and has fed long on rotting flesh.'

The ground was sodden underfoot when they finally reached the base of the wall. Swarms of insects rose around them, closing on the Tiste Edur with frenzied hunger. Onrack allowed his companion to set the pace as they made their way between the water-filled basins. The air was humid enough to sheathe their bodies, soaking through the clothing they wore. Although there was no wind at ground level, the clouds overhead had stretched into streamers, racing to overtake them then scudding on to mass against the range of hills, where the sky grew ever darker.

'We are heading right towards a squall,' Trull muttered, waving his arms about to disperse the midges.

'When it breaks, this land will flood,' Onrack noted. 'Are you capable of increasing your pace?'

'No.'

'Then I shall have to carry you.'
'Carry, or drag?'

'Which do you prefer?'

'Carrying seems somewhat less humiliating.'

Onrack returned his sword to its loop in the shoulder harness. Though the warrior was judged tall among his own kind, the Tiste Edur was taller, by almost the length of a forearm. The T'lan Imass had the man sit down on the ground, knees drawn up, then Onrack squatted and slipped one arm beneath Trull's knees, the other below his shoulder blades. Tendons creaking, the warrior straightened.

'There's fresh gouges all around your skull, or what's left of it at any rate,' the Tiste Edur noted.

Onrack said nothing. He set forth at a steady jog.

Before long a wind arrived, tumbling down from the hills, growing to such force that the T'lan Imass had to lean forward, his feet thumping along the gravel ridges between the pools.

The midges were quickly swept away.

There was, Onrack realized, a strange regularity to the hills ahead. There were seven in all, arrayed in what seemed a straight line, each of equal height though uniquely misshapen. The storm clouds were piling well behind them, corkscrewing in bulging columns skyward above an enormous range of mountains.

The wind howled against Onrack's desiccated face, snapped at the strands of his gold-streaked hair, thrummed with a low-pitched drone through the leather strips of his harness. Trull Sengar was hunched against him, head ducked away from the shrieking blast.

Lightning bridged the heaving columns, the thunder long in reaching them.

The hills were not hills at all. They were edifices, massive and hulking, constructed from a smooth black stone, seemingly each a single piece. Twenty or more man-lengths high. Dog-like beasts, broad-skulled and small-eared, thickly muscled, heads lowered towards the two travellers and the distant wall behind them, the vast pits of their eyes faintly gleaming a deep, translucent amber.

Onrack's steps slowed.

But did not halt.

The basins had been left behind, the ground underfoot slick with wind-borne rain but otherwise solid. The T'lan Imass angled his approach towards the nearest monument. As they came closer, they moved into the statue's lee.

The sudden falling off of the wind was accompanied by a cavernous silence, the wind to either side oddly mute and distant. Onrack set Trull Sengar down.

The Tiste Edur's bewildered gaze found the edifice rearing before them. He was silent, slow to stand as Onrack moved past him.

'Beyond,' Trull quietly murmured, 'there should be a gate."

Pausing, Onrack slowly swung round to study his companion. 'This is your warren,' he said after a moment. 'What do you sense of these . . . monuments?'

'Nothing, but I know what they are meant to represent ... as do you. It seems the inhabitants of this realm made them into their gods."

To that, Onrack made no reply. He faced the massive statue once more, head tilting as his gaze travelled upward, ever upward. To those gleaming, amber eyes.

'There will be a gate,' Trull Sengar persisted behind him. 'A means of leaving this world. Why do you
hesitate, T’lan Imass?”

‘I hesitate in the face of what you cannot see,’ Onrack replied. ‘There are seven, yes. But two of them are ... alive.’ He hesitated, then added, ‘And this is one of them.’
CHAPTER SEVEN

An army that waits is soon an army at war with itself.

Kellanved

The world was encircled in red, the hue of old blood, of iron rusting on a battlefield. It rose in a wall like a river turned on its side, crashing confused and uncertain against the rough cliffs that rose broken-toothed around the rim of Raraku. The Holy Desert’s most ancient guardians, those bleached limestone crags, now withering beneath the ceaseless storm of the Whirlwind, the raging goddess who could countenance no rival to her dominion. Who would devour the cliffs themselves in her fury.

Whilst the illusion of calm lay within her heart.

The old man who had come to be known as Ghost Hands slowly clambered his way up the slope. His ageing skin was deep bronze, his tattooed, blunt and wide face as creased as a wind-clawed boulder. Small yellow flowers cloaked the ridge above him, a rare blossoming of the low-growing desert plant the local tribes called hen’bara. When dried, the flowers made a heady tea, mender of grief, balm against pain in a mortal soul. The old man scrabbled and scraped his way up the slope with something like desperation.

No life’s path is bloodless. Spill that of those blocking your path. Spill your own. Struggle on, wade the growing torrent with all the frenzy that is the brutal unveiling of self-preservation. The macabre dance in the tugging currents held no artistry, and to pretend otherwise was to sink into delusion.

Delusions. Heboric Light Touch, once priest of Fener, possessed no more delusions. He had drowned them one by one with his own hands long ago. His hands – his Ghost Hands – had proved particularly capable of such tasks. Whisperers of unseen powers, guided by a mysterious, implacable will. He knew that he had no control over them, and so held no delusions. How could he?

Behind him, in the vast flat where tens of thousands of warriors and their followers were encamped amidst a city’s ruins, such clear-eyed vision was absent. The army was the strong hands, now at rest but soon to raise weapons, guided by a will that was anything but implacable, a will that was drowning in delusions. Heboric was not only different from all those below – he was their very opposite, a sordid reflection in a mangled mirror.

Hen’bara’s gift was dreamless sleep at night. The solace of oblivion.

He reached the ridge, breathing hard from the exertion, and settled down among the flowers for a moment to rest. Ghostly hands were as deft as real ones, though he could not see them – not even as the faint, mottled glow that others saw. Indeed, his vision was failing him in all things. It was an old man’s curse, he believed, to witness the horizons on all sides drawing ever closer. Even so, while the carpet of yellow surrounding him was little more than a blur to his eyes, the spicy fragrance filled his nostrils and left a palpable taste on his tongue.

The desert sun’s heat was bludgeoning, oppressive. It had a power of its own, transforming the Holy Desert into a prison, pervasive and relentless. Heboric had grown to despise that heat, to curse Seven Cities, to cultivate an abiding hatred for its people. And he was trapped among them, now. The Whirlwind’s barrier was indiscriminate, impassable both to those on the outside and those within – at the discretion of the Chosen One.

Movement to one side, the blur of a slight, dark-haired figure. Who then settled down beside him.

Heboric smiled. ‘I thought I was alone.’

‘We are both alone, Ghost Hands.’

‘Of that, Felisin, neither of us needs reminding.’ Felisin Younger, but that is a name I cannot speak out loud.
The mother who adopted you, lass, has her own secrets. 'What is that you have in your hands?'

'Scrolls,' the girl replied. 'From Mother. She has, it seems, rediscovered her hunger for writing poetry.'

The tattooed ex-priest grunted, 'I thought it was a love, not a hunger.'

'You are not a poet,' she said. 'In any case, to speak plainly is a true talent; to bury beneath obfuscation is a poet's calling these days.'

'You are a brutal critic, lass,' Heboric observed.

'Call to Shadow, she has called it. Or, rather, she continues a poem her own mother began.'

'Ah, well, Shadow is a murky realm. Clearly she has chosen a style to match the subject, perhaps to match that of her own mother.'

'Too convenient, Ghost Hands. Now, consider the name by which Korbolo Dom's army is now called. Dogslayers. That, old man, is poetic. A name fraught with diffidence behind its proud bluster. A name to match Korbolo Dom himself, who stands square-footed in his terror.'

Heboric reached out and plucked the first flower head. He held it to his nose a moment before dropping it into the leather bag at his belt. "Square-footed in his terror." An arresting image, lass. But I see no fear in the Napan. The Malazan army mustering in Aren is nothing but three paltry legions of recruits. Commanded by a woman devoid of any relevant experience. Korbolo Dom has no reason to be afraid.'

The young girl's laugh was a trill that seemed to cut an icy path through the air. 'No reason, Ghost Hands? Many reasons, in fact. Shall I list them? Leoman. Toblakai. Bidithal. L'oric. Mathok. And, the one he finds most terrifying of all: Sha'ik. My mother. The camp is a snake-pit, seething with dissent. You have missed the last spitting frenzy. Mother has banished Mallick Rei and Pullyk Alar. Cast them out. Korbolo Dom loses two more allies in the power struggle—'!

'There is no power struggle,' Heboric growled, tugging at a handful of flowers. 'They are fools to believe that one is possible. Sha'ik has thrown those two out because treachery flows in their veins. She is indifferent to Korbolo Dom's feelings about it.'

'He believes otherwise, and that conviction is more important than what might or might not be true. And how does Mother respond to the aftermath of her pronouncements? Felisin swiped the plants before her with the scrolls. 'With poetry.'

'The gift of knowledge,' Heboric muttered. 'The Whirlwind Goddess whispers in the Chosen One's ear. There are secrets within the Warren of Shadow, secrets containing truths that are relevant to the Whirlwind itself.'

'What do you mean?'

Heboric shrugged. His bag was nearly full. 'Alas, I possess my own prescient knowledge.' And little good it does me. 'The sundering of an ancient warren scattered fragments throughout the realms. The Whirlwind Goddess possesses power, but it was not her own, not at first. Just one more fragment, wandering lost and in pain. What was the goddess, I wonder, when she first stumbled onto the Whirlwind? Some desert tribe's minor deity, I suspect. A spirit of the summer wind, protector of some whirlpool spring, possibly. One among many, without question. Of course, once she made that fragment her own, it did not take long for her to destroy her old rivals, to assert complete, ruthless domination over the Holy Desert.'

'A quaint theory, Ghost Hands,' Felisin drawled. 'But it speaks nothing of the Seven Holy Cities, the Seven Holy Books, the prophecy of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic.'

Heboric snorted. 'Cults feed upon one another, lass. Whole myths are co-opted to fuel the faith. Seven Cities was born of nomadic tribes, yet the legacy preceding them was that of an ancient civilization, which in turn rested uneasy on the foundations of a still older empire – the First Empire of the T'lan Imass. That which survives in memory or falters and fades away is but chance and circumstance.'
'Poets may know hunger,' she commented drily, 'but historians devour. And devouring murders language, makes of it a dead thing.'

'Not the historian's crime, lass, but the critic's.'

'Why quibble? Scholars, then.'

'Are you complaining that my explanation destroys the mysteries of the pantheon? Felisin, there are more worthy things to wonder at in this world. Leave the gods and goddesses to their own sickly obsessions.'

Her laugh struck through him again. 'Oh, you are amusing company, old man! A priest cast out by his god. An historian once gaoled for his theories. A thief with nothing left worth stealing. I am not the one in need of wonder.'

He heard her climb to her feet. 'In any case,' she continued, 'I was sent to find you.'

'Oh? Sha'ik seeks more advice that she will no doubt ignore?'

'Not this time. Leoman.'

Heboric scowled. And where Leoman is, so too will be Toblakai. The slayer's only quality his holding to his vow to never again speak to me. Still, I will feel his eyes upon me. His killer's eyes. If there's anyone in the camp who should be banished... He slowly clambered upright. 'Where will I find him?'

'In the pit temple,' she replied.

Of course. And what, dear lass, were you doing in Leoman's company?

'I would take you by hand,' Felisin added, 'but I find their touch far too poetic.'

She walked at his side, back down the slope, between the two vast kraals which were empty at the moment – the goats and sheep driven to the pastures east of the ruins for the day. They passed through a wide breach in the dead city's wall, intersecting one of the main avenues that led to the jumble of sprawling, massive buildings of which only foundations and half-walls remained, that had come to be called the Circle of Temples.

Adobe huts, yurts and hide tents fashioned a modern city on the ruins. Neighbourhood markets bustled beneath wide, street-length awnings, filling the hot air with countless voices and the redolent aromas of cooking. Local tribes, those that followed their own war chief, Mathok – who held a position comparable to general in Sha'ilk's command – mingled with Dogslayers, with motley bands of renegades from cities, with cutthroat bandits and freed criminals from countless Malazan garrison gaols. The army's camp followers were equally disparate, a bizarre self-contained tribe that seemed to wander a nomadic round within the makeshift city, driven to move at the behest of hidden vagaries no doubt political in nature. At the moment, some unseen defeat had them more furtive than usual – old whores leading scores of mostly naked, thin children, weapon smiths and tack menders and cooks and latrine diggers, widows and wives and a few husbands and fewer still fathers and mothers ... threads linked most of them to the warriors in Sha'ilk's army, but they were tenuous at best, easily severed, often tangled into a web of adultery and bastardy.

The city was a microcosm of Seven Cities, in Heboric's opinion. Proof of all the ills the Malazan Empire had set out to cure as conquerors then occupiers. There seemed few virtues to the freedoms to which the ex-priest had been witness, here in this place. Yet he suspected he was alone in his traitorous thoughts. The empire sentenced me a criminal, yet I remain Malazan none the less. A child of the empire, a reawakened devotee to the old emperor's 'peace by the sword'. So, dear Tavore, lead your army to this heart of rebellion, and cut it dead. I'll not weep for the loss.

The Circle of Temples was virtually abandoned compared to the teeming streets the two had just passed through. The home of old gods, forgotten deities once worshipped by a forgotten people who left little behind apart from crumbling ruins and pathways ankle-deep in dusty potsherds. Yet something of the sacred still lingered for some, it seemed, for it was here where the most decrepit of the lost found meagre refuge.

A scattering of minor healers moved among these destitute few – the old widows who'd found no refuge as a
third or even fourth wife to a warrior or merchant, fighters who'd lost limbs, lepers and other diseased victims who could not afford the healing powers of High Denul. There had once numbered among these people abandoned children, but Sha'ik had seen to an end to that. Beginning with Felisin, she had adopted them all – her private retinue, the Whirlwind cult's own acolytes. By Heboric's last cursory measure, a week past, they had numbered over three thousand, in ages ranging from newly weaned to Felisin's age – close to Sha'ik's own, true age. To all of them, she was Mother.

It had not been a popular gesture. The pimps had lost their lambs.

In the centre of the Circle of Temples was a broad, octagonal pit, sunk deep into the layered limestone, its floor never touched by the sun, cleared out now of its resident snakes, scorpions and spiders and reoccupied by Leoman of the Flails. Leoman, who had once been Elder Sha'ik's most trusted bodyguard. But the reborn Sha'ik had delved deep into the man's soul, and found it empty, bereft of faith, by some flaw of nature inclined to disavow all forms of certainty. The new Chosen One had decided she could not trust this man – not at her side, at any rate. He had been seconded to Mathok, though it seemed that the position involved few responsibilities. While Toblakai remained as Sha'ik's personal guardian, the giant with the shattered tattoo on his face had not relinquished his friendship with Leoman and was often in the man's sour company.

There was history between the two warriors, of which Heboric was certain he sensed but a fraction. They had once shared a chain as prisoners of the Malazans, it was rumoured. Heboric wished the Malazans had shown less mercy in Toblakai's case.

'I will leave you now,' Felisin said at the pit's brick-lined edge. 'When next I desire to clash views with you, I will seek you out.'

Grimacing, Heboric nodded and began making his way down the ladder. The air around him grew cooler in layers as he descended into the gloom. The smell of durhang was sweet and heavy – one of Leoman's affectations, leading the ex-priest to wonder if young Felisin was following her mother's path more closely than he had suspected.

The limestone floor was layered in rugs now. Ornate furniture – the portable kind wealthy travelling merchants used – made the spacious chamber seem crowded. Wood-framed screens stood against the walls here and there, the stretched fabric of their panels displaying woven scenes from tribal mythology. Where the walls were exposed, black and red ochre paintings from some ancient artist transformed the smooth, rippled stone into multi-layered vistas – savannas where transparent beasts roamed. For some reason these images remained clear and sharp to Heboric's eyes, whispering memories of movement ever on the edges of his vision.

Old spirits wandered this pit, trapped for eternity by its high, sheer walls. Heboric hated this place, with all its spectral laminations of failure, of worlds long extinct.

Toblakai sat on a backless divan, rubbing oil into the blade of his wooden sword, not bothering to look up as Heboric reached the base of the ladder. Leoman lay sprawled among cushions near the wall opposite.

'Ghost Hands,' the desert warrior called in greeting. 'You have hen'bara? Come, there is a brazier here, and water—'

'I reserve that tea for just before I go to bed,' Heboric replied, striding over. 'You would speak with me, Leoman?'

'Always, friend. Did not the Chosen One call us her sacred triangle? We three, here in this forgotten pit? Or perhaps I have jumbled my words, and should reverse my usage of "sacred" and "forgotten"? Come, sit. I have herbal tea, the kind that makes one wakeful.'

Heboric sat down on a cushion. 'And what need have we to be wakeful?'

Leoman's smile was loose, telling Heboric that durhang had swept away his usual reticence. 'Dear Ghost Hands,' the warrior murmured, 'it is the need of the hunted. It is the gazelle with its nose to the ground that the lion sups with, after all.'
The ex-priest's brows rose. 'And who is stalking us now, Leoman?'

Leaning back, Leoman replied, 'Why, the Malazans, of course. Who other?'

'Why, most certainly then we must talk,' Heboric said in mock earnestness. 'I had no idea, after all, that the Malazans were planning on doing us harm. Are you certain of your information?'

Toblakai spoke to Leoman. 'As I have told you before, this old man should be killed.'

Leoman laughed. 'Ah, my friend, now that you are the only one of us three who still has the Chosen One's ear ... as it were ... I would suggest you relinquish that subject. She has forbidden it and that is that. Nor am I inclined to agree with you in any case. It is an old refrain that needs burying.'

'Toblakai hates me because I see too clearly what haunts his soul,' Heboric said. 'And, given his vow to not speak to me, his options for dialogue are sadly limited.'

'I applaud your empathy, Ghost Hands.'

Heboric snorted. 'If there is to be subject to this meeting, Leoman, let's hear it. Else I'll make my way back to the light.'

'That would prove a long journey,' the warrior chuckled. 'Very well. Bidithal is back to his old ways.'

'Bidithal, the High Mage? What "old ways"?'

'His ways with children, Heboric. Girls. His unpleasant ... hungers. Sha'ik is not all-knowing, alas. Oh, she knows Bidithal's old predilections – she experienced them firsthand when she was Sha'ik Elder, after all. But there are close to a hundred thousand people in this city, now. A few children vanishing every week . . . easily passing virtually unnoticed. Mathok's people, however, are by nature watchful.'

Heboric scowled. 'And what would you have me do about it?'

'Are you disinterested?'

'Of course not. But I am one man, without, as you say, a voice. While Bidithal is one of the three sworn to Sha'ik, one of her most powerful High Mages.'

Leoman began making tea. 'We share a certain loyalty, friend,' he murmured, 'the three of us here. With a certain child.' He looked up then, leaning close as he set the pot of water on the brazier's grate, his veiled blue eyes fixing on Heboric. 'Who has caught Bidithal's eye. But that attention is more than simply sexual. Felisin is Sha'ik's chosen heir – we can all see that, yes? Bidithal believes she must be shaped in a manner identical to her mother – when her mother was Sha'ik Elder, that is. The child must follow the mother's path, Bidithal believes. As the mother was broken inside, so too must the child be broken inside.'

Cold horror filled Heboric at Leoman's words. He snapped a glare at Toblakai. 'Sha'ik must be told of this!'

'She has,' Leoman said. 'But she needs Bidithal, if only to balance the schemes of Febryl and L'oric. The three despise each other, naturally. She has been told, Ghost Hands, and so she tasks us three in turn to be ... watchful.'

'How in Hood's name am I supposed to be watchful?' Heboric snapped. 'I am damned near blind! Toblakai! Tell Sha'ik to take that wrinkled bastard and flay him alive, never mind Febryl and L'oric!'

The huge savage bared his teeth at Leoman. 'I hear a lizard hissing from under its rock, Leoman of the Flails. Such bravado is quickly ended with the heel of a boot.'

'Ah,' Leoman sighed to Heboric, 'alas, Bidithal is not the problem. Indeed, he may prove Sha'ik's saviour. Febryl schemes betrayal, friend. Who are his co-conspirators? Unknown. Not L'oric, that's for certain – L'oric is by far the most cunning of the three, and so not a fool by any measure. Yet Febryl needs allies among the powerful. Is Korbolo Dom in league with the bastard? We don't know. Kamist Reloe? His two lieutenant mages, Henaras and Fayelle? Even if they all were, Febryl would still need Bidithal – either to stand aside and
Yet,' Toblakai growled, 'Bidithal is loyal.'

'In his own way,' Leoman agreed. 'And he knows that Febryl is planning treachery, and now but awaits the invitation. Whereupon he will tell Sha'ik.'

'And all the conspirators will then die,' Toblakai said.

Heboric shook his head. 'And what if those conspirators comprise her entire command?'

Leoman shrugged, then began pouring tea. 'Sha'ik has the Whirlwind, friend. To lead the armies? She has Mathok. And me. And L'oric will remain, that is certain. Seven take us, Korbolo Dom is a liability in any case.'

Heboric was silent for a long moment. He made no move when with a gesture Leoman invited him to partake of the tea. 'And so the lie is revealed,' he finally murmured. 'Toblakai has told Sha'ik nothing. Not him, nor Mathok, nor you, Leoman. This is your way of getting back into power. Crush a conspiracy and thereby eliminate all your rivals. And now, you invite me into the lie.'

'Not a great lie,' Leoman replied. 'Sha'ik has been informed that Bidithal hunts children once more ...'

'But not Felisin in particular.'

'The Chosen One must not let her personal loyalties place the entire rebellion at risk. She would act too quickly—'

'And you think I give a damn about this rebellion, Leoman?'

The warrior smiled as he leaned back on the cushions. 'You care about nothing, Heboric. Not even yourself. But no, that is not true, is it? There is Felisin. There is the child.'

Heboric climbed to his feet. 'I am done here.'

'Go well, friend. Know that your company is always welcome here.'

The ex-priest made his way towards the ladder. Reaching it, he paused. 'And here I'd been led to believe that the snakes were gone from this pit.'

Leoman laughed. 'The cool air but makes them . . . dormant. Be careful on that ladder, Ghost Hands.'

After the old man had left, Toblakai sheathed his sword and rose. 'He will head straight to Sha'ik,' he pronounced.

'Will he?' Leoman asked, then shrugged. 'No, I think not. Not to Sha'ik ...'

Of all the temples of the native cults in Seven Cities, only the ones raised in the name of a particular god displayed an architectural style that could be seen to echo the ancient ruins in the Circle of Temples. And so, in Heboric's mind, there was nothing accidental to Bidithal's choice of abode. Had the foundations of the temple the High Mage now occupied still held aloft walls and ceiling, it would be seen to be a low, strangely elongated dome, buttressed by half-arches like the ribs of a vast sea-creature, or perhaps the skeletal framework of a longship. The tent-cloth covering the withered and crumbled remnants was affixed to the few surviving upright wings. These wings and the floor plan gave sufficient evidence of what the temple had originally looked like; and in the Seven Holy Cities and among its more populated lesser kin, a certain extant temple could be found that closely resembled this ruin in style.

And in these truths, Heboric suspected a mystery. Bidithal had not always been a High Mage. Not in title in any case. In the Dhobri language, he had been known as Rashan'ais. The archpriest of the cult of Rashan, which had existed in Seven Cities long before the Throne of Shadow had been reoccupied. In the twisted minds of humanity, it seemed, there was nothing objectionable about worshipping an empty throne. No stranger than kneeling before the Boar of Summer, before a god of war.
The cult of Rashan had not taken well the ascension of Ammanas – Shadowthrone – and the Rope into positions of penultimate power within the Warren of Shadow. Though Heboric's knowledge of the details was sketchy at best, it seemed that the cult had torn itself apart. Blood had been spilled within temple walls, and in the aftermath of desecrating murder, only those who acknowledged the mastery of the new gods remained among the devotees. To the wayside, bitter and licking deep wounds, the banished slunk away.

Men like Bidithal.

Defeated but, Heboric suspected, not yet finished. For it is the Meanas temples of Seven Cities that most closely mimic this ruin in architectural style ... as if a direct descendant of this land's earliest cults ...

Within the Whirlwind, the cast-out Rashan'ais had found refuge. Further proof of his belief that the Whirlwind was but a fragment of a shattered warren, and that shattered warren was Shadow. And if that is indeed the case, what hidden purpose holds Bidithal to Sha'ik? Is he truly loyal to Dryjhna the Apocalyptic, to this holy conflagration in the name of liberty? Answers to such questions were long in coming, if at all. The unknown player, the unseen current beneath this rebellion – indeed, beneath the Malazan Empire itself – was the new ruler of Shadow and his deadly companion. Ammanas Shadowthrone, who was Kellanved – emperor of Malaz and conqueror of Seven Cities. Cotillion, who was Dancer – master of the Talon and the empire's deadliest assassin, deadlier even than Surly. Gods below, something breathes there ... I now wonder, whose war is this?

Distracted by such troubling thoughts as he made his way to Bidithal's abode, it was a moment before Heboric realized that his name had been called. Eyes straining to focus as he searched for the originator of that call, he was suddenly startled by a hand settling on his shoulder.

'My apologies, Ghost Hands, if I frightened you.'

'Ah, L'oric,' Heboric replied, finally recognizing the tall, white-robed figure standing beside him. 'These are not your usual haunts, are they?'

A slightly pained smile. 'I regret that my presence is seen as a haunting – unless of course your use of the word was unmindful.'

'Careless, you mean. It was. I have been in the company of Leoman, inadvertently breathing fumes of durhang. What I meant was, I rarely see you in these parts, that is all.'

'Thus explaining your perturbed expression,' L'oric murmured.

*Meeting you, the durhang or Leoman?* The tall mage – one of Sha'ik's three – was not by nature approachable, nor given to drama. Heboric had no idea which warren the man employed in his sorceries. Perhaps Sha'ik alone knew.

After a moment, the High Mage resumed, 'Your route suggests a visit to a certain resident here in the Circle. Further, I sense a storm of emotions stirring around you, which could lead one to surmise the impending encounter will prove tumultuous.'

'You mean we might argue, Bidithal and I,' Heboric growled. 'Well yes, that's damned likely.'

'I myself have but recently departed his company,' L'oric said. 'Perhaps a warning? He is much agitated over something, and so short of temper.'

'Perhaps it was something you said,' Heboric ventured.

'Entirely possible,' the mage conceded. 'And if so, then I apologize.'

'Fener's tusks, L'oric, what are you doing in this damned army of vipers?'

Again the pained smile, then a shrug. 'Mathok's tribes have among them women and men who dance with flare-necked vipers – such as are sometimes found where grasses grow deep. It is a complicated and obviously dangerous dance, yet one possessed of a certain charm. There are attractions to such exercise.'
'You enjoy taking risks, even with your life.'

'I might in turn ask why are you here, Heboric? Do you seek to return to your profession as historian, thus ensuring that the tale of Sha'ik and the Whirlwind will be told? Or are you indeed ensnared with loyalties to the noble cause of liberty? Surely, you cannot say you are both, can you?'

'I was a middling historian at best, L'oric,' Heboric muttered, reluctant to elaborate on his reasons for remaining – none of which had any real relevance, since Sha'ik was not likely to let him leave in any case.

'You are impatient with me. I will leave you to your task, then.' L'oric made a slight bow as he stepped back.

Watching the man walk away, Heboric stood motionless for a moment longer, then he resumed his journey. Bidithal was agitated, was he? An argument with L'oric, or something behind the veil? The High Mage's dwelling was before him now, the tent walls and peaked ceiling sun-faded and smoke-stained, a dusty smear of mottled magenta squatting above the thick foundation stones. Huddled just outside the flap entrance was a sunburned, filthy figure, mumbling in some foreign language, face hidden beneath long greasy strands of brown hair. The figure had no hands and no feet, the stumps showing old scar tissue yet still suppurating a milky yellow discharge. The man was using one of his wrist stumps to draw broad patterns in the thick dust, surrounding himself in linked chains, round and round, each pass obscuring what had been made before.

This one belongs to Toblakai. His master work – Sulgar? Silgar. The Nathii. The man was one of the many crippled, diseased and destitute inhabitants of the Circle of Temples. Heboric wondered what had drawn him to Bidithal's tent.

He arrived at the entrance. In tribal fashion, the flap was tied back, the customary expansive gesture of invitation, the message one of ingenuousness. As he ducked to step through, Silgar stirred, head snapping up.

'Brother of mine! I've seen you before, yes! Maimed – we are kin!' The language was a tangled mix of Nathii, Malazan and Ehrlii. The man's smile revealed a row of rotting teeth. 'Flesh and spirit, yes? We are, you and I, the only honest mortals here!'

'If you say so,' Heboric muttered, striding into Bidithal's home. Silgar's cackle followed him in.

No effort had been made to clean the sprawling chamber within. Bricks and rubble lay scattered across a floor of sand, broken mortar and potsherds. A half-dozen pieces of furniture were positioned here and there in the cavernous space. There was a large, low bed, wood-slatted and layered in thin mattresses. Four folding merchant chairs of the local three-legged kind faced onto the bed in a ragged row, as if Bidithal was in the habit of addressing an audience of acolytes or students. A dozen small oil lamps crowded the surface of a small table nearby.

The High Mage had his back to Heboric and most of the long chamber. A torch, fixed to a spear that had been thrust upright, its base mounded with stones and rubble, stood slightly behind Bidithal's left shoulder, casting the man's own shadow onto the tent wall.

A chill rippled through Heboric, for it seemed the High Mage was conversing in a language of gestures with his own shadow. Cast out in name only, perhaps. Still eager to play with Meanas. In the Whirlwind's name, or his own? 'High Mage,' the ex-priest called.

The ancient, withered man slowly turned. 'Come to me,' he rattled, 'I would experiment.'

'Not the most encouraging invitation, Bidithal.' But Heboric approached none the less. Bidithal waved impatiently. 'Closer! I would see if your ghostly hands cast shadows.'

Heboric halted, stepped back with a shake of his head. 'No doubt you would, but I wouldn't.'

'Come!'

'No.'
The dark wrinkled face twisted into a scowl, black eyes glittering. 'You are too eager to protect your secrets.'

'And you aren't?'

'I serve the Whirlwind. Nothing else is important—'

'Barring your appetites.'

The High Mage cocked his head, then made a small, almost effeminate wave with one hand. 'Mortal necessities. Even when I was Rashan'ais, we saw no imperative to turn away from the pleasures of the flesh. Indeed, the interweaving of the shadows possesses great power.'

'And so you raped Sha'ik when she was but a child. And scourged from her all future chance at such pleasures as you now espouse. I see little logic in that, Bidithal – only sickness.'

'My purposes are beyond your ability to comprehend, Ghost Hands,' the High Mage said with a smirk. 'You cannot wound me with such clumsy efforts.'

'I'd been given to understand you were agitated, discomfited.'

'Ah, L'oric. Another stupid man. He mistook excitement for agitation, but I will say no more of that. Not to you.'

'Allow me to be equally succinct, Bidithal.' Heboric stepped closer. 'If you even so much as look in Felisin's direction, these hands of mine will twist your head from your neck.'

'Felisin? Sha'ik's dearest? Do you truly believe she is a virgin? Before Sha'ik returned, the child was a waif, an orphan in the camp. None cared a whit about her—'

'None of which matters,' Heboric said.

The High Mage turned away. 'Whatever you say, Ghost Hands. Hood knows, there are plenty of others—'

'All now under Sha'ik's protection. Do you imagine she will permit such abuses from you?'

'You shall have to ask her that yourself,' Bidithal replied. 'Now leave me. You are guest no longer.'

Heboric hesitated, barely resisting an urge to kill the man now, this instant. Would it even be pre-emptive? Has he not as much as admitted to his crimes? But this was not a place of Malazan justice, was it? The only law that existed here was Sha'ik's. Nor will I be alone in this. Even Toblakai has vowed protection over Felisin. But what of the other children? Why does Sha'ik tolerate this, unless it is as Leoman has said. She needs Bidithal. Needs him to betray Febryl's plotting.

Yet what do I care for all of that? This . . . creature does not deserve to live.

'Contemplating murder?' Bidithal murmured, his back turned once more, his own shadow dancing on its own on the tent wall. 'You would not be the first, nor, I suspect, the last. I should warn you, however, this temple is newly resanctified. Take another step towards me, Ghost Hands, and you will see the power of that.'

'And you believe Sha'ik will permit you to kneel before Shadowthrone?'

The man whirled, his face black with rage. 'Shadowthrone? That . . . foreigner? The roots of Meanas are found in an elder warren! Once ruled by—' he snapped his mouth shut, then smiled, revealing dark teeth. 'Not for you. Oh no, not for you, ex-priest. There are purposes within the Whirlwind – your existence is tolerated but little more than that. Challenge me, Ghost Hands, and you will know holy wrath.'

Heboric's answering grin was hard. 'I've known it before, Bidithal. Yet I remain. Purposes? Perhaps mine is to block your path. I'd advise you to think on that.'

Stepping outside once more, he paused briefly, blinking in the harsh sunlight. Silgar was nowhere to be seen, yet he had completed an elaborate pattern in the dust around Heboric's moccasins. Chains, surrounding a figure
with stumps instead of hands ... yet footed. The ex-priest scowled, kicking through the image as he set forth.

Silgar was no artist. Heboric's own eyes were bad. Perhaps he'd seen only what his fears urged – it had been Silgar himself within the circle of chains the first time, after all. In any case, it was not important enough to make him turn back for a second look. Besides, his own steps had no doubt left it ruined.

None of which explained the chill that clung to him as he walked beneath the searing sun.

The vipers were writhing in their pit, and he was in their midst.

The old scars of ligature damage made his ankles and wrists resemble segmented tree trunks, each pinched width encircling his limbs to remind him of those times, of every shackle that had snapped shut, every chain that had held him down. In his dreams, the pain reared like a thing alive once more, weaving mesmerizing through a tumult of confused, distraught scenes.

The old Malazan with no hands and the shimmering, near solid tattoo had, despite his blindness, seen clearly enough, seen those trailing ghosts, the wind-moaning train of deaths that stalked him day and night now, loud enough in Toblakai's mind to drown out the voice of Urugal, close enough to obscure his god's stone visage behind veil after veil of mortal faces – each and every one twisted with the agony and fear that carved out the moment of dying. Yet the old man had not understood, not entirely. The children among those victims – children in terms of recently birthed, as the lowlanders used the word – had not all fallen to the bloodwood sword of Karsa Orlong. They were, one and all, the progeny that would never be, the bloodlines severed in the trophy-cluttered cavern of the Teblor's history.

Toblakai. A name of past glories, of a race of warriors who had stood alongside mortal Imass, alongside cold-miened Jaghut and demonic Forkrul Assail. A name by which Karsa Orlong was now known, as if he alone was the inheritor of elder dominators in a young, harsh world. Years ago, such a thought would have filled his chest with fierce, bloodthirsty pride. Now it racked him like a desert cough, weakened him deep in his bones. He saw what no-one else saw, that his new name was a title of polished, blinding irony.

The Teblor were long fallen from Thelomen Toblakai. Mirrored reflections in flesh only. Kneeling like fools before seven blunt-featured faces carved into a cliffside. Valley dwellers, where every horizon was almost within reach. Victims of brutal ignorance – for which no-one else could be blamed – entwined with deceit, for which Karsa Orlong would seek a final accounting.

He and his people had been wronged, and the warrior who now strode between the dusty white boles of a long-dead orchard would, one day, give answer to that.

But the enemy had so many faces . . .

Even alone, as he was now, he longed for solitude. But it was denied him. The rattle of chains was unceasing, the echoing cries of the slain endless. Even the mysterious but palpable power of Raraku offered no surcease – Raraku itself, not the Whirlwind, for Toblakai knew that the Whirlwind was like a child to the Holy Desert's ancient presence, and it touched him naught. Raraku had known many such storms, yet it weathered them as it did all things, with untethered skin of sand and the solid truth of stone. Raraku was its own secret, the hidden bedrock that held the warrior in this place. From Raraku, Karsa believed, he would find his own truth.

He had knelt before Sha'ik Reborn, all those months ago. The young woman with the Malazan accent who'd stumbled into view half carrying her tattooed, handless pet. Knelt, not in servitude, not from resurrected faith, but in relief. Relief, that the waiting had ended, that he would be able to drag Leoman away from that place of failure and death. They had seen Sha'ik Elder murdered while under their protection. A defeat that had gnawed at Karsa. Yet he could not deceive himself into believing that the new Chosen One was anything but a hapless victim that the insane Whirlwind Goddess had simply plucked from the wilderness, a mortal tool that would be used with merciless brutality. That she had proved a willing participant in her own impending destruction was equally pathetic in Karsa's eyes. Clearly, the scarred young woman had her own reasons, and seemed eager for the power.

Lead us, Warleader.
The words laughed bitterly through his thoughts as he wandered through the grove – the city almost a league to the east, the place where he now found himself a remnant outskirt of some other town. Warleaders needed such forces gathered around them, arrayed in desperate defence of self-delusion, of headlong singlemindedness. The Chosen One was more like Toblakai than she imagined, or, rather, a younger Toblakai, a Teblor commanding slayers – an army of two with which to deliver mayhem.

Sha'ilk Elder had been something else entirely. She had lived long through her haunting, her visions of Apocalypse that had tugged and jerked her bones ever onward as if they were string-tied sticks. And she had seen truths in Karsa's soul, had warned him of the horrors to come – not in specific terms, for like all seers she had been cursed with ambiguity – but sufficient to awaken within Karsa a certain ... watchfulness.

And, it seemed, he did little else these days but watch. As the madness that was the soul of the Whirlwind Goddess seeped out like poison in the blood to infect every leader among the rebellion. Rebellion ... oh, there was truth enough in that. But the enemy was not the Malazan Empire. It is sanity itself that they are rebelling against. Order. Honourable conduct. 'Rules of the common', as Leoman called them, even as his consciousness sank beneath the opaque fumes of durhang. Yes, I would well understand his flight, were I to believe what he would present to us all– the drifting layers of smoke in his pit, the sleepy look in his eyes, the slurred words . . . ah, but Leoman, I have never witnessed you actually partake of the drug. Only its apparent aftermath, the evidence scattered all about, and the descent into sleep that seems perfectly timed whenever you wish to close a conversation, end a certain discourse ...

Like him, Karsa suspected, Leoman was biding his time.

Raraku waited with them. Perhaps, for them. The Holy Desert possessed a gift, yet it was one that few had ever recognized, much less accepted. A gift that would arrive unseen, unnoticed at first, a gift too old to find shape in words, too formless to grasp in the hands as one would a sword.

Toblakai, once a warrior of forest-cloaked mountains, had grown to love this desert. The endless tones of fire painted on stone and sand, the bitter-needled plants and the countless creatures that crawled, slithered or scampered, or slipped through night-air on silent wings. He loved the hungry ferocity of these creatures, their dancing as prey and predator a perpetual cycle inscribed on the sand and beneath the rocks. And the desert in turn had reshaped Karsa, weathered his skin dark, stretched taut and lean his muscles, thinned his eyes to slits.

Leoman had told him much of this place, secrets that only a true inhabitant would know. The ring of ruined cities, harbours one and all, the old beach ridges with their natural barrows running for league upon league. Shells that had turned hard as stone and would sing low and mournful in the wind – Leoman had presented him with a gift of these, a vest of hide on which such shells had been affixed, armour that moaned in the endless, ever-dry winds. There were hidden springs in the wasteland, cairns and caves where an ancient sea-god had been worshipped. Remote basins that would, every few years, be stripped of sand to reveal long, high-prowed ships of petrified wood that was crowded with carvings – a long-dead fleet revealed beneath starlight only to be buried once more the following day. In other places, often behind the beach ridges, the forgotten mariners had placed cemeteries, using hollowed-out cedar trunks to hold their dead kin – all turned to stone, now, claimed by the implacable power of Raraku.

Layer upon countless layer, the secrets were unveiled by the winds. Sheer cliffs rising like ramps, in which the fossil skeletons of enormous creatures could be seen. The stumps of cleared forests, hinting of trees as large as any Karsa had known from his homeland. The columnar pilings of docks and piers, anchor-stones and the open cavities of tin mines, flint quarries and arrow-straight raised roads, trees that grew entirely underground, a mass of roots stretching out for leagues, from which the ironwood of Karsa's new sword had been carved – his bloodsword having cracked long ago.

Raraku had known Apocalypse first-hand, millennia past, and Toblakai wondered if it truly welcomed its return. Sha'ilk's goddess stalked the desert, her mindless rage the shriek of unceasing wind along its borders, but Karsa wondered at the Whirlwind's manifestation – just whose was it? Cold, disconnected rage, or a savage, unbridled argument?

Did the goddess war with the desert?
Whilst, far to the south in this treacherous land, the Malazan army prepared to march.

As he approached the heart of the grove – where a low altar of flatstones occupied a small clearing – he saw a slight, long-haired figure, seated on the altar as if it was no more than a bench in an abandoned garden. A book was in her lap, its cracked skin cover familiar to Toblakai's eyes.

She spoke without turning round. 'I have seen your tracks in this place, Toblakai.'

'And I yours, Chosen One.'

'I come here to wonder,' she said as he walked into view around the altar to stand facing her.

As do I.

'Can you guess what it is I wonder about?' she asked.

'No.'

The almost-faded pocks of bloodfly scars only showed themselves when she smiled. 'The gift of the goddess ...' the smile grew strained, 'offers only destruction.'

He glanced away, studied the nearby trees. 'This grove will resist in the way of Raraku,' he rumbled. 'It is stone. And stone holds fast.'

'For a while,' she muttered, her smile falling away. 'But there remains that within me that urges ... creation.'

'Have a baby.'

Her laugh was almost a yelp. 'Oh, you hulking fool, Toblakai. I should welcome your company more often.'

Then why do you choose not to?

She waved a small hand at the book in her lap. 'Dryjhna was an author who, to be gracious, lived with malnourished talent. There are naught but bones in this tome, I am afraid. Obsessed with the taking of life, the annihilation of order. Yet not once does he offer anything in its stead. There is no rebirth among the ashes of his vision, and that saddens me. Does it sadden you, Toblakai?'

He stared down at her for a long moment, then said, 'Come.'

Shrugging, she set the book down on the altar and rose, straightening the plain, worn, colourless telaba that hung loose over her curved body.

He led her into the rows of bone-white trees. She followed in silence.

Thirty paces, then another small clearing, this one ringed tight in thick, petrified boles. A squat, rectangular mason's chest sat in the skeletal shade cast down by the branches – which had remained intact down to the very twigs. Toblakai stepped to one side, studied her face as she stared in silence at his works-in-progress.

Before them, the trunks of two of the trees ringing the clearing had been reshaped beneath chisel and pick. Two warriors stared out with sightless eyes, one slightly shorter than Toblakai but far more robust, the other taller and thinner.

He saw that her breath had quickened, a slight flush on her cheeks. 'You have talent ... rough, but driven,' she murmured without pulling her eyes from their study. 'Do you intend to ring the entire clearing with such formidable warriors?'

'No. The others will be ... different.'

Her head turned at a sound. She stepped quickly closer to Karsa. 'A snake.'

He nodded. 'There will be more, coming from all sides. The clearing will be filled with snakes, should we choose to remain here.'
'Flare-necks.'

'And others. They won't bite or spit, however. They never do. They come ... to watch.'

She shot him a searching glance, then shivered slightly. 'What power manifests here? It is not the Whirlwind's—'

'No. Nor do I have a name for it. Perhaps the Holy Desert itself.'

She slowly shook her head to that. 'I think you are wrong. The power, I believe, is yours.'

He shrugged. 'We shall see, when I have done them all.'

'How many?'

'Besides Bairoth and Delum Thord? Seven.'

She frowned. 'One for each of the Holy Protectors?'

No. 'Perhaps. I have not decided. These two you see, they were my friends. Now dead.' He paused, then added, 'I had but two friends.'

She seemed to flinch slightly at that. 'What of Leoman? What of Mathok? What of... me?'

'I have no plans on carving your likenesses here.'

'That is not what I meant.'

I know. He gestured at the two Teblor warriors. 'Creation, Chosen One.'

'When I was young, I wrote poetry, in the path that my mother already walked. Did you know that?'

He smiled at the word 'young' but replied in all serious-ness, 'No, I did not.'

'I... I have resurrected the habit.'

'May it serve you well.'

She must have sensed something of the blood-slick edge underlying his statement, for her expression tightened. 'But that is never its purpose, is it. To serve. Or to yield satisfaction – self-satisfaction, I mean, since the other kind but follows as a returning ripple in a well—'

'Confusing the pattern.'

'As you say. It is far too easy to see you as a knot-browed barbarian, Toblakai. No, the drive to create is something other, isn't it? Have you an answer?'

He shrugged. 'If one exists, it will only be found in the search – and searching is at creation's heart, Chosen One.'

She stared at the statues once more. 'And what are you searching for? With these ... old friends?'

'I do not know. Yet.'

'Perhaps they will tell you, one day.'

The snakes surrounded them by the hundreds now, slithering unremarked by either over their feet, around their ankles, heads lifting again and again to flick tongues towards the carved trunks.

'Thank you, Toblakai,' Sha'ik murmured. 'I am humbled ... and revived.'

'There is trouble in your city, Chosen One.'
She nodded. ‘I know.’

‘Are you the calm at its heart?’

A bitter smile twisted her lips as she turned away. ‘Will these serpents permit us to leave?’

‘Of course. But do not step. Instead, shuffle. Slowly. They will open for you a path.’

‘I should be alarmed by all this,’ she said as she edged back on their path.

*But it is the least of your worries, Chosen One.* ‘I will keep you apprised of developments, if you wish.’

‘Thank you, yes.’

He watched her make her way out of the clearing. There were vows wrapped tight around Toblakai’s soul. Slowly constricting. Some time soon, something would break. He knew not which, but if Leoman had taught him one thing, it was patience.

When she was gone, the warrior swung about and approached the mason’s chest.

Dust on the hands, a ghostly patina, tinted faintly pink by the raging red storm encircling the world.

The heat of the day was but an illusion in Raraku. With the descent of darkness, the desert’s dead bones quickly cast off the sun’s shimmering, fevered breath. The wind grew chill and the sands erupted with crawling, buzzing life, like vermin emerging from a corpse. Rhizan flitted in a frenzied wild hunt through the clouds of capemoths and chigger fleas above the tent city sprawled in the ruins. In the distance desert wolves howled as if hunted by ghosts.

Heboric lived in a modest tent raised around a ring of stones that had once provided the foundation for a granary. His abode was situated well away from the settlement’s centre, surrounded by the yurts of one of Mathok’s desert tribes. Old rugs covered the floor. Off to one side a small table of piled bricks held a brazier, sufficient for cooking if not warmth. A cask of well-water stood nearby, flavoured with amber wine. A half-dozen flickering oil lamps suffused the interior with yellow light.

He sat alone, the pungent aroma of the hen’bara tea sweet in the cooling air. Outside, the sounds of the settling tribe offered a comforting background, close enough and chaotic enough to keep scattered and random his thoughts. Only later, when sleep claimed all those around him, would the relentless assault begin, the vertiginous visions of a face of jade, so massive it challenged comprehension. Power both alien and earthly, as if born of a natural force never meant to be altered. Yet altered it had been, shaped, cursed sentient. A giant buried in otataral, held motionless in an eternal prison.

Who could now touch the world beyond, with the ghosts of two human hands – hands that had been claimed then abandoned by a god.

*But was it Fener who abandoned me, or did I abandon Fener? Which of us, I wonder, is more . . . exposed?*

This camp, this war – this *desert* – all had conspired to ease the shame of his hiding. Yet one day, Heboric knew, he would have to return to that dreaded wasteland from his past, to the island where the stone giant waited. Return. *But to what end?*

He had always believed that Fener had taken his severed hands into keeping, to await the harsh justice that was the Tusked One’s right. A fate that Heboric had accepted, as best he could. But it seemed there was to be no end to the betrayals a single once-priest could commit against his god. Fener had been dragged from his realm, left abandoned and trapped on this world. Heboric’s severed hands had found a new master, a master possessed of such immense power that it could war with otataral itself. Yet it did not belong. The giant of jade, Heboric now believed, was an intruder, sent here from another realm for some hidden purpose.

And, instead of completing that purpose, someone had imprisoned it.
He sipped at his tea, praying that its narcotic would prove sufficient to deaden the sleep to come. It was losing its potency, or, rather, he was becoming inured to its effects.

The face of stone beckoned.

The face that was trying to speak.

There was a scratching at the tent flap, then it was pulled aside.

Felisin entered. 'Ah, still awake. Good, that will make this easier. My mother wants you.'

'Now?'

'Yes. There have been events in the world beyond. Consequences to be discussed. Mother seeks your wisdom.'

Heboric cast a mournful glance at the clay cup of steaming tea in his invisible hands. It was little more than flavoured water when cold. 'I am uninterested in events in the world beyond. If she seeks wise words from me, she will be disappointed.'

'So I argued,' Felisin Younger said, an amused glint in her eyes. 'Sha'ik insists.'

She helped him don a cloak then led him outside, one of her hands light as a capemoth on his back.

The night was bitter cold, tasting of settling dust. They set out along the twisting alleyways between the yurts, walking in silence.

They passed the raised dais where Sha'ik Reborn had first addressed the mob, then through the crumbled gateposts leading to the huge, multi-chambered tent that was the Chosen One's palace. There were no guards as such, for the goddess's presence was palpable, a pressure in the chill air.

There was little warmth in the first room beyond the tent flap, but with each successive curtain that they parted and stepped through, the temperature rose. The palace was a maze of such insulating chambers, most of them empty of furniture, offering little in the way of distinguishing one from another. An assassin who proceeded this far, somehow avoiding the attention of the goddess, would quickly get lost. The approach to where Sha'ik resided followed its own torturous, winding route. Her chambers were not central, not at the heart of the palace as one might expect.

With his poor vision and the endless turns and twists, Heboric was quickly confused; he had never determined the precise location of their destination. He was reminded of the escape from the mines, the arduous journey to the island's west coast – it had been Baudin in the lead, Baudin whose sense of direction had proved unerring, almost uncanny. Without him, Heboric and Felisin would have died.

A Talon, no less. Ah, Tavore, you were not wrong to place your faith in him. It was Felisin who would not co-operate. You should have anticipated that. Well, sister, you should have anticipated a lot of things . . .

But not this.

They entered the square, low-ceilinged expanse that the Chosen One – Felisin Elder, child of the House of Paran – had called her Throne Room. And indeed there was a dais, once the pedestal for a hearth, on which was a tall-backed chair of sun-bleached wood and padding. In councils such as these, Sha'ik invariably positioned herself in that makeshift throne; nor would she leave it while her advisers were present, not even to peruse the yellowed maps the commanders were wont to lay out on the hide-covered floor. Apart from Felisin Younger, the Chosen One was the smallest person there.

Heboric wondered if Sha'ik Elder had suffered similar insecurities. He doubted it.

The room was crowded; among the army's leaders and Sha'ik's select, only Leoman and Toblakai were absent. There were no other chairs, although cushions and pillows rested against the base of three of the four tent walls, and it was on these that the commanders sat. Felisin at his side, Heboric made his way to the far
side, Sha’ik’s left, and took his place a few short paces from the dais, the young girl settling down beside him.

Some permanent sorcery illuminated the chamber, the light somehow warming the air as well. Everyone else was in their allotted place, Heboric noted. Though they were little more than blurs in his eyes, he knew them all well enough. Against the wall opposite the throne sat the half-blood Napan, Korbolo Dom, shaved hairless, his dusty blue skin latticed in scars. On his right, the High Mage Kamist Reloe, gaunt to the point of skeletal, his grey hair cut short to stubble, a tight-curled iron beard reaching up to prominent cheekbones above which glittered sunken eyes. On Korbolo’s left sat Henaras, a witch from some desert tribe that had, for unknown reasons, banished her. Sorcery kept her youthful in appearance, the heavy languor in her dark eyes the product of diluted Tralb, a poison drawn from a local snake, which she imbibed to inure her against assassination. Beside her was Fayelle, an obese, perpetually nervous woman of whom Heboric knew little.

Along the wall opposite the ex-priest were L’oric, Bidithal and Febryl, the latter shapeless beneath an oversized silk telaba, its hood opened wide like the neck of a desert snake, tiny black eyes glittering out from its shadow. Beneath those eyes gleamed twin fangs of gold, capping his upper canines. They were said to hold Emulor, a poison rendered from a certain cactus that gifted not death, but permanent dementia.

The last commander present was on Felisin’s left. Mathok. Beloved of the desert tribes, the tall, black-skinned warrior possessed an inherent nobility, but it was the kind that seemed to irritate everyone around him, barring perhaps Leoman who appeared to be indifferent to the war chief’s grating personality. There was, in fact, little to give cause to the dislike, for Mathok was ever courteous, even congenial, quick to smile – perhaps too quick at that, as if the man dismissed everyone as not worth taking seriously. With the exception of the Chosen One, of course.

As Heboric settled, Sha’ik murmured, ‘Are you with us this evening, Ghost Hands?’

‘Well enough,’ he replied.

An undercurrent of tense excitement was in her voice, ‘You had better be, old man. There have been ... startling developments. Distant catastrophes have rocked the Malazan Empire ...’

‘How long ago?’ Heboric asked.

Sha’ik frowned at the odd question, but Heboric did not elaborate. ‘Less than a week. The warrens have been shaken, one and all, as if by an earthquake. Sympathizers of the rebellion remain in Dujek Onearm’s army, delivering to us the details.’ She gestured to L’oric. ‘I’ve no wish to talk all night. Elaborate on the events, L’oric, for the benefit of Korbolo, Heboric, and whoever else knows nothing of all that has occurred.’

The man tilted his head. ‘Delighted to, Chosen One. Those of you who employ warrens will no doubt have felt the repercussions, the brutal reshaping of the pantheon. But what specifically happened? The first answer, simply, is usurpation. Fener, Boar of Summer, has, to all intents and purposes, been ousted as the pre-eminent god of war.’ He was merciful enough to not glance at Heboric. ‘In his place, the once First Hero, Treach. The Tiger of Summer—’

Ousted. The fault is mine and mine alone.

L’oric would have continued, but Korbolo Dom interrupted the High Mage. ‘And what is the significance of that to us? War needs no gods, only mortal contestants, two enemies and whatever reasons they invent in order to justify killing each other.’ He paused, smiling at L’oric, then shrugged. ‘All of which satisfies me well enough.’

His words had pulled Sha’ik’s gaze from Heboric. An eyebrow rising, she addressed the Napan. ‘And what are your reasons, specifically, Korbolo Dom?’

‘I like killing people. It is the one thing I am very good at.’

‘Would that be people in general?’ Heboric asked him. ‘Or perhaps you meant the enemies of the
There was a moment of general unease, then L'oric cleared his throat and said, 'The usurpation, Korbolo Dom, is the one detail that a number of mages present may already know. I would lead us, gently, towards the less well known developments on far-away Genabackis. Now, to continue. The pantheon was shaken yet again – by the sudden, unexpected taking of the Beast Throne by Togg and Fanderay, the mated Elder Wolves that had seemed eternally cursed to never find each other – riven apart as they were by the Fall of the Crippled God. The full effect of this reawakening of the ancient Hold of the Beast is yet to be realized. All I would suggest, personally, is to those Soletaken and D'ivers among us: 'ware the new occupants of the Beast Throne. They may well come to you, eventually, to demand that you kneel before them.' He smiled. 'Alas, all those poor fools who followed the Path of the Hand. The game was won far, far away—'

'We were the victims,' Fayelle murmured, 'of deception. By minions of Shadowthrone, no less, for which there will one day be a reckoning.'

Bidithal smiled at her words, but said nothing.

L'oric's shrug affected indifference. 'As to that, Fayelle, my tale is far from done. Allow me, if you will, to shift to mundane – though if anything even more important – events. A very disturbing alliance had been forged on Genabackis, to deal with a mysterious threat called the Pannion Domin. Onearm's Host established an accord with Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake. Supplied by the supremely wealthy city of Darujhistan, the joined armies marched off to wage war against the Domin. We were, truth be told, relieved by this event from a short-term perspective, though we recognized that in the long term such an alliance was potentially catastrophic to the cause of the rebellion here in Seven Cities. Peace on Genabackis would, after all, free Dujek and his army, leaving us with the potential nightmare of Tavore approaching from the south, and Dujek and his ten thousand disembarking at Ehlritan then marching down from the north.'

'An unpleasant thought,' Korbolo Dom growled. 'Tavore alone will not cause us much difficulty. But the High Fist and his ten thousand ... that's another matter. Granted, most of the soldiers are from Seven Cities, but I would not cast knuckles on the hope that they would switch sides. Dujek owns them body and soul—'

'Barring a few spies,' Sha'ik said, her voice strangely flat.

'None of whom would have contacted us,' L'oric said, 'had things turned out... differently.'

'A moment, please,' young Felisin cut in. 'I thought that Onearm and his host had been outlawed by the Empress.'

'Thus permitting him to forge the alliance with Brood and Rake,' L'oric explained. 'A convenient and temporary ploy, lass.'

'We don't want Dujek on our shores,' Korbolo Dom said. 'Bridgeburners. Whiskeyjack, Quick Ben, Kalam, Black Moranth and their damned munitions—'

'Permit me to ease your pattering heart, Commander,' L'oric murmured. 'We shall not see Dujek. Not anytime soon, at any rate. The Pannion War proved ... devastating. The ten thousand lost close to seven thousand of their number. The Black Moranth were similarly mauled. Oh, they won, in the end, but at such a cost. The Bridgeburners ... gone. Whiskeyjack ... dead.'

Heboric slowly straightened. The room was suddenly cold.

'And Dujek himself,' L'oric went on, 'a broken man. Is this news pleasing enough? There is this: the scourge that is the T'lan Imass is no more. They have departed, one and all. No more will their terrors be visited upon the innocent citizens of Seven Cities. Thus,' he concluded, 'what has the Empress left? Adjunct Tavore. An extraordinary year for the empire. Coltaine and the Seventh, the Aren Legion, Whiskeyjack, the Bridgeburners, Onearm's Host – we will be hard-pressed to best that.'

'But we shall,' Korbolo Dom laughed, both hands closed into pale-knuckled fists. 'Whiskeyjack! Dead! Ah,
blessings to Hood this night! I shall make sacrifice before his altar! And Dujek – oh, his spirit will have been broken indeed. Crushed!'

'Enough gloating,' Heboric growled, sickened.

Kamist Reloe was leaning far forward, 'L'oric!' he hissed. 'What of Quick Ben?'

'He lives, alas. Kalam did not accompany the army – no-one knows where he has gone. There were but a handful of survivors from the Bridgeburners, and Dujek disbanded them and had them listed as casualties—'

'Who lived?' Kamist demanded.

L'oric frowned. 'A handful, as I said. Is it important?'

'Yes!'

'Very well.' L'oric glanced over at Sha'ik. 'Chosen One, do you permit me to make contact once more with my servant in that distant army? It will be but a few moments.'

She shrugged. 'Proceed.' Then, as L'oric lowered his head, she slowly leaned back in her chair. 'Thus. Our enemy has faced irreparable defeat. The Empress and her dear empire reel from the final gush of life-blood. It falls to us, then, to deliver the killing blow.'

Heboric suspected he was the only one present who heard the hollowness of her words.

*Sister Tavore stands alone, now.*

*And alone is what she prefers. Alone is the state in which she thrives. Ah, lass, you would pretend to excitement at this news, yet it has achieved the very opposite for you, hasn't it. Your fear of sister Tavore has only deepened.*

*Freezing you in place.*

L'oric began speaking without raising his head. 'Blend. Toes. Mallet. Spindle. Sergeant Antsy. Lieutenant Picker ... Captain Paran.'

There was a thump from the high-backed chair as Sha'ik's head snapped back. All colour had left her face, the only detail Heboric could detect with his poor eyes, but he knew the shock that would be written on those features. A shock that rippled through him as well, though it was but the shock of recognition – not of what it portended for this young woman seated on this throne.

Unmindful, L'oric continued, 'Quick Ben has been made High Mage. It is believed the surviving Bridgeburners departed by warren to Darujhistan, though my spy is in fact uncertain of that. Whiskeyjack and the fallen Bridgeburners ... were interred ... in Moon's Spawn, which has – gods below! Abandoned! The Son of Darkness has abandoned Moon's Spawn!' He seemed to shiver then, and slowly looked up, blinking rapidly. A deep breath, loosed raggedly. 'Whiskeyjack was killed by one of Brood's commanders. Betrayal, it seemed, plagued the alliance.'

'Of course it did,' Korbolo Dom sneered.

'We must consider Quick Ben,' Kamist Reloe said, his hands wringing together incessantly on his lap. 'Will Tayschrenn send him to Tavore? What of the remaining three thousand of Onearm's Host? Even if Dujek does not lead them—'

'They are broken in spirit,' L'oric said. 'Hence, the wavering souls among them who sought me out.'

'And where is Kalam Mekhar?' Kamist hissed, inadvertently glancing over his shoulder then starting at his own shadow on the wall.

'Kalam Mekhar is nothing without Quick Ben,' Korbolo Dom sneered. 'Even less now that his beloved Whiskeyjack is dead.'
Kamist rounded on his companion. 'And what if Quick Ben is reunited with that damned assassin? What then?'

The Napan shrugged. 'We didn't kill Whiskeyjack. Their minds will be filled with vengeance for the slayer among Brood's entourage. Do not fear what will never come to pass, old friend.'

Sha'ik's voice rang startlingly through the room. 'Everyone out but Heboric! Now!'

Blank looks, then the others rose.

Felisin Younger hesitated. 'Mother?'

'You as well, child. Out.'

'L'oric said, 'There is the matter of the new House and all it signifies, Chosen—'

'Tomorrow night. We will resume the discussion then. Out!'

A short while later Heboric sat alone with Sha'ik. She stared down at him in silence for some time, then rose suddenly and stepped down from the dais. She fell to her knees in front of Heboric, sufficiently close for him to focus on her face. It was wet with tears.

'My brother lives!' she sobbed.

And suddenly she was in his arms, face pressed against his shoulders as shudders heaved through her small, fragile frame.

Stunned, Heboric remained silent.

She wept for a long, long time, and he held her tight, unmoving, as solid as he could manage. And each time the vision of his fallen god rose before his mind's eye, he ruthlessly drove it back down. The child in his arms – for child she was, once more – cried in nothing other than the throes of salvation. She was no longer alone, no longer alone with only her hated sister to taint the family's blood.

For that – for the need his presence answered – his own grief would wait.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Among the untried recruits of the Fourteenth Army, fully half originated from the continent of Quon Tali, the very centre of the empire. Young and idealistic, they stepped onto blood-soaked ground, in the wake of the sacrifices made by their fathers and mothers, their grandfathers and grandmothers. It is the horror of war that, with each newly arrived generation, the nightmare is reprised by innocents.

The Sha'ik Rebellion, Illusions of Victory
Imrygyn Tallobant

Adjunct Tavore stood alone in front of four thousand milling, jostling soldiers, while officers bellowed and screamed through the press, their voices hoarse with desperation. Pikes wavered and flashed blinding glares through the dusty air of the parade ground like startled birds of steel. The sun was a raging fire overhead.

Fist Gamet stood twenty paces behind her, tears in his eyes as he stared at Tavore. A pernicious wind was sweeping the dust cloud directly towards the Adjunct. In moments she was engulfed. Yet she made no move, her back straight, her gloved hands at her sides.

No commander could be more alone than she was now. Alone, and helpless.

And worse. This is my legion. The 8th. The first to assemble, Bern fend us all.

But she had ordered that he remain where he was, if only to spare him the humiliation of trying to impose some kind of order on his troops. She had, instead, taken that humiliation upon herself. And Gamet wept for her, unable to hide his shame and grief.

Aren's parade ground was a vast expanse of hard-packed, almost white earth. Six thousand fully armoured soldiers could stand arrayed in ranks with sufficient avenues between the companies for officers to conduct their review. The Fourteenth Army was to assemble before the scrutiny of Adjunct Tavore in three phases, a legion at a time. Gamet's 8th had arrived in a ragged, dissolving mob over two bells past, every lesson from every drill sergeant lost, the few veteran officers and non-coms locked in a titanic struggle with a four-thousand-headed beast that had forgotten what it was.

Gamet saw Captain Keneb, whom Blistig had graciously given him to command the 9th Company, battering at soldiers with the flat of his blade, forcing them into a line that broke up in his wake as other soldiers pressed forward from behind. There were some old soldiers in that front row, trying to dig in their heels – sergeants and corporals, red-faced with sweat streaming from beneath their helms.

Fifteen paces behind Gamet waited the other two Fists, as well as the Wickan scouts under the command of Temul. Nil and Nether were there as well, although, mercifully, Admiral Nok was not – for the fleet had sailed.

Impulses at war within him, Gamet trembled, wanting to be elsewhere – anywhere – and wanting to drag the Adjunct with him. Failing that, wanting to step forward, defying her direct order, to take position at her side.

Someone came alongside him. A heavy leather sack thumped into the dust, and Gamet turned to see a squat soldier, blunt-featured beneath a leather cap, wearing barely half of a marine's standard issue of armour – a random collection of boiled leather fittings – over a threadbare, stained uniform, the magenta dye so faded as to be mauve. No insignia was present. The man's scarred, pitted face stared impassively at the seething mob.

Gamet swung further round to see an additional dozen decrepit men and women, each standing an arm's reach from the one in front, wearing unrepaired, piecemeal armour and carrying an assortment of weapons – few of which were Malazan.

The Fist addressed the man in the lead. 'And who in Hood's name are you people?'
'Sorry we was late,' the soldier grunted. 'Then again,' he added, 'I could be lying.'

'Late? Which squads? What companies?'

The man shrugged. 'This and that. We was in Aren gaol. Why was we there? This and that. But now we're here, sir. You want these children quelled?'

'If you can manage that, soldier, I'll give you a command of your own.'

'No you won't. I killed an Untan noble here in Aren. Name of Lenestro. Snapped his neck with these two hands.'

Through the clouds of dust before them, a sergeant had clawed free of the mob and was approaching Adjunct Tavore. For a moment Gamet was terrified that he would, insanely, cut her down right there, but the man sheathed his short-sword as he drew up before her. Words were exchanged.

The Fist made a decision. 'Come with me, soldier.'

'Aye, sir.' The man reached down and collected his kit bag.

Gamet led him to where Tavore and the sergeant stood. An odd thing happened then. There was a grunt from the veteran at the Fist's side, even as the wiry, red-and-grey-bearded sergeant's eyes flickered past the Adjunct and fixed on the soldier. A sudden broad grin, then a quick succession of gestures — a hand lifting, as if holding an invisible rock or ball, then the hand flipping, index finger inscribing a circle, followed by a jerk of the thumb towards the east, concluded with a shrug. In answer to all this, the soldier from the gaol gave his kit bag a shake.

The sergeant's blue eyes widened.

They arrived, coming alongside the Adjunct, who swung a blank gaze on Gamet.

'Your pardon, Adjunct,' the Fist said, and would have added more, but Tavore raised a hand and made to speak.

She didn't get a chance.

The soldier at Gamet's side spoke to the sergeant. 'Draw us a line, will ya?'

'I'll do just that.'

The sergeant pivoted and returned to the heaving ranks.

Tavore's eyes had snapped to the soldier, but she said nothing, for the man had set his bag down, drawn back its flap, and was rummaging inside it.

Five paces in front of the legion's uneven ranks, the sergeant once more drew his sword, then drove its blunt tip into the dust and set off, inscribing a sharp furrow in the ground.

*Draw us a line, will ya?*

The soldier crouched over his kit bag looked up suddenly. 'You two still here? Go back to them Wickans, then all of you pull back another thirty, forty paces. Oh, and get them Wickans off their horses and a tight grip on the reins, and all of ya, take for yourselves a wide stance. Then when I give the signal, plug your ears.'

Gamet flinched as the man began withdrawing a succession of clay balls from his bag. *The bag . . . that thumped down beside me not fifty heartbeats ago. Hood's breath!*

'What is your name, soldier?' Adjunct Tavore rasped.

'Cuttle. Now, better get moving, lass.'

Gamet reached out and touched her shoulder. 'Adjunct, those are—'
'I know what they are,' she snapped. 'And this man's liable to kill fifty of my soldiers—'

'Right now, lady,' Cuttle growled as he drew out a folding shovel, 'you ain't got any. Now take it from me, that otataral blade at your comely hip ain't gonna help you one bit if you decide to stand here. Pull 'em all back, and leave the rest to me and the sergeant.'

'Adjunct,' Gamet said, unable to keep the pleading from his tone.

She shot him a glare, then wheeled. 'Let us be about it, then, Fist.'

He let her take the lead, paused after a few paces to glance back. The sergeant had rejoined Cuttle, who had managed to dig a small hole in what seemed an absurdly short time.

'Cobbles down there!' The sergeant nodded. 'Perfect!'

'About what I figured,' Cuttle replied. 'I'll angle these crackers, with the cusser a hand's width deeper—'

'Perfect. I'd have done the same if I'd thought to bring some with me—'

'You supplied?'

'Well enough.'

'What I got here in my bag are the last.'

'I can mend that, Cuttle.'

'For that, Fid—'

'Strings.'

'For that, Strings, you've earned a kiss.'

'I can't wait.'

Gamet pulled himself away with a shake of his head. *Sappers.*

The explosion was a double thump that shook the earth, cobbles punching free of the overburden of dust – which had leapt skyward – to clack and clash in a maelstrom of stone chips and slivers. Fully a third of the legion were thrown from their feet, taking down others with them.

Astonishingly, none seemed fatally injured, as if Cuttle had somehow directed the force of the detonation downward and out under the cobbles.

As the last rubble pattered down, Adjunct Tavore and Gamet moved forward once again.

Facing the silenced mob, Cuttle stood with a sharper held high in one hand. In a bellowing voice, he addressed the recruits. 'Next soldier who moves gets this at his feet, and if you think my aim ain't any good, try me! Now, sergeants and corporals! Up nice and slow now. Find your squads. You up here in front, Sergeant Strings here has drawn us a tidy nice line – all right, so it's a bit messy right now so he's drawing it again – walk up to it easy like, toes a finger's width away from it, boots square! We're gonna do this right, or people are going to *die.*'

Sergeant Strings was moving along the front line now, ensuring the line was held, spreading soldiers out. Officers were shouting once more, though not as loud as before, since the recruits remained silent. Slowly, the legion began taking shape.

Those recruits were indeed silent, and ... watchful, Gamet noted as he and the Adjunct returned to close to their original position – the gaping, smoking crater off to one side. Watchful ... of the madman with the sharper held high above his head. After a moment, the Fist moved up to stand beside Cuttle.
'You killed a nobleman?' he asked in a low voice, studying the assembling ranks.

'Aye, Fist. I did.'

'Was he on the Chain of Dogs?'

'He was.'

'As were you, Cuttle.'

'Until I took a spear through a shoulder. Went with the others on the Silanda. Missed the final argument, I did. Lenestro was ... second best. I wanted Pullyk Alar to start, but Alar's run off with Mallick Rel. I want both of them, Fist. Maybe they think the argument's over, but not for me.'

'I'd be pleased if you took me up on that offer of command,' Gamet said.

'No thanks, sir. I'm already assigned to a squad. Sergeant Strings's squad, in fact. Suits me fine.'

'Where do you know him from?'

Cuttle glanced over, his eyes thinned to slits. Expressionless, he said, 'Never met him before today, sir. Now, if you'll excuse me, I owe him a kiss.'

Less than a quarter-bell later, Fist Gamet's 8th Legion stood motionless in tight, even ranks. Adjunct Tavore studied them from where she stood at Gamet's side, but had yet to speak. Cuttle and Sergeant Strings had rejoined the 9th Company's 4th squad.

Tavore seemed to reach some decision. A gesture behind her brought Fists Tene Baralta and Blistig forward. Moments later they came up alongside Gamet and halted. The Adjunct's unremarkable eyes fixed on Blistig. 'Your legion waits in the main avenue beyond?'

The red-faced man nodded. 'Melting in the heat, Adjunct. But that cusser going off settled them down.'

Her gaze shifted to the Red Blade. 'Fist Baralta?'

'Calmed, Adjunct.'

'When I dismiss the 8th and they depart the parade ground, I suggest the remaining soldiers enter by company. Each company will then take position and when they are ready the next one follows. It may take longer, but at the very least we will not have a repetition of the chaos we have just witnessed. Fist Gamet, are you satisfied with the assemblage of your troops?'

'Well enough, Adjunct.'

'As am I. You may now—'

She got no further, seeing that the attention of the three men standing before her had slipped past, over her shoulder; and from the four thousand soldiers standing at attention, there was sudden, absolute silence – not a rustle of armour, not a cough. For the 8th had drawn a single breath, and now held it.

Gamet struggled to maintain his expression, even as Tavore raised an eyebrow at him. Then she slowly turned.

The toddler had come from nowhere, unseen by any until he arrived to stand in the very spot where the Adjunct had first stood, his oversized rust-red telaba trailing like a royal train. Blond hair a tangled shock above a deeply tanned, cherubic face smeared with dirt, the child faced the ranks of soldiers with an air of unperturbed calculation.

A strangled cough from among the soldiers, then someone stepped forward.
Even as the man emerged from the front line, the toddler's eyes found him. Both arms, buried in sleeves, reached out. Then one sleeve slipped back, revealing the tiny hand, and in that hand there was a bone. A human longbone. The man froze in mid-step.

The air above the parade ground seemed to hiss like a thing alive with the gasps of four thousand soldiers.

Gamet fought down a shiver, then spoke to the man. 'Captain Keneb,' he said loudly, struggling to swallow a welling dread, 'I suggest you collect your lad. Now, before he, uh, starts screaming.'

Face flushed, Keneb threw a shaky salute then strode forward.

'Neb!' the toddler shouted as the captain gathered him up.

Adjunct Tavore snapped, 'Follow me!' to Gamet, then walked to the pair. 'Captain Keneb, is it?'

'Your p-pardon, Adjunct. The lad has a nurse but seems determined to slip through her grasp at every opportunity – there's a blown graveyard behind the—'

'Is he yours, Captain?' Tavore demanded, her tone brittle.

'As good as, Adjunct. An orphan from the Chain of Dogs. The historian Duiker placed him into my care.'

'Has he a name?'

'Grub.'

'Grub?'

Keneb's shrug was apologetic. 'For now, Adjunct. It well suits him—'

'And the 8th. Yes, I see that. Deliver him to your hired nurse, Captain. Then, tomorrow, fire her and hire a better one ... or three. Will the child accompany the army?'

'He has no-one else, Adjunct. There will be other families among the camp followers—'

'I am aware of that. Be on your way, Captain Keneb.'

'I – I am sorry, Adjunct—'

But she was already turning away, and only Gamet heard her sigh and murmur, 'It is far too late for that.'

And she was right. Soldiers – even recruits – recognized an omen when it arrived. A child in the very boot prints of the woman who would lead this army. Raising high a sun-bleached thigh bone.

Gods below ...

'Hood's balls skewered on a spit.'

The curse was spoken as a low growl, in tones of disgust.

Strings watched Cuttle set his bag down and slide it beneath the low flatboard bed. The stable that had been transformed into a makeshift barracks held eight squads now, the cramped confines reeking of fresh sweat ... and stark terror. At the back wall's urine hole someone was being sick.

'Let's head outside, Cuttle,' Strings said after a moment. 'I'll collect Gesler and Borduke.'

'I'd rather go get drunk,' the sapper muttered.

'Later, we'll do just that. But first, we need to have a small meeting.'

Still the other man hesitated.
Strings rose from his cot and stepped close. 'Aye, it's that important.'

'All right. Lead on ... Strings.'

As it turned out, Stormy joined the group of veterans that pushed silently past ashen-faced recruits – many of them with closed eyes and mouthing silent prayers – and headed out into the courtyard.

It was deserted, Lieutenant Ranal – who had proved pathetically ineffective at the assembly – having fled into the main house the moment the troop arrived.

All eyes were on Strings. He in turn studied the array of grim expressions around him. There was no doubt among them concerning the meaning of the omen, and Strings was inclined to agree. A child leads us to our deaths. A leg bone to signify our march, withered under the curse of the desert sun. We've all lived too long, seen too much, to deceive ourselves of this one brutal truth: this army of recruits now see themselves as already dead.

Stormy's battered, red-bearded face finally twisted into an expression too bitter to be wry. 'If you're going to say that us here have a hope at Hood's gate in fighting the tide, Strings, you've lost your mind. The lads and lasses in there ain't unique – the whole damned three legions—'

'I know,' Strings cut in. 'We ain't none of us stupid. Now, all I'm asking is for a spell of me talking. Me talking. No interruptions. I'll tell you when I'm done. Agreed?'

Borduke turned his head and spat. 'You're a Hood-damned Bridgeburner.'

'Was. Got a problem with that?'

The sergeant of the 6th squad grinned. 'What I meant by that, Strings, is that for you I'll listen. As you ask.'

'Same with us,' Gesler muttered, Stormy nodding agreement at his side.

Strings faced Cuttle. 'And you?'

'Only because it's you and not Hedge, Fiddler. Sorry. Strings.'

Borduke's eyes widened in recognition of the name. He spat a second time.

'Thank you.'

'Don't thank us yet,' Cuttle said, but took the edge off with a slight smile.

'All right, I'll start with a story. Has to do with Nok, the admiral, though he wasn't an admiral back then, just the commander of six dromons. I'd be surprised if any of you have heard this story but if you have don't say nothing – but its relevance here should have occurred to you already. Six dromons. On their way to meet the Kartool fleet, three pirate galleys, which had each been blessed by the island's priests of D'rek. The Worm of Autumn. Yes, you all know D'rek's other name, but I said it for emphasis. In any case, Nok's fleet had stopped at the Napan Isles, went up the mouth of Koolibor River to drag barrels – drawing fresh water. What every ship did when heading out to Kartool or beyond on the Reach. Six ships, each drawing water, storing the barrels below decks.

'Half a day out of the Napan Isles, the first barrel was broached, by a cook's helper, on the flagship. And straight out through the hole came a snake. A paralt, up the lad's arm. Sank both fangs into his left eye. Screaming, he ran out on deck, the snake with its jaws wide and holding tight, writhing around. Well, the lad managed two steps before he died, then he went down, already white as a sun-bleached yard. The snake was killed, but as you can imagine, it was too late.

'Nok, being young, just shrugged the whole event off, and when word spread and sailors and marines started dying of thirst – in ships loaded with barrels of fresh water that no-one would dare open – he went and did the obvious thing. Brought up another barrel. Breached it with his own hands.' Strings paused. He could see that no-one else knew the tale. Could see that he had their attention.
'The damned barrel was full of snakes. Spilling out onto the deck. A damned miracle Nok wasn't bitten. It was just starting dry season, you see. The paralts' season in the river was ending. The waters fill with them as they head down to the river mouth on their way out to sea. Every single barrel on those six dromons held snakes.

'The fleet never closed to do battle with the Kartoolians. By the time it made it back to Nap, half of the complement was dead of thirst. All six ships were holed outside the harbour, packed with offerings to D'rek, the Worm of Autumn, and sent to the deep. Nok had to wait until the next year to shatter Kartool's paltry fleet. Two months after that, the island was conquered.' He fell silent for a moment, then shook his head. 'No, I'm not finished. That was a story, a story of how to do things wrong. You don't destroy an omen by fighting it. No, you do the opposite. You swallow it whole.'

Confused expressions. Gesler's was the first to clear and at the man's grin – startling white in his bronze-hued face – Strings slowly nodded, then said, 'If we don't close both hands on this omen, we're all nothing more than pall-bearers to those recruits in there. To the whole damned army.

'Now, didn't I hear that captain mention something about a nearby cemetery? Blown clear, the bones exposed to all. I suggest we go find it. Right now. All right, I'm finished talking.'

'That was a damned thigh bone,' Stormy growled.

Gesler stared at his corporal.

'We march in two days' time.'

Before anything else happens, Gamet silently added to the Adjunct's announcement. He glanced over at Nil and Nether where they sat side by side on the bench against the wall. Both racked with shivers, the aftermath of the omen's power leaving them huddled and pale.

Mysteries stalked the world. Gamet had felt their chill breath before, a reverberation of power that belonged to no god, but existed none the less. As implacable as the laws of nature. Truths beneath the bone. To his mind, the Empress would be better served by the immediate disbanding of the Fourteenth Army. A deliberate and thorough breaking up of the units with reassignments throughout the empire, the wait of another year for another wave of recruits.

Adjunct Tavore's next words to those gathered in the chamber seemed to speak directly to Gamet's thoughts. 'We cannot afford it,' she said, uncharacteristically pacing. 'The Fourteenth cannot be defeated before it sets foot outside Aren. The entire subcontinent will be irretrievably lost if that happens. Better we get annihilated in Raraku. Sha'ik's forces will have at least been reduced.

'Two days.

'In the meantime, I want the Fists to call their officers together, rank of lieutenant and higher. Inform them I will be visiting each company in person, beginning tonight. Give no indication of which one I will visit first – I want them all alert. Apart from guard postings, every soldier is restricted to barracks. Keep a particular eye on veterans. They will want to get drunk, and stay drunk, if they can. Fist Baralta, contact Orto Setral and have him assemble a troop of Red Blades. They're to sweep the settlement of the camp followers and confiscate all alcohol and durhang or whatever else the locals possess that deadens the senses. Then establish a picket round that settlement. Any questions? Good. You are all dismissed. Gamet, send for T'amber.'

'Aye, Adjunct.' Uncharacteristically careless. That perfumed lover of yours has been kept from the sights of every' one here but me. They know, of course. Even so ...

Outside in the hallway, Blistig exchanged a nod with Baralta then gripped Gamet's upper arm. 'With us, if you please.'

Nil and Nether shot them a glance then hurried off.
'Take that damned hand off me,' Gamet said quietly. 'I can follow without your help, Blistig.'

The grip fell away.

They found an empty room, once used to store items on hooks fixed three-quarters of the way up all four walls. The air smelled of lanolin.

'Time's come,' Blistig said without preamble. 'We cannot march in two days' time, Gamet, and you know it. We cannot march at all. There will be a mutiny at worst, at best an endless bleeding of desertions. The Fourteenth is finished.'

The satisfied gleam in the man's eyes triggered a boiling rage in Gamet. He struggled for a moment then managed to clamp down on his emotions, sufficient to lock gazes with Blistig and ask, 'Was that child's arrival set up between you and Keneb?'

Blistig recoiled as if struck, then his face darkened. 'What do you take me for—'

'Right now,' Gamet snapped, 'I am not sure.'

The once-commander of the Aren garrison tugged the peace-loop from his sword's hilt, but Tene Baralta stepped between the two men, armour clanking. Taller and broader than either Malazan, the dusk-skinned warrior reached out to set a gloved hand on each chest, then slowly pushed the men apart. 'We are here to reach agreement, not kill one another,' he rumbled. 'Besides,' he added, facing Blistig, 'Gamet's suspicion had occurred to me as well.'

'Keneb would not do such a thing,' Blistig rasped, 'even if you two imagine that I might.'

A worthy answer.

Gamet pulled away and strode to face the far wall, back to the others. His mind raced, then he finally shook his head. Without turning round, he said, 'She asked for two days—'

'Asked? I heard an order—'

'Then you were not listening carefully enough, Blistig. The Adjunct, young and untested though she may be, is not a fool. She sees what you see – what we all see. But she has asked for two days. Come the moment to march ... well, a final decision will become obvious, either way, at that moment. Trust her.' He swung round. 'For this and this alone, if need be. Two days.'

After a long moment, Baralta nodded. 'So be it.'

'Very well,' Blistig allowed.

Beru bless us. As Gamet made to leave, Tene Baralta touched his shoulder. 'Fist,' he said, 'what is the situation with this ... this T'amber? Do you know? Why is the Adjunct being so ... cagey? Women who take women for lovers – the only crime is the loss to men, and so it has always been.'

'Cagey? No, Tene Baralta. Private. The Adjunct is simply a private woman.'

The ex-Red Blade persisted, 'What is this T'amber like? Does she exercise undue influence on our commander?'

'I have no idea, to answer your latter question. What is she like? She was a concubine, I believe, in the Grand Temple of the Queen of Dreams, in Unta. Other than that, my only words with her have been at the Adjunct's behest. Nor is T'amber particularly talkative... And that is an understatement of prodigious proportions. Beautiful, aye, and remote. Has she undue influence over Tavore? I wish I knew. 'And speaking of T'amber, I must leave you now.'

At the door he paused and glanced back at Blistig. 'You gave good answer, Blistig. I no longer suspect you.'

In reply, the man simply nodded.
Lostara Yil placed the last of her Red Blade accoutrements into the chest then lowered the lid and locked it. She straightened and stepped back, feeling bereft. There had been a vast comfort in belonging to that dreaded company. That the Red Blades were hated by their tribal kin, reviled in their own land, had proved surprisingly satisfying. For she hated them in turn.

Born a daughter instead of the desired son in a Pardu family, as a child she had lived on the streets of Ehrlitan. It had been common practice – before the Malazans came with their laws for families – among many tribes to cast out their unwanted children once they reached the fifth year of life. Acolytes from numerous temples – followers of mystery cults – regularly rounded up such abandoned children. No-one knew what was done with them. The hopeful among the rough circle of fellow urchins Lostara had known had believed that, among the cults, there could be found a kind of salvation. Schooling, food, safety, all leading to eventually becoming an acolyte in turn. But the majority of children suspected otherwise. They’d heard tales of – or had themselves seen – the occasional nightly foray of shrouded figures emerging from the backs of temples, wending down alleyways with a covered cart, on their way to the crab-infested tidal pools east of the city, pools not so deep that one could not see the glimmer of small picked bones at the bottom.

One thing all could agree on. The hunger of the temples was insatiable.

Optimistic or pessimistic, the children of Ehrlitan’s streets did all they could to evade the hunters with their nets and pole-ropes. A life could be eked out, a kind of freedom won, bitter though it might be.

Midway through her seventh year, Lostara was dragged down to the greasy cobbles by an acolyte's net. Her shrieks went unheeded by the citizens who stepped aside as the silent priest dragged his prize back to the temple. Impassive eyes met hers every now and then on that horrible journey, and those eyes Lostara would never forget.

Rashan had proved less bloodthirsty than most of the other cults in the habit of hunting children. She had found herself among a handful of new arrivals, all tasked with maintenance of the temple grounds, destined, it seemed, for a lifetime of menial servitude. The drudgery continued until her ninth year, when for reasons unknown to Lostara she was selected for schooling in the Shadow Dance. She had caught rare and brief glimpses of the dancers – a hidden and secretive group of men and women for whom worship was an elaborate, intricate dance. Their only audience were priests and priestesses – none of whom would watch the actual dancers, only their shadows.

You are nothing, child. Not a dancer. Your body is in service to Rashan, and Rashan is this realm's manifestation of Shadow, the drawing of darkness to light. When you dance, it is not you that is watched. It is the shadow your body paints. The shadow is the dancer, Lostara Yil. Not you.

Years of discipline, of limb-stretching training that loosened every joint, that drew out the spine, that would allow the Caster to flow with seamless movement – and all for naught.

The world had been changing outside the temple’s high walls. Events unknown to Lostara were systematically crushing their entire civilization. The Malazan Empire had invaded. Cities were falling. Foreign ships had blockaded Ehrlitan's harbour.

The cult of Rashan was spared the purges of the new, harsh masters of Seven Cities, for it was a recognized religion. Other temples did not fare as well. She recalled seeing smoke in the sky above Ehrlitan and wondering at its source, and she was awakened at night by terrible sounds of chaos in the streets.

Lostara was a middling Caster. Her shadow seemed to have a mind of its own and was a recalcitrant, halting partner in the training. She did not ask herself if she was happy or otherwise. Rashan's Empty Throne did not draw her faith as it did the other students'. She lived, but it was an unquestioning life. Neither circular nor linear, for in her mind there was no movement at all, and the notion of progress was measured only in terms of mastering the exercises forced upon her.

The cult's destruction was sudden, unexpected, and it came from within.
She recalled the night when it had all begun. Great excitement in the temple. A High Priest from another city was visiting. Come to speak with Master Bidithal on matters of vast importance. There would be a dance in the stranger's honour, for which Lostara and her fellow students would provide a background sequence of rhythms to complement the Shadow Dancers.

Lostara herself had been indifferent to the whole affair, and had been nowhere close to the best of the students in their minor role in the performance. But she remembered the stranger.

So unlike sour old Bidithal. Tall, thin, a laughing face, remarkably long-fingered, almost effeminate hands – hands the sight of which awakened in her new emotions.

Emotions that stuttered her mechanical dancing, that sent her shadow twisting into a rhythm that was counterpoint to that cast by not only her fellow students, but the Shadow Dancers themselves – as if a third strain had slipped into the main chamber.

Too striking to remain unnoticed.

Bidithal himself, his face darkening, had half risen – but the stranger spoke first.

'Pray let the Dance continue,' he said, his eyes finding Lostara's own. 'The Song of the Reeds has never been performed in quite this manner before. No gentle breeze here, eh, Bidithal? Oh no, a veritable gale. The Dancers are virgins, yes?' His laugh was low yet full. 'Yet there is nothing virginal about this dance, now, is there? Oh, storm of desire!'

And those eyes held Lostara still, in fullest recognition of the desire that overwhelmed her – that gave shape to her shadow's wild cavort. Recognition, and a certain pleased, but cool ... acknowledgement. As if flattered, but with no invitation offered in return.

The stranger had other tasks that night – and in the nights that followed – or so Lostara would come to realize much later. At the moment, however, her face burned with shame, and she had broken off her dance to flee the chamber.

Of course, Delat had not come to steal the heart of a Caster. He had come to destroy Rashan.

Delat, who, it proved, was both a High Priest and a Bridgeburner, and whatever the Emperor's reason for annihilating the cult, his was the hand that delivered the death-blow.

Although not alone. The night of the killings, at the bell of the third hour – two past midnight – after the Song of Reeds, there had been another, hidden in the black clothes of an assassin ...

Lostara knew more of what had happened that night in the Rashan Temple of Ehlitan than anyone else barring the players themselves, for Lostara had been the only resident to be spared. Or so she had believed for a long time, until the name of Bidithal rose once more, from Sha'ik's Apocalypse army.

*Ah, I was more than spared that night, wasn't I?*

*Delat's lovely, long-fingered hands ...*

Setting foot onto the city's streets the following morning, after seven years' absence, she had been faced with the terrifying knowledge that she was alone, truly alone. Resurrecting an ancient memory of when she was awakened following the fifth birthday, and thrust into the hands of an old man hired to take her away, to leave her in a strange neighbourhood on the other side of the city. A memory that echoed with a child's cries for her mother.

The short time that followed her departure from the temple, before she joined the Red Blades – the newly formed company of Seven Cities natives who avowed loyalty to the Malazan Empire – held its own memories, ones she had long since repressed. Hunger, denigration, humiliation and what seemed a fatal, spiralling descent. But the recruiters had found her, or perhaps she found them. The Red Blades would be a statement to the Emperor, the marking of a new era in Seven Cities. There would be peace. None of this interested Lostara, however. Rather, it was the widely-held rumour that the Red Blades sought to become the deliverers of
She had not forgotten those impassive eyes. The citizens who were indifferent to her pleas, who had watched the acolyte drag her past to an unknown fate. She had not forgotten her own parents.

Betrayal could be answered by but one thing, and one thing alone, and the once-captain Lostara Yil of the Red Blades had grown skilled in that answer’s brutal delivery.

*And now, am I being made into a betrayer?*

She turned away from the wooden chest. She was a Red Blade no longer.

In a short while, Pearl would arrive, and they would set out to find the cold, cold trail of Tavore’s hapless sister, Felisin. Along which they might find opportunity to drive a blade into the heart of the Talons. Yet were not the Talons of the empire? Dancer’s own, his spies and killers, the deadly weapon of his will. Then what had turned them into traitors?

Betrayal was a mystery. Inexplicable to Lostara. She only knew that it delivered the deepest wounds of all.

And she had long since vowed that she would never again suffer such wounds.

She collected her sword-belt from the hook above the bed and drew the thick leather band about her hips, hooking it in place.

Then froze.

The small room before her was filled with dancing shadows.

And in their midst, a figure. A pale face of firm features, made handsome by smile lines at the corners of the eyes – and the eyes themselves, which, as he looked upon her, settled like depthless pools.

Into which she felt, in a sudden rush, she could plunge. Here, now, for ever.

The figure made a slight bow with his head, then spoke, ‘Lostara Yil. You may doubt my words, but I remember you—’

She stepped back, her back pressing up against the wall, and shook her head. ‘I do not know you,’ she whispered.

‘True. But there were three of us that night, so very long ago in Ehrlitan. I was witness to your ... unexpected performance. Did you know Delat – or, rather, the man I would eventually learn was Delat – would have taken you for his own? Not just the one night. You would have joined him as a Bridgeburner, and that would well have pleased him. Or so I believe. No way to test it, alas, since it all went – outwardly – so thoroughly awry.’

‘I remember,’ she said.

The man shrugged. ‘Delat, who had a different name for that mission and was my partner’s responsibility besides — Delat let Bidithal go. I suppose it seemed a ... a betrayal, yes? It certainly did to my partner. Certainly to this day Shadowthrone – who was not Shadowthrone then, simply a particularly adept and ambitious practitioner of Rashan’s sister warren, Meanas – to this day, I was saying, Shadowthrone stokes eternal fires of vengeance. But Delat proved very capable of hiding ... under our very noses. Like Kalam. Just another unremarked soldier in the ranks of the Bridgeburners.’

‘I do not know who you are.’

The man smiled. ‘Ah, yes, I am well ahead of myself...’ His gaze fell to the shadows spread long before him, though his back was to an unlit, closed door, and his smile broadened as if he was reconsidering those words. ‘I am Cotillion, Lostara Yil. Back then, I was Dancer, and yes, you can well guess the significance of that name, given what you were being trained to do. Of course, in Seven Cities, certain truths of the cult had been lost, in particular the true nature of Shadow Dancing. It was never meant for performance, Lostara. It was, in fact, an art most martial. Assassination.’
'I am no follower of Shadow – Rashan or your version—'

'That is not the loyalty I would call upon with you,' Cotillion replied.

She was silent, struggling to fit sense to her thoughts, to his words. Cotillion ... was Dancer. Shadowthrone ... must have been Kellanved, the Emperor! She scowled. 'My loyalty is to the Malazan Empire. The Empire—'

'Very good,' he replied. 'I am pleased.'

'And now you're going to try to convince me that the Empress Laseen should not be the empire's true ruler—'

'Not at all. She is welcome to it. But, alas, she is in some trouble right now, isn't she? She could do with some ... help.'

'She supposedly assassinated you!' Lostara hissed. 'You and Kellanved both!' She betrayed you.

Cotillion simply shrugged again. 'Everyone had their ... appointed tasks. Lostara, the game being played here is far larger than any mortal empire. But the empire in question – your empire – well, its success is crucial to what we seek. And, were you to know the fullest extent of recent, distant events, you would need no convincing that the Empress sits on a tottering throne right now.'

'Yet even you betrayed the Emper— Shadowthrone. Did you not just tell me—'

'Sometimes, I see further than my dear companion. Indeed, he remains obsessed with desires to see Laseen suffer – I have other ideas, and while he may see them as party to his own, there is yet no pressing need to disabuse him of that notion. But I will not seek to deceive you into believing I am all-knowing. I admit to having made grave errors, indeed, to knowing the poison of suspicion. Quick Ben. Kalam. Whiskeyjack. Where did their loyalty truly reside? Well, I eventually got my answer, but I am not yet decided whether it pleases me or troubles me. There is one danger that plagues ascendants in particular, and that is the tendency to wait too long. Before acting, before stepping – if you will – from the shadows. He smiled again. 'I would make amends for past, at times fatal, hesitation. And so here I stand before you, Lostara, to ask for your help.'

Her scowl deepened. 'Why should I not tell Pearl all about this ... meeting?'

'No reason, but I'd rather you didn't. I am not yet ready for Pearl. For you, remaining silent will not constitute treason, for, if you do as I ask, you two will walk step in step. You will face no conflict, no matter what may occur, or what you may discover in your travels.'

'Where is this... Delat?'

His brows rose, as if he was caught off guard momentarily by the question, then he sighed and nodded. 'I have no hold over him these days, alas. Why? He is too powerful. Too mysterious. Too conniving. Too Hood-damned smart. Indeed, even Shadowthrone has turned his attentions elsewhere. I would love to arrange a reunion, but I am afraid I have not that power.' He hesitated, then added, 'Sometimes, one must simply trust in fate, Lostara. The future can ever promise but one thing and one thing only: surprises. But know this, we would all save the Malazan Empire, in our own ways. Will you help me?'

'If I did, would that make me a Talon?'

Cotillion's smile broadened. 'But, my dear, the Talons no longer exist.'

'Oh, really, Cotillion, would you ask my help and then play me for a fool?'

The smile slowly faded. 'But I am telling you, the Talons no longer exist. Surlly annihilated them. Is there knowledge you possess that would suggest otherwise?'

She was silent a moment, then turned away. 'No. I simply ... assumed.'

'Indeed. Will you help me then?'

'Pearl is on his way,' Lostara said, facing the god once again.
'I am capable of brevity when need be.'

'What is it you want me to do?'

Half a bell later there was a light rap upon the door and Pearl entered.

And immediately halted. 'I smell sorcery.'

Seated on the bed, Lostara shrugged then rose to collect her kit bag. 'There are sequences in the Shadow Dance,' she said casually, 'that occasionally evoke Rashan.'

'Rashan! Yes.' He stepped close, his gaze searching. 'The Shadow Dance. You?'

'Once. Long ago. I hold to no gods, Pearl. Never have. But the Dance, I've found, serves me in my fighting. Keeps me flexible, and I need that the most when I am nervous or unhappy.' She slung the bag over a shoulder and waited.

Pearl's eyebrows rose. 'Nervous or unhappy?'

She answered him with a sour look, then walked to the doorway. 'You said you've stumbled on a lead ...'

He joined her. 'I have at that. But a word of warning first. Those sequences that evoke Rashan – it would be best for us both if you avoided them in the future. That kind of activity risks drawing ... attention.'

'Very well. Now, lead on.'

A lone guard slouched outside the estate's gate, beside a bound bundle of straw. Pale green eyes tracked Lostara and Pearl as they approached from across the street. The man's uniform and armour were dull with dust. A small human finger bone hung on a brass loop from one ear. His expression was sickly, and he drew a deep breath before saying, 'You the advance? Go back and tell her we're not ready.'

Lostara blinked and glanced over at Pearl.

Her companion was smiling. 'Do we look like messengers, soldier?'

The guard's eyes thinned. 'Didn't I see you dancing on a table down at Pugroot's Bar?'

Pearl's smile broadened. 'And have you a name, soldier?'

'Maybe.'

'Well, what is it?'

'I just told you. Maybe. Do you need me to spell it or something?'

'Can you?'

'No. I was just wondering if you was stupid, that's all. So, if you're not the Adjunct's advance, come to warn us about that surprise inspection, then what do you want?'

'A moment,' Pearl said, frowning. 'How can an inspection be a surprise if there's advance warning?'

'Hood's leathery feet, you are stupid after all. That's how it's done—'

'A warning, then.' He glanced at Lostara and winked as he added, 'Seems I'm offering those all day. Listen, Maybe, the Adjunct won't be warning you about her inspections – and don't expect your officers to do so either. She has her own rules, and you'd better get used to it.'

'You still ain't told me what you want.'
'I need to speak to a certain soldier of the 5th squad of the 9th Company, and I understand he is stationed in the temporary barracks here.'

'Well, I'm in the 6th, not the 5th.'

'Yes... so?'

'Well, it's obvious then, isn't it? You don't want to speak to me at all. Go on in, you're wasting my time. And hurry up, I'm not feeling too well.'

The guard opened the gate and watched them stride inside, his eyes falling to Lostara's swaying hips for a long moment before he slammed the reinforced gate shut.

Beside him, the bale of straw shimmered suddenly then reformed as an overweight young man seated cross-legged on the cobbles.

Maybe's head turned and he sighed. 'Don't do that again – not near me, Balgrid. Magic makes me want to puke.'

'I had no choice but to maintain the illusion,' Balgrid replied, drawing a sleeve across his sweat-beaded brow. 'That bastard was a Claw!'

'Really? I could have sworn I saw him wearing a woman's clothes and dancing at Pug—'

'Will you shut up with that! Pity the poor bastard he's looking for in the 5th!'

Maybe suddenly grinned. 'Hey, you just fooled a real live Claw with that damned illusion! Nice work!'

'You ain't the only one feeling sick,' Balgrid muttered.

Thirty paces took Lostara and Pearl across the compound to the stables.

'That was amusing,' said the man at her side.

'And what was the point?'

'Oh, just to see them sweat.'

'Them?'

'The man and the bale, of course. Well, here we are.' As she reached to draw back one of the broad doors, Pearl closed a hand on her wrist. 'In a moment. Now, there's actually more than one person within that we need to question. A couple of veterans — leave them to me. There's also a lad, was a guard at a mining camp. Work your charms on him while I'm talking with the other two.'

Lostara stared at him. 'My charms,' she said, deadpan.

Pearl grinned. 'Aye, and if you leave him smitten, well, consider it a future investment in case we need the lad later.'

'I see.'

She opened the door, stepping back to let Pearl precede her. The air within the stables was foul. Urine, sweat, honing oil and wet straw. Soldiers were everywhere, lying or sitting on beds or on items from a collection of ornate furniture that had come from the main house. There was little in the way of conversation, and even that fell away as heads turned towards the two strangers.

'Thank you,' Pearl drawled, 'for your attention. I would speak with Sergeant Gesler and Corporal Stormy ...'

'I'm Gesler,' a solid-looking, bronze-skinned man said from where he sprawled on a plush couch. 'The one snoring under those silks is Stormy. And if you come from Oblat tell him we'll pay up ... eventually.'
Smiling, Pearl gestured at Lostara to follow and strode up to the sergeant. 'I am not here to call in your debts. Rather, I would like to speak with you in private ... concerning your recent adventures.'

'Is that right. And who in Fener's hoofprint are you?'

'This is an imperial matter,' Pearl said, his gaze falling to Stormy. 'Will you wake him or shall I? Further, my companion wishes to speak with the soldier named Pella.'

Gesler's grin was cool. 'You want to wake my corporal? Go right ahead. As for Pella, he's not here at the moment.'

Pearl sighed and stepped to the side of the bed. A moment's study of the heap of expensive silks burying the snoring corporal, then the Claw reached down and flung the coverings clear.

The hand that snapped to Pearl's right shin – halfway between knee and ankle – was large enough to almost close entirely around the limb. The surge that followed left Lostara gaping.

Up. Pearl yelling. Up, as Stormy reared from the bed like a bear prodded from its hibernation, a roar rolling from his lungs.

Had the chamber contained a ceiling of normal height – rather than a few simple crossbeams spanning the space beneath the stable roof, none of which were, mercifully, directly overhead – Pearl would have struck it, and hard, as he was lifted into the air by that single hand clasped around his shin. Lifted, then thrown.

The Claw cavorted, arms flailing, his knees shooting up over his head, spinning, legs kicking free as Stormy's hand let go. He came down hard on one shoulder, the breath leaving his lungs in a grunting whoosh. He lay unmoving, drawing his legs up, in increments, into a curled position.

The corporal was standing now, shaggy-haired, his red beard in wild disarray, the oblivion of sleep vanishing from his eyes like pine needles in a fire – a fire that was quickly flaring into a rage. 'I said no-one wakes me!' he bellowed, huge hands held out to either side and clutching at the air, as if eager to close on offending throats. His bright blue eyes fixed suddenly on Pearl, who was only now moving onto his hands and knees, his head hanging low. 'Is this the bastard?' Stormy asked, taking a step closer.

Lostara blocked his path.

Grunting, Stormy halted.

'Leave them be, Corporal,' Gesler said from the couch. 'That fop you just tossed is a Claw. And a sharper look at that woman in front of you will tell you she's a Red Blade, or was, and can likely defend herself just fine. No need to get into a brawl over lost sleep.'

Pearl was climbing to his feet, massaging his shoulder, his breaths deep and shuddering.

Hand on the pommel of her sword, Lostara stared steadily into Stormy's eyes. 'We were wondering,' she said conversationally, 'which of you is the better story-teller. My companion here would like to hear a tale. Of course, there will be payment for the privilege. Perhaps your debts to this Oblat can be . . . taken care of, as a show of our appreciation.'

Stormy scowled and glanced back at Gesler.

The sergeant slowly rose from the couch. 'Well, lass, the corporal here's better with the scary ones... since he tells them so bad they ain't so scary any more. Since you're being so kind with ... uh, our recent push of the Lord at knuckles, me and the corporal will both weave you a tale, if that's what you're here for. We ain't shy, after all. Where should we start? I was born—'

'Not that early,' Lostara cut in. 'I will leave the rest to Pearl – though perhaps someone could get him something to drink to assist in his recovery. He can advise you on where to start. In the meantime, where is Pella?'
'He's out back,' Gesler said.

'Thank you.'

As she was making her way to the narrow, low door at the back of the stables, another sergeant emerged to move up alongside her. 'I'll escort you,' he said.

Another damned Falari veteran. And what's with the finger bones? 'Am I likely to get lost, Sergeant?' she asked as she swung open the door. Six paces beyond was the estate's back wall. Heaps of sun-dried horse manure were banked against it. Seated on one of them was a young soldier. At the foot of a nearby pile lay two dogs, both asleep, one huge and terribly scarred, the other tiny – a snarl of hair and a pug nose.

'Possibly,' the sergeant replied. He touched her arm as she made to approach Pella, and she faced him with an enquiring look. 'Are you with one of the other legions?' he asked.

'No.'

'Ah.' He glanced back at the stables. 'Newly assigned to handmaid the Claw.'

'Handmaid?'

'Aye. The man needs ... learning. Seems he chose well in you, at least.'

'What is it you want, Sergeant?'

'Never mind. I'll leave you now.'

She watched him re-enter the stables. Then, with a shrug, she swung about and walked up to Pella.

Neither dog awoke at her approach.

Two large burlap sacks framed the soldier, the one on the soldier's right filled near to bursting, the other perhaps a third full. The lad himself was hunched over, holding a small copper awl which he was using to drill a hole into a finger bone.

The sacks, Lostara realized, contained hundreds of such bones.

'Pella.'

The young man looked up, blinked. 'Do I know you?'

'No. But we perhaps share an acquaintance.'

'Oh.' He resumed his work.

'You were a guard in the mines—'

'Not quite,' he replied without looking up. 'I was garrisoned at one of the settlements. Skullcup. But then the rebellion started. Fifteen of us survived the first night – no officers. We stayed off the road and eventually made our way to Dosin Pali. Took four nights, and we could see the city burning for the first three. Wasn't much left when we arrived. A Malazan trader ship showed up at about the same time as us, and took us, eventually, here to Aren.'

'Skullcup,' Lostara said. 'There was a prisoner there. A young girl—'

'Tavore's sister, you mean. Felisin.'

Her breath caught.

'I was wondering when somebody would find me about that. Am I under arrest, then?' He looked up.

'No. Why? Do you think you should be?"
He returned to his work. 'Probably. I helped them escape, after all. The night of the Uprising. Don't know if they ever made it, though. I left them supplies, such as I could find. They were planning on heading north then west ... across the desert. I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only one aiding them, but I never found out who the others were.'

Lostara slowly crouched down until she was at his eye-level. 'Not just Felisin, then. Who was with her?'

'Baudin – a damned frightening man, that one, but strangely loyal to Felisin, though...’ He lifted his head and met her gaze. 'Well, she wasn't one to reward loyalty, if you know what I mean. Anyway. Baudin, and Heboric.'

'Heboric? Who is that?'

'Was once a priest of Fener – all tattooed with the fur of the Boar. Had no hands – they'd been cut off. Anyway, them three.'

'Across the desert,' Lostara murmured. 'But the west coast of the island has ... nothing.'

'Well, they were expecting a boat, then, weren't they? It was planned, right? Anyway, that's as far as I can take the tale. For the rest, ask my sergeant. Or Stormy. Or Truth.'

'Truth? Who is he?'

'He's the one who's just showed up in the doorway behind you ... come to deliver more bones.' He raised his voice. 'No need to hesitate, Truth. In fact, this pretty woman here has some questions for you.'

Another one with the strange skin. She studied the tall, gangly youth who cautiously approached, carrying another bulging burlap sack from which sand drifted down in a dusty cloud. Hood take me, a comely lad . . . though that air of vulnerability would get on my nerves eventually. She straightened. 'I would know of Felisin,' she said, slipping some iron into her tone.

Sufficient to catch Pella's notice, and he threw her a sharp look.

Both dogs had awakened at Truth's arrival, but neither rose from where they lay – they simply fixed eyes on the lad.

Truth set down the bag and snapped to sudden attentiveness. Colour rose in his face.

My charms. It's not Pella who'll remember this day. Not Pella who'll find someone to worship. 'Tell me about what happened on the western shore of Otataral Island. Did the rendezvous occur as planned?'

'I believe so,' Truth replied after a moment. 'But we weren't part of that plan – we just happened to find ourselves in the same boat with Kulp, and it was Kulp who was looking to collect them.'

'Kulp? The cadre mage from the Seventh?'

'Aye, him. He'd been sent by Duiker—'

'The imperial historian?' Gods, what twisted trail is this? 'And why would he have any interest in saving Felisin?'

'Kulp said it was the injustice,' Truth answered. 'But you got it wrong – it wasn't Felisin that Duiker wanted to help. It was Heboric.'

Pella spoke in a low voice quite unlike what she had heard from him moments earlier. 'If Duiker is going to be made out as some kind of traitor ... well, lass, better think twice. This is Aren, after all. The city that watched. That saw Duiker delivering the refugees to safety. He was the last one through the gate, they say.' The emotion riding his words was now raw. 'And Pormqual had him arrested!'

A chill rippled through Lostara. 'I know,' she said. 'Blistig loosed us Red Blades from the gaols. We were on the wall by the time Pormqual had his army out there on the plain. If Duiker was seeking to free Heboric, a fellow scholar, well, I have no complaint with that. The trail we are on is Felisin's.'
Truth nodded at that. 'Tavore has sent you, hasn't she? You and that Claw inside, listening to Gesler and Stormy.'

Lostara briefly closed her eyes. 'I am afraid I lack Pearl's subtlety. This mission was meant to be ... secret.'

'Fine with me,' Pella said. 'And you, Truth?'

The tall lad nodded. 'It doesn't really matter anyway. Felisin is dead. They all are. Heboric. Kulp. They all died. Gesler was just telling that part.'

'I see. None the less, please say nothing to anyone else. We will be pursuing our task, if only to gather her bones. Their bones, that is.'

'That would be a good thing,' Truth said with a sigh.

Lostara made to leave but Pella gestured to catch her attention. 'Here.' He held out to her the finger bone he had been drilling a hole through. 'Take this for yourself. Wear it in plain sight.'

'Why?'

Pella scowled. 'You've just asked a favour of us...'

'Very well.' She accepted the grisly object.

Pearl appeared in the doorway. 'Lostara,' he called. 'Are you done here?'

'I am.'

'Time to leave, then.'

She could see by his expression that he too had been told of Felisin's death. Though probably in greater detail than the little that Truth had said.

In silence, they retraced their route through the stables, out into the compound, then across to the gate. The door swung open as they arrived and the soldier named Maybe waved them out. Lostara's attention was drawn to the bale of straw, which seemed to be wavering, strangely melting where it squatted, but Pearl simply waved her on.

As they drew some distance from the estate, the Claw voiced a soft curse, then said, 'I need a healer.'

'Your limp is barely noticeable,' Lostara observed.

'Years of discipline, my dear. I'd much rather be screaming. The last time I suffered such strength used against me was with that Semk demon, that godling. The three of them – Gesler, Stormy and Truth – there's more that's strange about them than just their skin.'

'Any theories?'

'They went through a warren of fire – and somehow survived, though it seems that Felisin, Baudin and Heboric didn't. Though their actual fate remains unknown. Gesler simply assumes they died. But if something unusual happened to those coastal guards in that warren, then why not the same to the ones who were washed overboard?'

'I'm sorry. I was not told the details.'

'We must pay a visit to a certain impounded ship. I will explain on the way. Oh, and next time don't offer to pay off someone else's debt... until you find out how big it is.'

And next time, leave that pompous attitude at the stable doors. 'Very well.'

'And stop taking charge.'
She glanced over at him. 'You advised me to use my charm, Pearl. It's hardly my fault if I possess more of that quality than you.'

'Really? Let me tell you, that corporal was lucky you stepped between us.'

She wanted to laugh, but pushed it back. 'You clearly did not notice the weapon under the man's bed.'

'Weapon? I care—'

'It was a two-handed flint sword. The weapon of a T'lan Imass, Pearl. It probably weighs as much as I do.'

He said no more until they reached the Silanda.

The ship's berth was well guarded, yet clearly permission for Pearl and Lostara had been provided earlier, for the two were waved onto the old dromon's battered deck then left deliberately alone, the ship itself cleared of all others.

Lostara scanned the area amidships. Flame-scarred and mud-smeared. A strange pyramidal mound surrounded the main mast, draped in a tarpaulin. New sails and sheets had been fitted, clearly taken from a variety of other vessels.

Standing at her side, Pearl's gaze fell upon the covered mound, and he voiced a soft grunt. 'Do you recognize this ship?' he asked.

'I recognize it's a ship,' Lostara replied.

'I see. Well, it's a Quon dromon of the old, pre-imperial style. But much of the wood and the fittings are from Drift Avalii. Do you know anything of Drift Avalii?'

'It's a mythical island off the Quon Tali coast. A drifting island, peopled with demons and spectres.'

'Not mythical, and it does indeed drift, though the pattern seems to describe a kind of wobbly circle. As for demons and spectres . . . well. . .' he strode to the tarpaulin, 'hardly anything so frightening.' He drew the covering back.

Severed heads, neatly piled, all facing outward, eyes blinking and fixing on Pearl and Lostara. The glimmer of wet blood.

'If you say so,' Lostara croaked, stepping back.

Even Pearl seemed taken aback, as if what he had unveiled was not entirely what he had expected. After a long moment he reached down and touched a fingertip to the pooled blood. 'Still warm . . .'

'B-but that's impossible.'

'Any more impossible than the damned things being still conscious – or alive at the very least?' He straightened and faced her, then waved expansively. 'This ship is a lode' stone. There are layers upon layers of sorcery, soaked into the very wood, into the frame. It descends upon you with the weight of a thousand cloaks.'

'It does? I don't feel it.'

He looked at her blankly, then faced the mound of severed heads once more. 'Neither demons nor spectres, as you can see. Tiste Andii, most of them. A few Quon Talian sailors. Come, let us go and examine the captain's cabin – magic tumbles from that room in waves.'

'What kind of magic, Pearl?'

He had already begun walking towards the hatch. A dismissive gesture. 'Kurald Galain, Tellann, Kurald Emurlahn, Rashan—' He paused suddenly and swung round. 'Rashan. Yet you feel nothing?'

She shrugged. 'Are there more ... heads ... in there, Pearl? If so, I think I'd rather not—'
'Follow me,' he snapped.

Inside, black wood, the air thick as if roiling with memories of violence. A grey-skinned, barbaric-looking corpse pinned to the captain's chair by a massive spear. Other bodies, sprawled here and there as if grabbed, broken then tossed aside.

A dull, sourceless glow permeated the low, cramped room. Barring strange patches on the floor, smeared with, Lostara saw, otataral dust.

'Not Tiste Andii,' Pearl muttered. 'These must be Tiste Edur. Oh, there are plenty of mysteries here. Gesler told me about the crew manning the oars down below – headless bodies. Those poor Tiste Andii on the deck. Now, I wonder who killed these Edur ...'

'How does all this lead us further onto Felisin's trail, Pearl?'

'She was here, wasn't she? Witness to all this. The captain here had a whistle, strung around his neck, which was used to direct the rowers. It's disappeared, alas.'

'And without that whistle, this ship just sits here.'

Pearl nodded. 'Too bad, isn't it? Imagine, a ship with a crew you never have to feed, that never needs rest, that never mutinies.'

'You can have it,' Lostara said, turning back to the doorway. 'I hate ships. Always have. And now I'm leaving this one.'

'I see no reason not to join you,' Pearl said. 'We have a journey ahead of us, after all.'

'We do? Where?'

'The Silanda travelled warrens between the place where it was found by Gesler, and where it reappeared in this realm. From what I can gather, that journey crossed the mainland, from the north Otataral Sea down to Aren Bay. If Felisin, Heboric and Baudin jumped off, they might well have reappeared on land somewhere on that route.'

'To find themselves in the midst of the rebellion.'

'Given what seems to have led up to it, they might well have considered that a far less horrendous option.'

'Until some band of raiders stumbled onto them.'

Captain Keneb's 9th Company was called to muster in three successive assemblies on the parade ground. There had been no advance warning, simply the arrival of an officer commanding the soldiers to proceed at double-time.

Squads 1, 2 and 3 went first. These were heavy infantry, thirty soldiers in all, loaded down in scale armour and chain vambraces and gauntlets, kite shields, weighted longswords, stabbing spears strapped to their backs, visored and cheek-guarded helms with lobster tails, dirks and pigstickers at their belts.

The marines were next. Ranal's 4th, 5th and 6th squads. Following them were the bulk of the company's troops, medium infantry, the 7th to the 24th squads. Only slightly less armoured than the heavy infantry, there was, among them, the addition of soldiers skilled in the use of the short bow, the longbow, and the spear. Each company was intended to work as a discrete unit, self-reliant and mutually supportive.

As he stood in front of his squad, Strings studied the 9th. Their first assembly as a separate force. They awaited the Adjunct's arrival in mostly precise ranks, saying little, not one out of uniform or weaponless.

Dusk was fast approaching, the air growing mercifully cool.

Lieutenant Ranal had been walking the length of the three squads of marines for some time, back and forth,
his steps slow, a sheen of sweat on his smooth-shaven cheeks. When he finally halted, it was directly before Strings.

‘All right, Sergeant,’ he hissed. ‘It’s your idea, isn’t it?’

‘Sir?’

‘Those damned finger bones! They showed up in your squad first – as if I wouldn’t have noticed that. And now I’ve heard from the captain that it’s spreading through every legion. Graves are being robbed all over the city! And I’ll tell you this—’ He stepped very close and continued in a rough whisper. ‘If the Adjunct asks who is responsible for this last spit in her face over what happened yesterday, I won’t hesitate in directing her to you.’

‘Spit in her face? Lieutenant, you are a raging idiot. Now, a clump of officers have just appeared at the main gate. I suggest you take your place, sir.’

Face dark with fury, Ranal wheeled and took position before the three squads.

The Adjunct led the way, her entourage trailing.

Captain Keneb awaited her. Strings remembered the man from the first, disastrous mustering. A Malazan. The word was out that he had been garrisoned inland, had seen his share of fighting when their company had been overrun. Then the flight southward, back to Aren. There was enough in that to lead Strings to wonder if the man hadn’t taken the coward’s route. Rather than dying with his soldiers, he’d been first in the rout. That’s how many officers outlived their squads, after all. Officers weren’t worth much, as far as the sergeant was concerned.

The Adjunct was speaking with the man now, then the captain stepped back and saluted, inviting Tavore to approach the troops. But instead she drew a step closer to the man, reached out and touched something looped about Keneb’s neck.

Strings’s eyes widened slightly. That’s a damned finger bone.

More words between the man and the woman, then the Adjunct nodded and proceeded towards the squads.

Alone, her steps slow, her face expressionless.

Strings saw the flicker of recognition as she scanned the squads. Himself, then Cuttle. After a long moment, during which she entirely ignored the ramrod-straight Lieutenant Ranal, she finally turned to the man.

‘Lieutenant.’

‘Adjunct.’

‘There seems to be a proliferation of non-standard accoutrements on your soldiers. More so here than among any of the other companies I have reviewed.’

‘Yes, Adjunct. Against my orders, and I know the man responsible—’

‘No doubt,’ she replied. ‘But I am not interested in that. I would suggest, however, that some uniformity be established for those... trinkets. Perhaps from the hip belt, opposite the scabbard. Furthermore, there have been complaints from Aren’s citizenry. At the very least, the looted pits and tombs should be returned to their original state ... as much as that is possible, of course.’

Ranal’s confusion was obvious. ‘Of course, Adjunct.’

‘And you might note, as well,’ the Adjunct added drily, ‘that you are alone in wearing a ... non-standard uniform of the Fourteenth Army, at this time. I suggest you correct that as soon as possible, Lieutenant. Now, you may dismiss your squads. And on your way out, convey my instruction to Captain Keneb that he can proceed with moving the company’s medium infantry to the fore.’

‘Y-yes, Adjunct. At once.’ He saluted.
Strings watched her walk back to her entourage. *Oh, well done, lass.*

Gamet's chest was filled with aching as he studied the Adjunct striding back to where he and the others waited. A fiercely welling emotion. Whoever had come up with the idea deserved ... well, a damned kiss, as Cuttle would have said. *They've turned the omen. Turned it!*

And he saw the rekindled fire in Tavore's eyes as she reached them. 'Fist Gamet.'

'Adjunct?'

'The Fourteenth Army requires a standard.'

'Aye, it does indeed.'

'We might take our inspiration from the soldiers themselves.'

'We might well do that, Adjunct.'

'You will see to it? In time for our departure tomorrow?'

'I will.'

From the gate a messenger arrived on horseback. He had been riding hard, and drew up sharply upon seeing the Adjunct.

Gamet watched the man dismount and approach. *Gods, not bad news . . . not now ...*

'Report,' the Adjunct demanded.

'Three ships, Adjunct,' the messenger gasped. 'Just limped into harbour.'

'Go on.'

'Volunteers! Warriors! Horses and wardogs! It's chaos at the docks!'

'How many?' Gamet demanded.

'Three hundred, Fist.'

'Where in Hood's name are they from?'

The messenger's gaze snapped away from them – over to where Nil and Nether stood. 'Wickans.' He met Tavore's gaze once more. 'Adjunct! Clan of the Crow. *The Crow! Coltaine's own!*'
The twin long-knives were slung in a faded leather harness stitched in swirling Pardu patterns. They hung from a nail on one of the shop's corner posts, beneath an elaborate Kherahn shaman's feather headdress. The long table fronting the canopied stall was crowded with ornate obsidian objects looted from some tomb, each one newly blessed in the name of gods, spirits or demons. On the left side, behind the table and flanking the toothless proprietor who sat cross-legged on a high stool, was a tall screened cabinet.

The burly, dark-skinned customer stood examining the obsidian weapons for some time before a slight flip of his right hand signalled an interest to the hawker.

'The breath of demons!' the old man squealed, jabbing a gnarled finger at various stone blades in confusing succession. 'And these, kissed by Mael – see how the waters have smoothed them? I have more—'

'What lies in the cabinet?' the customer rumbled.

'Ah, you've a sharp eye! Are you a Reader, perchance? Could you smell the chaos, then? Decks, my wise friend! Decks! And oh, haven't they awakened! Yes, all anew. All is in flux—'

'The Deck of Dragons is always in flux—'

'Ah, but a new House! Oh, I see your surprise at that, friend! A new House. Vast power, 'tis said. Tremors to the very roots of the world!'

The man facing him scowled. 'Another new House, is it? Some local impostor cult, no doubt—'

But the old man was shaking his head, eyes darting past his lone customer, suspiciously scanning the market crowd – paltry as it was. He then leaned forward. 'I do not deal in those, friend. Oh, I am as loyal to Dryjhna as the next, make no claims otherwise! But the Deck permits no bias, does it? Oh no, balanced wise eyes and mind is necessary. Indeed. Now, why does the new House ring with truth? Let me tell you, friend. First, a new Unaligned card, a card denoting that a Master now commands the Deck. An arbiter, yes? And then, spreading out like a runaway stubble fire, the new House. Sanctioned? Undecided. But not rejected out of hand, oh no, not rejected. And the Readers – the patterns! The House will be sanctioned – not one Reader doubts that!'

'And what is the name of this House?' the customer asked. 'What throne? Who claims to rule it?'

'The House of Chains, my friend. To your other, questions, there is naught but confusion in answer. Ascendants vie. But I will tell you this: the Throne where the King shall sit – the Throne, my friend, is cracked.'

'You are saying this House belongs to the Chained One?'

'Aye. The Crippled God.'

'The others must be assailing it fiercely,' the man murmured, his expression thoughtful.

'You would think, but not so. Indeed, it is they who are assailed! Do you wish to see the new cards?'

'I may return later and do that very thing,' the man replied. 'But first, let me see those poor knives on that
'Poor knives! Aaii! Not poor, oh no!' The old man spun on his seat, reached up and collected the brace of weapons. He grinned, blue-veined tongue darting between red gums. 'Last owned by a Pardu ghost-slayer!' He drew one of the knives from its sheath. The blade was blackened, inlaid with a silver serpent pattern down its length.

'That is not Pardu,' the customer growled.

'Owned, I said. You've a sharp eye indeed. They are Wickan. Booty from the Chain of Dogs.'

'Let me see the other one.'

The old man unsheathed the second blade.

Kalam Mekhar's eyes involuntarily widened. Quickly regaining his composure, he glanced up at the proprietor – but the man had seen and was nodding.

'Aye, friend. Aye ...'

The entire blade, also black, was feather-patterned, the inlay an amber-tinged silver – that amber taint alloyed with otataral. Crow clan. But not a lowly warrior's weapon. No, this one belonged to someone important.

The old man resheathed the Crow knife, tapped the other one with a finger. 'Invested, this one. How to challenge the otataral? Simple. Elder magic'

'Elder. Wickan sorcery is not Elder—'

'Oh, but this now-dead Wickan warrior had a friend. See, here, take the knife in your hand. Squint at this mark, there, at the base – see, the serpent's tail coils around it—'

The long-knife was startlingly heavy in Kalam's hand. The finger ridges in the grip were overlarge, but the Wickan had compensated for this with thicker leather straps. The stamp impressed into the metal in the centre of the looped tail was intricate, almost beyond belief, given the size of the hand that must have inscribed it. Venn. Thelomen Toblakai. The Wickan had a friend indeed. And worse, I know that mark. I know precisely who invested this weapon. Gods below, what strange cycles am I striding into here?

There was no point in bartering. Too much had been revealed. 'Name your price,' Kalam sighed.

The old man's grin broadened. 'As you can imagine, a cherished set – my most valuable prize.'

'At least until the dead Crow warrior's son comes to collect it – though I doubt he will be interested in paying you in gold. I will inherit that vengeful hunter, so rein in your greed and name the price.'

'Twelve hundred.'

The assassin set a small pouch on the table and watched the proprietor loosen the strings and peer inside.

'There is a darkness to these diamonds,' the old man said after a moment.

'It is that shadow that makes them so valuable and you know it.'

'Aye, I do indeed. Half of what is within will suffice.'

'An honest hawker.'

'A rarity, yes. These days, loyalty pays.'

Kalam watched the old man count out the diamonds. 'The loss of imperial trade has been painful, it seems.'

'Very. But the situation here in G'danisban is doubly so, friend.'
'And why is that?'

'Why, everyone is at B'ridys, of course. The siege.'

'B'ridys? The old mountain fortress? Who is holed up there?'

'Malazans. They retreated from their strongholds in Ehrlitan, here and Pan'potsun – were chased all the way into the hills. Oh, nothing so grand as the Chain of Dogs, but a few hundred made it.'

'And they're still holding out?'

'Aye. B'ridys is like that, alas. Still, not much longer, I wager. Now, I am done, friend. Hide that pouch well, and may the gods ever walk in your shadow.'

Kalam struggled to keep the grin from his face as he collected the weapons. 'And with you, sir.' And so they will, friend. Far closer than you might want.

He walked a short distance down the market street, then paused to adjust the clasps of the weapon harness. The previous owner had not Kalam's bulk. Then again, few did. When he was done he slipped into the harness, then drew his telaba's overcloak around once more. The heavier weapon jutted from under his left arm.

The assassin continued on through G'danisban's mostly empty streets. Two long-knives, both Wickan. The same owner? Unknown. They were complementary in one sense, true, yet the difference in weight would challenge anyone who sought to fight using both at the same time.

In a Fenn's hand, the heavier weapon would be little more than a dirk. The design was clearly Wickan, meaning the investment had been a favour, or in payment. Can I think of a Wickan who might have earned that? Well, Coltaine – but he carried a single long-knife, unpatterned. Now, if only I knew more about that damned Thelomen Toblakai...

Of course, the High Mage named Bellurdan Skullcrusher was dead.

Cycles indeed. And now this House of Chains. The damned Crippled God—

You damned fool, Cotillion. You were there at the last Chaining, weren't you? You should have stuck a knife in the bastard right there and then.

Now, I wonder, was Bellurdan there as well?

Oh, damn, I forgot to ask what happened to that Pardu ghost-slayer ...

The road that wound southwest out of G'danisban had been worn down to the underlying cobbles. Clearly, the siege had gone on so long that the small city that fed it was growing gaunt. The besieged were probably faring worse. B'ridys had been carved into a cliffside, a long-standing tradition in the odhans surrounding the Holy Desert. There was no formal, constructed approach – not even steps, nor handholds, cut into the stone – and the tunnels behind the fortifications reached deep. Within those tunnels, springs supplied water. Kalam had only seen B'ridys from the outside, long abandoned by its original inhabitants, suggesting that the springs had dried up. And while such strongholds contained vast storage chambers, there was little chance that the Malazans who'd fled to it had found those chambers supplied.

The poor bastards were probably starving.

Kalam walked the road in the gathering dusk. He saw no-one else on the track, and suspected that the supply trains would not set out from G'danisban until the fall of night, to spare their draught animals the heat. Already, the road had begun its climb, twisting onto the sides of the hills.

The assassin had left his horse with Cotillion in the Shadow Realm. For the tasks ahead, stealth, not speed, would prove his greatest challenge. Besides, Raraku was hard on horses. Most of the outlying sources of water would have been long since fouled, in anticipation of the Adjunct's army. He knew of a few secret ones,
however, which would of necessity have been kept untainted.

This land, Kalam realized, was in itself a land under siege – and the enemy had yet to arrive. Sha’ik had
drawn the Whirlwind close, a tactic that suggested to the assassin a certain element of fear. Unless, of course,
Sha’ik was deliberately playing against expectations. Perhaps she simply sought to draw Tavore into a trap, into
Raraku, where her power was strongest, where her forces knew the land whilst the enemy did not.

But there’s at least one man in Tavore’s army who knows Raraku. And he’d damn well better speak up when
the time comes.

Night had arrived, stars glittering overhead. Kalam pressed on. Burdened beneath a pack heavy with food
and waterskins, he continued to sweat as the air chilled. Reaching the summit of yet another hill, he discerned
the glow of the besiegers’ camp beneath the ragged horizon’s silhouette. From the cliffside itself there was no
light at all.

He continued on.

It was midmorning before he arrived at the camp. Tents, wagons, stone-ringed firepits, arrayed haphazardly in a
rough semicircle before the rearing cliff-face with its smoke-blackened fortress. Heaps of rubbish surrounded
the area, latrine pits overflowing and reeking in the heat. As he made his way down the track, Kalam studied
the situation. He judged that there were about five hundred besiegers, many of them – given their uniforms –
originally part of Malazan garrisons, but of local blood. There had been no assault in some time. Makeshift
wooden towers waited off to one side.

He had been spotted, but no challenge was raised, nor was much interest accorded him as he reached the
camp’s edge. Just another fighter come to kill Malazans. Carrying his own food, ensuring he would not burden
anyone else, and therefore welcome.

As the hawker in G’danisban had suggested, the patience of the attackers had ended. Preparations were under
way for a final push. Probably not this day, but the next. The scaffolds had been left untended for too long –
ropes had dried out, wood had split. Work crews had begun the repairs, but without haste, moving slowly in the
enervating heat. There was an air of dissolution to the camp that even anticipation could not hide.

The fires have cooled here. Now, they’re only planning an assault so they can get this over with, so they can
go home.

The assassin noted a small group of soldiers near the centre of the half-ring where it seemed the orders were
coming from. One man in particular, accoutred in the armour of a Malazan lieutenant, stood with hands on hips
and was busy haranguing a half-dozen sappers.

The workmen wandered off a moment before Kalam arrived, desultorily making for the towers.

The lieutenant noticed him. Dark eyes narrowed beneath the rim of the helm. There was a crest on that
skullcap. Ashok Regiment.

Stationed in Genabariss a few years past. Then sent back to . . . Ehrlitan, I think. Hood rot the bastards, I’d
have thought they would have stayed loyal.

‘Come to see the last of them get their throats cut?’ the lieutenant asked with a hard grin. ‘Good. You’ve the
look of an organized and experienced man, and Beru knows, I’ve far too few of them here in this mob. Your
name?’

‘Ulfas,’ Kalam replied.

‘Sounds Barghast.’

The assassin shrugged as he set down his pack. ‘You’re not the first to think that.’

‘You will address me as sir. That’s if you want to be part of this fight.’
'You're not the first to think that... sir.'

'I am Captain Irriz.'

Captain . . . in a lieutenant's uniform. Felt unappreciated in the regiment, did you? 'When does the assault begin, sir?'

'Eager? Good. Tomorrow at dawn. There's only a handful left up there. It shouldn't take long once we breach the balcony entrance.'

Kalam looked up at the fortress. The balcony was little more than a projecting ledge, the doorway beyond narrower than a man's shoulders. 'They only need a handful,' he muttered, then added, 'sir.'

Irriz scowled. 'You just walked in and you're already an expert?'

'Sorry, sir. Simply an observation.'

'Well, we've a mage just arrived. Says she can knock a hole where that door is. A big hole. Ah, here she comes now.'

The woman approaching was young, slight and pallid. And Malazan. Ten paces away, her steps faltered, then she halted, light brown eyes fixing now on Kalam. 'Keep that weapon sheathed when you're near me,' she drawled. 'Irriz, get that bastard to stand well away from us.'

'Sinn? What's wrong with him?'

'Wrong? Nothing, probably. But one of his knives is an otataral weapon.'

The sudden avarice in the captain's eyes as he studied Kalam sent a faint chill through the assassin. 'Indeed. And where did you come by that, Ulfas?'

'Took it from the Wickan I killed. On the Chain of Dogs.'

There was sudden silence. Faces turned to regard Kalam anew.

Doubt flickered onto Irriz's face. 'You were there?'

'Aye. What of it?'

There were hand gestures all round, whispered prayers. The chill within Kalam grew suddenly colder. Gods, they're voicing blessings ... but not on me. They're blessing the Chain of Dogs. What truly happened there, for this to have been born?

'Why are you not with Sha'ik, then?' Irriz demanded. 'Why would Korbolo have let you leave?'

'Because,' Sinn snapped, 'Korbolo Dom is an idiot, and Kamist Reloe even worse. Personally, I am amazed he didn't lose half his army after the Fall. What true soldier would stomach what happened there? Ulfas, is it? You deserted Korbolo's Dogslayers, yes?'

Kalam simply shrugged. 'I went looking for a cleaner fight.'

Her laugh was shrill, and she spun in mocking pirouette in the dust. 'And you came here? Oh, you fool! That's so funny! It makes me want to scream, it's so funny!'

Her mind is broken. 'I see nothing amusing in killing,' he replied. 'Though I find it odd that you are here, seemingly so eager to kill fellow Malazans.'

Her face darkened. 'My reasons are my own, Ulfas. Irriz, I would speak with you in private. Come.'

Kalam held his expression impassive as the captain flinched at the imperious tone. Then the renegade officer nodded. 'I will join you in a moment, Sinn.' He turned back to the assassin. 'Ulfas. We want to take most of them alive, to give us sport. Punishment for being so stubborn. I especially want their commander. He is named
Kindly—'

'Do you know him, sir?'

Irriz grinned. 'I was 3rd Company in the Ashok. Kindly leads the 2nd.' He gestured at the fortress. 'Or what's left of it. This is a personal argument for me, and that is why I intend to win. And it's why I want those bastards alive. Wounded and disarmed.'

Sinn was waiting impatiently. Now she spoke up, 'There's a thought. Ulfas, with his otataral knife – he can make their mage useless.'

Irriz grinned. 'First into the breach, then. Acceptable to you, Ulfas?'

First in, last out. 'It won't be my first time, sir.'

The captain then joined Sinn and the two strode off.

Kalam stared after them. Captain Kindly. Never met you, sir, but for years you've been known as the meanest officer in the entire Malazan military. And, it now seems, the most stubborn, too.

Excellent. I could use a man like that.

He found an empty tent to stow his gear – empty because a latrine pit had clawed away the near side of its sand-crusted wall and was now soaking the ground beneath the floor's single rug along the back. Kalam placed his bag beside the front flap then stretched out close to it, shutting his mind and senses away from the stench.

In moments he was asleep.

He awoke to darkness. The camp beyond was silent. Slipping out from his telaba, the assassin rose into a crouch and began winding straps around his loose-fitting clothes. When he was done, he drew on fingerless leather gloves, then wound a black cloth around his head until only his eyes remained uncovered. He edged outside.

A few smouldering firepits, two tents within sight still glowing with lamplight. Three guards sitting in a makeshift picket facing the fortress – about twenty paces distant.

Kalam set out, silently skirting the latrine pit and approaching the skeletal scaffolding of the siege towers. They had posted no guard there. Irriz was probably a bad lieutenant, and now he's an even worse captain. He moved closer.

The flicker of sorcery at the base of one of the towers froze him in place. After a long, breathless moment, a second muted flash, dancing around one of the support fittings.

Kalam slowly settled down to watch.

Sinn moved from fitting to fitting. When she finished with the closest tower, she proceeded to the next. There were three in all.

When she was working on the last fitting at the base of the second tower, Kalam rose and slipped forward. As he drew near her, he unsheathed the otataral blade.

He smiled at her soft curse. Then, as realization struck her, she whirled.

Kalam held up a staying hand, slowly raised his knife, then sheathed it once more. He padded to her side. 'Lass,' he whispered in Malazan, 'this is a nasty nest of snakes for you to play in.'

Her eyes went wide, gleaming like pools in the starlight. 'I wasn't sure of you,' she replied quietly. Her thin arms drew tight around herself. 'I'm still not. Who are you?'

'Just a man sneaking to the towers ... to weaken all the supports. As you have done. All but one of them, that
is. The third one is the best made – Malazan, in fact. I want to keep that one intact.'

'Then we are allies,' she said, still hugging herself.

'She's very young. 'You showed fine acting abilities earlier on. And you've surprising skill as a mage, for one so ...'

'Minor magicks only, I'm afraid. I was being schooled.'

'Who was your instructor?'

'Fayelle. Who's now with Korbolo Dom. Fayelle, who slid her knife across the throats of my father and mother. Who went hunting for me, too. But I slipped away, and even with her sorcery she could not find me.'

'And this is to be your revenge?'

Her grin was a silent snarl. 'I have only begun my revenge, Ulfas. I want her. But I need soldiers.'

'Captain Kindly and company. You mentioned a mage in that fortress. Have you been in touch with him?'

She shook her head. 'I have not that skill.'

'Then why do you believe that the captain will join you in your cause?'

'Because one of his sergeants is my brother – well, my half-brother. I don't know if he still lives, though ...'

He settled a hand on her shoulder, ignoring the answering flinch. 'All right, lass. We will work together on this. You've your first ally.'

'Why?'

He smiled unseen behind the cloth. 'Fayelle is with Korbolo Dom, yes? Well, I have a meeting pending with Korbolo. And with Kamist Reloe. So, we'll work together in convincing Captain Kindly. Agreed?'

'Agreed.'

The relief in her voice sent a twinge through the assassin. She'd been alone for far too long in her deadly quest. In need of help . . . but with no-one around to whom she could turn. Just one more orphan in this Hood-cursed rebellion. He recalled his first sight of those thirteen hundred children he had unwittingly saved all those months back, his last time crossing this land. And there, in those faces, was the true horror of war. Those children had been alive when the carrion birds came down for their eyes ... A shudder ran through him.

'What is wrong? You seemed far away.'

He met her eyes. 'No, lass, far closer than you think.'

'Well, I have already done most of my work this night. Irriz and his warriors won't be worth much come the morning.'

'Oh? And what did you have planned for me?'

'I wasn't sure. I was hoping that, with you up front, you'd get killed quick. Captain Kindly's mage wouldn't go near you – he'd leave it to the soldiers with their crossbows.'

'And what of this hole you were to blast into the cliff-face?'

'Illusion. I've been preparing for days. I think I can do it.'

'Brave and desperate. 'Well, lass, your efforts seem to have far outstripped mine in ambition. I'd intended a little mayhem and not much more. You mentioned that Irriz and his men wouldn't be worth much. What did you mean by that?"
'I poisoned their water.'

Kalam blanched behind his mask. 'Poison? What kind?'

Tralb.'

The assassin said nothing for a long moment. Then, 'How much?'

She shrugged. 'All that the healer had. Four vials. He once said he used it to stop tremors, such as afflicted old people.'

Aye. A drop. 'When?'

'Not long ago.'

'So, unlikely anyone's drunk it yet.'

'Except maybe a guard or two.'

'Wait here, lass.' Kalam set out, silent in the darkness, until he came within sight of the three warriors manning the picket. Earlier, they had been seated. That was no longer the case. But there was movement, low to the ground – he slipped closer.

The three figures were spasming, writhing, their limbs jerking. Foam caked their mouths and blood had started from their bulging eyes. They had fouled themselves. A waterskin lay nearby in a patch of wet sand that was quickly disappearing beneath a carpet of capemoths.

The assassin drew his pig-sticker. He would have to be careful, since to come into contact with blood, spit or any other fluid was to invite a similar fate. The warriors were doomed to suffer like this for what to them would be an eternity – they would still be spasming by dawn, and would continue to do so until either their hearts gave out or they died from dehydration. Horribly, with Tralb it was often the latter rather than the former.

He reached the nearest one. Saw recognition in the man's leaking eyes. Kalam raised his knife. Relief answered the gesture. The assassin drove the narrow-bladed weapon down into the guard's left eye, angled upward. The body stiffened, then settled with a frothy sigh.

He quickly repeated the grisly task with the other two.

Then meticulously cleaned his knife in the sand.

Capemoths, wings rasping, were descending on the scene. Hunting rhizan quickly joined them. The air filled with the sound of crunching exoskeletons.

Kalam faced the camp. He would have to stove the casks. Enemies of the empire these warriors might be, but they deserved a more merciful death than this.

A faint skittering sound spun him around.

A rope had uncoiled down the cliff-face from the stone balcony. Figures began descending, silent and fast.

They had watchers.

The assassin waited.

Three in all, none armed with more than daggers. As they came forward one halted while still a dozen paces distant.

The lead man drew up before the assassin. 'And who in Hood's name are you?' he hissed, gold flashing from his teeth.

'A Malazan soldier,' was Kalam's whispered reply. 'Is that your mage hanging back over there? I need his help.'
'He says he can’t—'

'I know. My otataral long-knife. But he need not get close – all he has to do is empty this camp’s water casks.'

'What for? There’s a spring not fifty paces downtrail – they’ll just get more.'

'You’ve another ally here,' Kalam said. 'She fouled the water with Tralb – what do you think afflicted these poor bastards?''

The second man grunted. 'We was wondering. Not pleasant, what happened to them. Still, it’s no less than they deserved. I say leave the water be.'

'Why not take the issue to Captain Kindly? He’s the one making the decisions for you, right?'

The man scowled.

His companion spoke. 'That’s not why we’re down here. We’re here to retrieve you. And if there’s another one, we’ll take her, too.'

'To do what?' Kalam demanded. He was about to say Starve? Die of thirst? but then he realized that neither soldier before him looked particularly gaunt, nor parched. 'You want to stay holed up in there for ever?'

'It suits us fine,' the second soldier snapped. 'We could leave at any time. There’s back routes. But the question is, then what? Where do we go? The whole land is out for Malazan blood.'

'What is the last news you’ve heard?' Kalam asked.

'We ain’t heard any at all. Not since we quitted Ehrlitan. As far as we can see, Seven Cities ain’t part of the Malazan Empire any more, and there won’t be nobody coming to get us. If there was, they’d have come long since.'

The assassin regarded the two soldiers for a moment, then he sighed. 'All right, we need to talk. But not here. Let me get the lass – we’ll go with you. On condition that your mage do me the favour I asked.'

'Not an even enough bargain,' the second soldier said. 'Grab for us Irriz. We want a little sit-down with that flyblown corporal.'

'Corporal? Didn’t you know, he’s a captain now. You want him. Fine. Your mage destroys the water in those casks. I’ll send the lass your way – be kind to her. All of you head back up. I may be a while.'

'We can live with that deal.'

Kalam nodded and made his way back to where he’d left Sinn.

She had not left her position, although instead of hiding she was dancing beneath one of the towers, spinning in the sand, arms floating, hands fluttering like capemoth wings.

The assassin hissed in warning as he drew near. She halted, saw him, and scurried over. 'You took too long! I thought you were dead!'

And so you danced? 'No, but those three guards are. I’ve made contact with the soldiers from the fortress. They’ve invited us inside – conditions seem amenable up there. I’ve agreed.'

'But what about the attack tomorrow?'

'It will fail. Listen, Sinn, they can leave at any time, unseen – we can be on our way into Raraku as soon as we can convince Kindly. Now, follow me – and quietly.'

They returned to where the three Malazan imperials waited.

Kalam scowled at the squad mage, but he grinned in return. 'It’s done. Easy when you’re not around.'
'Very well. This is Sinn – she's a mage as well. Go on, all of you.'

'Lady's luck to you,' one of the soldiers said to Kalam.

Without replying, the assassin turned about and slipped back into the camp. He returned to his own tent, entered and crouched down beside his kit bag. Rummaging inside it, he drew out the pouch of diamonds and selected one at random.

A moment's careful study, holding it close in the gloom. Murky shadows swam within the cut stone. Beware of shadows bearing gifts. He reached outside and dragged in one of the flat stones used to hold down the tent walls, and set the diamond onto its dusty surface.

The bone whistle Cotillion had given him was looped on a thong around his neck. He pulled it clear and set it to his lips. 'Blow hard and you'll awaken all of them. Blow soft and directly at one in particular, and you'll awaken that one alone.' Kalam hoped the god knew what he was talking about. Better if these weren't Shadowthrone's toys ... He leaned forward until the whistle was a mere hand's width from the diamond.

Then softly blew through it.

There was no sound. Frowning, Kalam pulled the whistle from his lips and examined it. He was interrupted by a soft tinkling sound.

The diamond had crumbled to glittering dust.

From which a swirling shadow rose.

As I'd feared. Azalan. From a territory in the Shadow Realm bordering that of the Aptorians. Rarely seen, and never more than one at a time. Silent, seemingly incapable of language – how Shadowthrone commanded them was a mystery.

Swirling, filling the tent, dropping to all six limbs, the spiny ridge of its massive, hunched back scraping against the fabric to either side of the ridge-pole. Blue, all-too-human eyes blinked out at Kalam from beneath a black-skinned, flaring, swept-back brow. Wide mouth, lower lip strangely protruding as if in eternal pout, twin slits for a nose. A mane of thin bluish-black hair hung in strands, tips brushing the tent floor. There was no indication of its gender. A complicated harness crisscrossed its huge torso, studded with a variety of weapons, not one of which seemed of practical use.

The azalan possessed no feet as such – each appendage ended in a wide, flat, short-fingered hand. The homeland of these demons was a forest, and these creatures commonly lived in the tangled canopy high overhead, venturing down to the gloomy forest floor only when summoned.

Summoned . . . only to then be imprisoned in diamonds. If it was me, I'd be pretty annoyed by now.

The demon suddenly smiled.

Kalam glanced away, considering how to frame his request. Get Captain Irriz. Alive, but kept quiet. Join me at the rope. There would need to be some explaining to do, and with a beast possessing no language—

The azalan turned suddenly, nostrils twitching. The broad, squat head dipped down on its long, thickly muscled neck. Down to the tent's back wall at the base.

Where urine from the latrine pit had soaked through.

A soft cluck, then the demon wheeled about and lifted a hind limb. Two penises dropped into view from a fold of flesh.

Twin streams reached down to the sodden carpet.

Kalam reeled back at the stench, back, out through the flap and outside into the chill night air, where he remained, on hands and knees, gagging.
A moment later the demon emerged. Lifted its head to test the air, then surged into the shadows – and was gone.

In the direction of the captain's tent.

Kalam managed a lungful of cleansing air, slowly brought his shuddering under control. 'All right, pup,' he softly gasped, 'guess you read my mind.' After a moment he rose into a crouch, reached back with breath held into the tent to retrieve his pack, then staggered towards the cliff-face.

A glance back showed steam or smoke rising out from his tent's entrance, a whispering crackle slowly growing louder from within it.

*Gods, who needs a vial of Tralb?*

He padded swiftly to where the rope still dangled beneath the balcony.

A sputtering burst of flames erupted from where his tent had been.

Hardly an event to go unnoticed. Hissing a curse, Kalam sprinted for the rope.

Shouts rose from the camp. Then screams, then shrieks, each one ending in a strange mangled squeal.

The assassin skidded to a halt at the cliff-face, closed both hands on the rope, and began climbing. He was halfway up to the balcony when the limestone wall shook suddenly, puffing out dust. Pebbles rained down. And a hulking shape was now beside him, clinging to the raw, runnelled rock. Tucked under one arm was Irriz, unconscious and in his bedclothes. The azalan seemed to flow up the wall, hands gripping the rippled ribbons of shadow as if they were iron rungs. In moments the demon reached the balcony and swung itself over the lip and out of sight.

And the stone ledge groaned.

Cracks snaked down.

Kalam stared upward to see the entire balcony sagging, pulling away from the wall.

His moccasins slipped wildly as he tried to scrabble his way to one side. Then he saw long, unhuman hands close on the lip of the stone ledge. The sagging ceased.

*H-how in Hood's name—*

The assassin resumed climbing. Moments later he reached the balcony and pulled himself over the edge.

The azalan was fully stretched over it. Two hands gripped the ledge. Three others held shadows on the cliffside above the small doorway. Shadows were unravelling from the demon like layers of skin, vaguely human shapes stretching out to hold the balcony to the wall – and being torn apart by the immense strain. As Kalam scrambled onto its surface, a grinding, crunching sound came from where the balcony joined the wall, and it dropped a hand's width along the seam.

The assassin launched himself towards the recessed doorway, where he saw a face in the gloom, twisted with terror – the squad mage.

'Back off!' Kalam hissed. 'It's a friend!'

The mage reached out and clasped Kalam's forearm.

The balcony dropped away beneath the assassin even as he was dragged into the corridor.

Both men tumbled back, over Irriz's prone body.

Everything shook as a tremendous thump sounded from below. The echoes were slow to fade.

The azalan swung in from under the lintel stone. Grinning.
A short distance down the corridor crouched a squad of soldiers. Sinn had an arm wrapped round one of them – her half-brother, Kalam assumed as he slowly regained his feet.

One of the soldiers the assassin had met earlier moved forward, edging past the assassin and – with more difficulty – the azalan, back out to the edge. After a moment he called back. 'All quiet down there, Sergeant. The camp's a mess, though. Can't see anyone about…'

The other soldier from before frowned. 'No-one, Bell?'

'No. Like they all ran away.'

Kalam offered nothing, though he had his suspicions. There was something about all those shadows in the demon's possession…

The squad mage had disentangled himself from Irriz and now said to the assassin, 'That's a damned frightening friend you have there. And it ain't imperial. Shadow Realm?'

'A temporary ally,' Kalam replied with a shrug.

'How temporary?'

The assassin faced the sergeant. 'Irriz has been delivered – what do you plan on doing with him?'

'Haven't decided yet. The lass here says you're named Ulfas. Would that be right? A Genabackan Barghast name? Wasn't there a war chief by that name? Killed at Blackdog.'

'I wasn't about to tell Irriz my real name, Sergeant. I'm a Bridgeburner. Kalam Mekhar, rank of corporal.'

There was silence.

Then the mage sighed. 'Wasn't you outlawed?'

'A feint, one of the Empress's schemes. Dujek needed a free hand for a time.'

'All right,' the sergeant said. 'It don't matter if you're telling the truth or not. We've heard of you. I'm Sergeant Cord. The company mage here is Ebron. That's Bell, and Corporal Shard.'

The corporal was Sinn's half-brother, and the young man's face was blank, no doubt numbed by the shock of Sinn's sudden appearance.

'Where's Captain Kindly?'

'Cord winced. 'The rest of the company – what's left, is down below. We lost the captain and the lieutenant a few days ago.'

'Lost? How?'

'They, uh, they fell down a well shaft. Drowned. Or so Ebron found out, once he climbed down and examined the situation more closely. It's fast-running, an underground river. They were swept away, the poor bastards.'

'And how do two people fall down a well shaft, Sergeant?'

'The man bared his gold teeth. 'Exploring, I imagine. Now, Corporal, it seems I outrank you. In fact, I'm the only sergeant left. Now, if you aren't outlawed, then you're still a soldier of the empire. And as a soldier of the empire…'

'You have me there,' Kalam muttered.

'For now, you'll be attached to my old squad. You've got seniority over Corporal Shard, so you'll be in charge.'
'Very well, and what's the squad's complement?'

'Shard, Bell and Limp. You've met Bell. Limp's down below. He broke his leg in a rock-slide, but he's mending fast. There's fifty-one soldiers in all. Second Company, Ashok Regiment.'

'It seems your besiegers are gone,' Kalam observed. 'The world hasn't been entirely still while you've been shut up in here, Sergeant. I think I should tell you what I know. There are alternatives to waiting here – no matter how cosy it might be – until we all die of old age ... or drowning accidents.'

'Aye, Corporal. You'll make your report. And if I want to ask for advice on what to do next, you'll be first in line. Now, enough with the opinions. Time to go below – and I suggest you find a leash for that damned demon. And tell it to stop smiling.'

'You'll have to tell it yourself, Sergeant,' Kalam drawled.

Ebron snapped, 'The Malazan Empire don't need allies from the Shadow Realm – get rid of it!'

The assassin glanced over at the mage. 'As I said earlier, changes have come, Mage. Sergeant Cord, you're entirely welcome to try throwing a collar round this azalan's neck. But I should tell you first – even though you're not asking for my advice – that even though those weird gourds, pans and knobby sticks strapped on to the beast's belts don't look like weapons, this azalan has just taken the lives of over five hundred rebel warriors. And how long did that take? Maybe fifty heartbeats. Does it do what I ask? Now that's a question worth pondering, don't you think?'

Cord studied Kalam for a long moment. 'Are you threatening me?'

'Having worked alone for some time, Sergeant,' the assassin replied in a low voice, 'my skin's grown thin. I'll take your squad. I'll even follow your orders, unless they happen to be idiotic. If you have a problem with all this, take it up with my own sergeant next time you see him. That'd be Whiskeyjack. Apart from the Empress herself, he's the only man I answer to. You want to make use of me? Fine. My services are available to you ... for a time.'

'He's on some secret mission,' Ebron muttered. 'For the Empress, is my guess. He's probably back in the Claw – that's where he started, after all, isn't it?'

Cord looked thoughtful, then he shrugged and turned away. 'This is making my head ache. Let's get below.'

Kalam watched the sergeant push between the clump of soldiers crowding the corridor. *Something tells me I'm not going to enjoy this much.*

Sinn danced a step.

A blurred sword of dark iron rose along the horizon, a massive, bruised blade that flickered as it swelled ever larger. The wind had fallen off, and it seemed that the island in the path of the sword's tip grew no closer. Cutter moved up to the lone mast and began storm-rigging the luffing sail. 'I'm going to man the sweeps for a while,' he said. 'Will you take the tiller?'

With a shrug Apsalar moved to the stern.

The storm still lay behind the island of Drift Avalii, over which hung a seemingly permanent, immovable bank of heavy clouds. Apart from a steeply rising shoreline, there seemed to be no high ground; the forest of cedars, firs and redwoods looked impenetrable, their boles ever cloaked in gloom.

Cutter stared at the island for a moment longer, then gauged the pace of the approaching storm. He settled onto the bench behind the mast and collected the sweeps. 'We might make it,' he said, as he dropped the oar blades into the murky water and pulled.

'The island will shatter it,' Apsalar replied.
He narrowed his eyes on her. It was the first time in days that she had ventured a statement without considerable prodding on his part. 'Well, I may have crossed a damned ocean, but I still understand nothing of the sea. Why should an island without a single mountain break that storm?'

'A normal island wouldn't,' she answered.

'Ah, I see.' He fell silent. Her knowledge came from Cotillion's memories, appearing to add yet another layer to Apsalar's miseries. The god was with them once more, a haunting presence between them. Cutter had told her of the spectral visitation, of Cotillion's words. Her distress — and barely constrained fury — seemed to originate from the god's recruitment of Cutter himself.

His choosing of his new name had displeased her from the very first, and that he had now become, in effect, a minion of the patron god of assassins appeared to wound her deeply. He had been naive, it now seemed in retrospect, to have believed that such a development would bring them closer.

Apsalar was not happy with her own path — a realization that had rocked the Daru. She drew no pleasure or satisfaction from her own cold, brutal efficiency as a killer. Cutter had once imagined that competency was a reward in itself, that skill bred its own justification, creating its own hunger and from that hunger a certain pleasure. A person was drawn to his or her own proficiency — back in Darujhistan, after all, his thieving habits had not been the product of necessity. He'd suffered no starvation on the city's streets, no depredation by its crueler realities. He had stolen purely for pleasure, and because he had been good at it. A future as a master thief had seemed a worthy goal, notoriety indistinguishable from respect.

But now, Apsalar was trying to tell him that competence was not justification. That necessity demanded its own path and there was no virtue to be found at its heart.

He'd found himself at subtle war with her, the weapons those of silence and veiled expressions.

He grunted at the sweeps. The seas were growing choppy. 'Well, I hope you're right,' he said. 'We could do with the shelter... though from what the Rope said, there will be trouble among the denizens of Drift Avalii.'

'Tiste Andii,' Apsalar said. 'Anomander Rake's own. He settled them there, to guard the Throne.'

'Do you recall Dancer — or Cotillion — speaking with them?'

Her dark eyes flicked to his for a moment, then she looked away. 'It was a short conversation. These Tiste Andii have known isolation for far too long. Their master left them there, and has never returned.'

'Never?'

'There are... complications. The shore ahead offers no welcome — see for yourself.'

He drew the oars back in and twisted round on the seat.

The shoreline was a dull grey sandstone, wave-worn into undulating layers and shelves. 'Well, we can draw up easily enough, but I see what you mean. No place to pull the runner up, and tethering it risks battering by the waves. Any suggestions?'

The storm — or the island — was drawing breath, tugging the sail. They were quickly closing on the rocky coast.

The sky's rumbles were nearer now, and Cutter could see the wavering treetops evincing the arrival of a high and fierce wind, stretching the clouds above the island into long, twisting tendrils.

'I have no suggestions,' Apsalar finally replied. 'There is another concern — currents.'

And he could see now. The island did indeed drift, unmoored to the sea bottom. Spinning vortices roiled around the sandstone. Water was pulled under, flung back out, seething all along the shoreline. 'Beru fend us,' Cutter muttered, 'this won't be easy.' He scrambled to the bow.

Apsalar swung the runner onto a course parallel to the shore. 'Look for a shelf low to the water,' she called.
'We might be able to drag the boat onto it.'

Cutter said nothing to that. It would take four or more strong men to manage such a task... but at least we'd get onto shore in one piece. The currents tugged at the hull, thawing the craft side to side. A glance back showed Apsalar struggling to steady the tiller.

The dull grey sandstone revealed, in its countless shelves and modulations, a history of constantly shifting sea levels. Cutter had no idea how an island could float. If sorcery was responsible, then its power was vast, and yet, it seemed, far from perfect.

'There!' he shouted suddenly, pointing ahead where the coast’s undulations dropped to a flat stretch barely a hand's width above the roiling water.

'Get ready,' Apsalar instructed, half rising from her seat.

Clambering up alongside the prow, a coil of rope in his left hand, Cutter prepared to leap onto the shelf. As they drew closer, he could see that the stone ledge was thin, deeply undercut.

They swiftly closed. Cutter jumped.

He landed square-footed, knees flexing into a crouch.

There was a sharp crack, then the stone was falling away beneath his moccasined feet. Cold water swept around his ankles. Unbalanced, the Daru pitched backward with a yelp. Behind him, the boat rushed inward on the wave that tumbled into the sinking shelf's wake. Cutter plunged into deep water, even as the encrusted hull rolled over him.

The currents yanked him downward into icy darkness. His left heel thumped against the island's rock, the impact softened by a thick skin of seaweed.

Down, a terrifyingly fast plummet into the deep.

Then the rock wall was gone, and he was pulled by the currents under the island.

A roar filled his head, the sound of rushing water. His last lungful of air was dwindling to nothing in his chest. Something hard hammered into his side – a piece of the runner's hull, wreckage being dragged by the currents – their boat had overturned. Either Apsalar was somewhere in the swirling water with him, or she had managed to leap onto solid sandstone. He hoped it was the latter, that they would not both drown – for drowning was all that was left to him.

Sorry, Cotillion. I hope you did not expect too much of me—

He struck stone once more, was rolled along it, then the current tugged him upward and suddenly spat him loose.

He flailed with his limbs, clawing the motionless water, his pulse pounding in his head. Disorientated, panic ripping through him like wildfire, he reached out one last time.

His right hand plunged into cold air.

A moment later his head broke the surface.

Icy, bitter air poured into his lungs, as sweet as honey. There was no light, and the sounds of his gasping returned no echoes, seeming to vanish in some unknown immensity.

Cutter called out to Apsalar, but there was no reply.

He was swiftly growing numb. Choosing a random direction, he set out.

And quickly struck a stone wall, thick with wet, slimy growth. He reached up, found only sheerness. He swam along it, his limbs weakening, a deadly lassitude stealing into him. He struggled on, feeling his will seep
away.

Then his outstretched hand slapped down onto the flat surface of a ledge. Cutter threw both arms onto the stone. His legs, numbed by the cold, pulled at him. Moaning, he sought to drag himself out of the water, but his strength was failing. Fingers gouging tracks through the slime, he slowly sank backward.

A pair of hands closed, one on each shoulder, to gather the sodden fabric in a grip hard as iron. He felt himself lifted clear from the water, then dropped onto the ledge.

Weeping, Cutter lay unmov ing. Shivers racked him.

Eventually, a faint crackling sound reached through, seeming to come from all sides. The air grew warmer, a dull glow slowly rising.

The Daru rolled onto his side. He had expected to see Apsalar. Instead, standing above him was an old man, extraordinarily tall, his white hair long and dishevelled, white-bearded though his skin was black as ebony, with eyes a deep, glittering amber – the sole source, Cutter realized with a shock – of the light.

All around them, the seaweed was drying, shrivelling, as waves of heat radiated from the stranger.

The ledge was only a few paces wide, a single lip of slick stone flanked by vertical walls stretching out to the sides.

Sensation was returning to Cutter's legs, his clothes steaming now in the heat. He struggled into a sitting position. 'Thank you, sir,' he said in Malazan.

'Your craft has littered the pool,' the man replied. 'I suppose you will want some of the wreckage recovered.'

Cutter twisted to stare out on the water, but could see nothing. 'I had a companion—'

'You arrived alone. It is probable that your companion drowned. Only one current delivers victims here. The rest lead only to death. On the isle itself, there is but one landing, and you did not find it. Few corpses of late, of course, given our distance from occupied lands. And the end of trade.'

His words were halting, as if rarely used, and he stood awkwardly.

'She drowned? More likely she made it onto shore. Not for Apsalar the ignoble end that almost took me. Then again... She was not yet immortal, as subject to the world's cruel indifference as anyone. He pushed the thought away for the moment.

'Are you recovered?'

Cutter glanced up. 'How did you find me?'

A shrug. 'It is my task. Now, if you can walk, it is time to leave.'

The Daru pushed himself to his feet. His clothing was almost dry. 'You possess unusual gifts,' he observed. 'I am named ... Cutter.'

'You may call me Darist. We must not delay. The very presence of life in this place risks his awakening.'

The ancient Tiste Andii turned to face the stone wall. At a gesture, a doorway appeared, beyond which were stone stairs leading upward. 'That which survived the wrecking of your craft awaits you above, Cutter. Come.'

The Daru set off after the man. 'Awakening? Who might awaken?'

Darist did not reply.

The steps were worn and slick, the ascent steep and seemingly interminable. The cold water had stolen Cutter's strength, and his pace grew ever slower. Again and again Darist paused to await him, saying nothing, his expression closed.
They eventually emerged onto a level hallway down which ran, along the walls, pillars of rough-skinned cedars. The air was musty and damp beneath the sharp scent of the wood. There was no-one else in sight. ‘Darist,’ Cutter asked as they walked down the aisle, ‘are we still beneath ground level?’

'We are, but we shall proceed no higher for the time being. The island is assailed.'

'What? By whom? What of the Throne?'

Darist halted and swung round, the glow in his eyes somehow deepening. ‘A question carelessly unasked. What has brought you, human, to Drift Avalii?’

Cutter hesitated. There was no love lost between the present rulers of Shadow and the Tiste Andii. Nor had Cotillion even remotely suggested actual contact be made with the Children of Darkness. They had been placed here, after all, to ensure that the true Throne of Shadow remain unoccupied. ‘I was sent by a mage – a scholar, whose studies had led him to believe the island – and all it contained – was in danger. He seeks to discover the nature of that threat.’

Darist was silent for a moment, his lined face devoid of expression. Then he said, ‘What is this scholar’s name?’

‘Uh, Baruk. Do you know him? He lives in Darujhistan—’

‘What lies in the world beyond the island is of no concern to me,’ the Tiste Andii replied.

And that, old man, is why you’re in this mess. Cotillion was right. The Tiste Edur have returned, haven’t they? To reclaim the Throne of Shadow. But it was Anomander Rake who left you here, entrusted with—’

‘He lives still, does he? If Mother Dark’s favoured son is displeased with how we have managed this task, then he must come and tell us so himself. It was not some human mage who sent you here, was it? Do you kneel before the Wielder of Dragnipur? Does he renew his claims to the blood of the Tiste Andii, then? Has he renounced his Draconian blood?’

‘I wouldn’t know—’

‘Does he now appear as an old man — older by far than me? Ah, I see by your face the truth of it. He has not. Well, you may go back to him and tell him—’

‘Wait! I do not serve Rake! Aye, I saw him in person, and not very long ago, and he looked young enough at the time. But I did not kneel to him – Hood knows, he was too busy at the time in any case! Too busy fighting a demon to converse with me! We but crossed paths. I don’t know what you’re talking about, Darist. Sorry. And I am most certainly not in any position to find him and tell him whatever it is you want me to say to him.’

The Tiste Andii studied Cutter for a moment longer, then he swung about and resumed the journey.

The Daru followed, his thoughts wild with confusion. It was one thing to accept the charge of a god, but the further he travelled on this dread path, the more insignificant he himself felt. Arguments between Anomander Rake and these Tiste Andii of Drift Avalii ... well, that was no proper business of his. The plan had been to sneak onto this island and remain unseen. To determine if indeed the Edur had found this place, though what Cotillion would do with such knowledge was anyone’s guess.

But that’s something I should think about, I suppose. Damn it, Cutter — Crokus would’ve had questions! Mowri knows, he would’ve hesitated a lot longer before accepting Cotillion’s bargain. If he accepted at all! This new persona was imposing a certain sense of stricture – he’d thought it would bring him more freedom. But now it was beginning to appear that the truly free one had been Crokus.

Not that freedom ensured happiness. Indeed, to be free was to live in absence. Of responsibilities, of loyalties, of the pressures that expectation imposed. Ah, misery has tainted my views. Misery, and the threat of true grieving, which draws nearer – but no, she must be alive. Somewhere up above. On an island assailed ...

‘Darist, please, wait a moment.’
The tall figure stopped. 'I see no reason to answer your questions.'

'I am concerned ... for my companion. If she's alive, she's somewhere above us, on the surface. You said you were under attack. I fear for her—'

'We sense the presence of strangers, Cutter. Above us, there are Tiste Edur. But no-one else. She is drowned, this companion of yours. There is no point in holding out hope.'

The Daru sat down suddenly. He felt sick, his heart stuttering with anguish. And despair.

'Death is not an unkind fate,' Darist said above him. 'If she was a friend, you will miss her company, and that is the true source of your grief – your sorrow is for yourself. My words may displease you, but I speak from experience. I have felt the deaths of many of my kin, and I mourn the spaces in my life where they once stood. But such losses serve only to ease my own impending demise.'

Cutter stared up at the Tiste Andii. 'Darist, forgive me. You may be old, but you are also a damned fool. And I begin to understand why Rake left you here then forgot about you. Now, kindly shut up.' He pushed himself upright, feeling hollowed out inside, but determined not to surrender to the despair that threatened to overwhelm him.

Because surrendering is what this Tiste Andii has done.

'Your anger leaves me undamaged,' Darist said. He turned and gestured to the double doors directly ahead. 'Through here you will find a place to rest. Your salvage awaits there, as well.'

'Will you tell me nothing of the battle above?'

'What is there to tell you, Cutter? We have lost.'

'Lost! Who is left among you?'

'Here in the Hold, where stands the Throne, there is only me. Now, best rest. We shall have company soon enough.'

The howls of rage reverberated through Onrack's bones, though he knew his companion could hear nothing. These were cries of the spirits – two spirits, trapped within two of the towering, bestial statues rearing up on the plain before them.

The cloud cover overhead had broken apart, was fast vanishing in thinning threads. Three moons rode the heavens, and there were two suns. The light flowed with shifting hues as the moons swung on their invisible tethers. A strange, unsettling world, Onrack reflected.

The storm was spent. They had waited in the lee of a small hill while it thrashed around the gargantuan statues, the wind howling past from its wild race through the rubble-littered streets of the ruined city lying beyond. And now the air steamed.

'What do you see, T'lan Imass?' Trull asked from where he sat hunched, his back to the edifices.

Shrugging, the T'lan Imass turned away from his lengthy study of the statues. 'There are mysteries here ... of which I suspect you know more than I.'

The Tiste Edur glanced up with a wry expression. 'That seems unlikely. What do you know of the Hounds of Shadow?'

'Very little. The Logros crossed paths with them only once, long ago, in the time of the First Empire. Seven in number. Serving an unknown master, yet bent on destruction.'

Trull smiled oddly, then asked, 'The human First Empire, or yours?'

'I know little of the human empire of that name. We were drawn into its heart but once, Trull Sengar, in answer to the chaos of the Soletaken and D'ivers. The Hounds made no appearance during that slaughter.' Onrack looked back at the massive stone Hound before them. 'It is believed,' he said slowly, 'by the
bonecasters, that to create an icon of a spirit or a god is to capture its essence within that icon. Even the laying of stones prescribes confinement. Just as a hut can measure out the limits of power for a mortal, so too are spirits and gods sealed into a chosen place of earth or stone or wood ... or an object. In this way power is chained, and so becomes manageable. Tell me, do the Tiste Edur concur with that notion?'

Trull Sengar climbed to his feet. 'Do you think we raised these giant statues, Onrack? Do your bonecasters also believe that power begins as a thing devoid of shape, and thus beyond control? And that to carve out an icon – or make a circle of stones – actually forces order upon that power?'

Onrack cocked his head, was silent for a time. 'Then it must be that we make our own gods and spirits. That belief demands shape, and shaping brings life into being. Yet were not the Tiste Edur fashioned by Mother Dark? Did not your goddess create you?'

Trull's smile broadened. 'I was referring to these statues, Onrack. To answer you – I do not know if the hands that fashioned these were Tiste Edur. As for Mother Dark, it may be that in creating us, she but simply separated what was not separate before.'

'Are you then the shadows of Tiste Andii? Torn free by the mercy of your goddess mother?'

'But Onrack, we are all torn free.'

'Two of the Hounds are here, Trull Sengar. Their souls are trapped in the stone. And one more thing of note – these likenesses cast no shadows.'

'Nor do the Hounds themselves.'

'If they are but reflections, then there must be Hounds of Darkness, from which they were torn,' Onrack persisted. 'Yet there is no knowledge of such...' The T'lan Imass suddenly fell silent.

Trull laughed. 'It seems you know more of the human First Empire than you first indicated. What was that tyrant emperor's name? No matter. We should journey onward, to the gate—'

'Dessimbelackis,' Onrack whispered. 'The founder of the human First Empire. Long vanished by the time of the unleashing of the Beast Ritual. It was believed he had ... veered.'

'D'ivers?'

'Aye.'

'And beasts numbered?'

'Seven.'

Trull stared up at the statues, then gestured. 'We didn't build these. No, I am not certain, but in my heart I feel ... no empathy. They are ominous and brutal to my eyes, T'lan Imass. The Hounds of Shadow are not worthy of worship. They are indeed untethered, wild and deadly. To truly command them, one must sit in the Throne of Shadow – as master of the realm. But more than that. One must first draw together the disparate fragments. Making Kurald Emurlahn whole once more.'

'And this is what your kin seek,' Onrack rumbled. 'The possibility troubles me.'

The Tiste Edur studied the T'lan Imass, then shrugged. 'I did not share your distress at the prospect – not at first. And indeed, had it remained ... pure, perhaps I would still be standing alongside my brothers. But another power acts behind the veil in all this – I know not who or what, but I would tear aside that veil.'

'Why?'

Trull seemed startled by the question, then he shivered. 'Because what it has made of my people is an abomination, Onrack.'

The T'lan Imass set out towards the gap between the two nearest statues.
After a moment, Trull Sengar followed. ‘I imagine you know little of what it is like to see your kin fall into
dissolution, to see the spirit of an entire people grow corrupt, to struggle endlessly to open their eyes – as yours
have been opened by whatever clarity chance has gifted you.’

‘True,’ Onrack replied, his steps thumping the sodden ground.

‘Nor is it mere naïveté,’ the Tiste Edur went on, limping in Onrack's wake. ‘Our denial is wilful, our studied
indifference conveniently self-serving to our basest desires. We are a long-lived people who now kneel before
short-term interests—’

‘If you find that unusual,’ the T’lan Imass muttered, ‘then it follows that the one behind the veil has need for
you only in the short term – if indeed that hidden power is manipulating the Tiste Edur.’

‘An interesting thought. You may well be right. The question then is, once that short-term objective is
reached, what will happen to my people?’

‘Things that outlive their usefulness are discarded,’ Onrack replied.

‘Abandoned. Yes—’

‘Unless, of course,’ the T’lan Imass went on, ‘they would then pose a threat to one who had so exploited them.
If so, then the answer would be to annihilate them once they are no longer useful.’

‘There is the unpleasant ring of truth to your words, Onrack.’

‘I am generally unpleasant, Trull Sengar.’

‘So I am learning. You say the souls of two Hounds are imprisoned within these – which ones again?’

‘We now walk between them.’

‘What are they doing here, I wonder?’

‘The stone has been shaped to encompass them, Trull Sengar. No-one asks the spirit or the god, when the
icon is fashioned, if it wishes entrapment. Do they? The need to make such vessels is a mortal's need. That one
can rest eyes on the thing one worships is an assertion of control at worst, or at best the illusion that one can
negotiate over one’s own fate.’

‘And you find such notions suitably pathetic, Onrack?’

‘I find most notions pathetic, Trull Sengar.’

‘Are these beasts trapped for eternity, do you think? Is this where they go when they are destroyed?’

Onrack shrugged. ‘I have no patience with these games. You possess your own knowledge and suspicions,
yet would not speak them. Instead, you seek to discover what I know, and what I sense of these snared spirits. I
care nothing for the fate either way of these Hounds of Shadow. Indeed, I find it unfortunate that – if these two
were slain in some other realm and so have ended up here – there are but five remaining, for that diminishes my
chances of killing one myself. And I think I would enjoy killing a Hound of Shadow.’

The Tiste Edur’s laugh was harsh. ‘Well, I won’t deny that confidence counts for a lot. Even so, Onrack of the
Logros, I do not think you would walk away from a violent encounter with a Hound.’

The T’lan Imass halted and swung towards Trull Sengar. ‘There is stone, and there is stone.’

‘I am afraid I do not understand—’

In answer, Onrack unsheathed his obsidian sword. He strode up to the nearer of the two statues. The
creature's forepaw was itself taller than the T’lan Imass. He raised his weapon two-handed, then swung a blow
against the dark, unweathered stone.
An ear-piercing crack ripped the air.

Onrack staggered, head tilting back as fissures shot up through the enormous edifice.

It seemed to shiver, then exploded into a towering cloud of dust.

Yelling, Trull Sengar leapt back, scrambling as the billowing dust rolled outward to engulf him.

The cloud hissed around Onrack. He righted himself, then dropped into a fighting stance as a darker shape appeared through the swirling grey haze.

A second concussion thundered – this time behind the T’lan Imass – as the other statue exploded. Darkness descended as the twin clouds blotted out the sky, closing the horizons to no more than a dozen paces on all sides.

The beast that emerged before Onrack was as tall at the shoulder as Trull Sengar’s full height. Its hide was colourless, and its eyes burned black. A broad, flat head, small ears . . .

Faint through the grey gloom, something of the two suns’ light, and that reflected from the moons, reached down – to cast beneath the Hound a score of shadows.

The beast bared fangs the size of tusks, lips peeling back in a silent snarl that revealed blood-red gums.

The Hound attacked.

Onrack’s blade was a midnight blur, flashing to kiss the creature’s thick, muscled neck – but the swing cut only dusty air. The T’lan Imass felt enormous jaws close about his chest. He was yanked from his feet. Bones splintered. A savage shake that ripped the sword from his hands, then he was sailing through the grainy gloom —

To be caught with a grinding snap by a second pair of jaws.

The bones of his left arm shattered into a score of pieces within its taut hide of withered skin, then it was torn entirely from his body.

Another crunching shake, then he was thrown into the air once more. To crash in a splintered heap on the ground, where he rolled once, then was still.

There was thunder in Onrack’s skull. He thought to fall to dust, but for the first time he possessed neither the will nor, it seemed, the capacity to do so.

The power was shorn from him – the Vow had been broken, ripped away from his body. He was now, he realized, as those of his fallen kin, the ones that had sustained so much physical destruction that they had ceased to be one with the T’lan Imass.

He lay unmoving, and felt the heavy tread of one of the Hounds as it padded up to stand over him. A dust- and shard-flecked muzzle nudged him, pushed at the broken ribs of his chest. Then lifted away. He listened to its breathing, the sound like waves riding a tide into caves, could feel its presence like a heaviness in the damp air.

After a long moment, Onrack realized that the beast was no longer looming over him. Nor could he hear the heavy footfalls through the wet earth. As if it and its companion had simply vanished.

Then the scrape of boots close by, a pair of hands dragging him over, onto his back.

Trull Sengar stared down at him. ‘I do not know if you can still hear me,’ he muttered. ‘But if it is any consolation, Onrack of the Logros, those were not Hounds of Shadow. Oh, no, indeed. They were the real ones. The Hounds of Darkness, my friend. I dread to think what you have freed here...’

Onrack managed a reply, his words a soft rasp. ‘So much for gratitude.'
Trull Sengar dragged the shattered T’lan Imass to a low wall at the city's edge, where he propped the warrior into a sitting position. 'I wish I knew what else I could do for you,' he said, stepping back.

‘If my kin were present,’ Onrack said, ‘they would complete the necessary rites. They would sever my head from my body, and find for it a suitable place so that I might look out upon eternity. They would dismember the headless corpse and scatter the limbs. They would take my weapon, to return it to the place of my birth.’

‘Oh.’

‘Of course, you cannot do such things. Thus, I am forced into continuation, despite my present condition.’ With that, Onrack slowly clambered upright, broken bones grinding and crunching, splinters falling away.

Trull grunted, ‘You could have done that before I dragged you.’

‘I regret most the loss of an arm,’ the T’lan Imass said, studying the torn muscles of his left shoulder. ‘My sword is most effective when in the grip of two hands.’ He staggered over to where the weapon lay in the mud. Part of his chest collapsed when he leaned down to retrieve it. Straightening, Onrack faced Trull Sengar. ‘I am no longer able to sense the presence of gates.’

‘They should be obvious enough,’ the Tiste Edur replied. ‘I expect near the centre of the city. We are quite a pair, aren’t we?’

‘I wonder why the Hounds did not kill you.’

‘They seemed eager to leave.’ Trull set off down the street directly opposite, Onrack following. ‘I am not even certain they noticed me – the dust cloud was thick. Tell me, Onrack. If there were other T’lan Imass here, then they would have done all those things to you? Despite the fact that you remain . . . functional?’

‘Like you, Trull Sengar, I am now shorn. From the Ritual. From my own kind. My existence is now without meaning. The final task left to me is to seek out the other hunters, to do what must be done.’

The street was layered in thick, wet silt. The low buildings to either side, torn away above the ground level, were similarly coated, smoothing every edge – as if the city was in the process of melting. There was no grand architecture, and the rubble in the streets revealed itself to be little more than fired bricks. There was no sign of life anywhere.

They continued on, their pace torturously slow. The street slowly broadened, forming a vast concourse flanked by pedestals that had once held statues. Brush and uprooted trees marred the vista, all a uniform grey that gradually assumed an unearthly hue beneath the now-dominant blue sun, which in turn painted a large moon the colour of magenta.

At the far end was a bridge, over what had once been a river but was now filled with silt. A tangled mass of detritus had ridden up on one side of the bridge, spilling flotsam onto the walkway. Among the garbage lay a small box.

Trull angled over towards it as they reached the bridge. He crouched down. 'It crouched down. 'It seems well sealed,' he said, reaching out to pry the clasp loose, then lifting the lid. 'That's odd. Looks like clay pots. Small ones ...'

Onrack moved up alongside the Tiste Edur. 'They are Moranth munitions, Trull Sengar.'

The Tiste Edur glanced up. 'I have no knowledge of such things.'

‘Weapons. Explosive when the clay breaks. They are generally thrown. As far as is possible. Have you heard of the Malazan Empire?’

‘No.’

‘Human. From my birth realm. These munitions belong to that empire.’

‘Well, that is troubling indeed – for why are they here?’
'I do not know.'

Trull Sengar closed the lid and collected the box. 'While I would prefer a sword, these will have to do. I was not pleased at being unarmed for so long.'

'There is a structure beyond – an arch.'

Straightening, the Tiste Edur nodded. 'Aye. It is what we seek.'

They continued on.

The arch stood on pedestals in the centre of a cobbled square. Floodwaters had carried silt to its mouth where it had dried in strange, jagged ridges. As the two travellers came closer, they discovered that the clay was rock hard. Although the gate did not manifest itself in any discernible way, a pulsing heat rolled from the space beneath the arch.

The pillars of the structure were unadorned. Onrack studied the edifice. 'What can you sense of this?' the T'lan Imass asked after a moment.

Trull Sengar shook his head, then approached. He halted within arm's reach of the gate's threshold. 'I cannot believe this is passable – the heat pouring from it is scalding.'

'Possibly a ward,' Onrack suggested.

'Aye. And no means for us to shatter it.'

'Untrue.'

The Tiste Edur glanced back at Onrack, then looked down at the box tucked under his arm. 'I do not understand how a mundane explosive could destroy a ward.'

'Sorcery depends on patterns, Trull Sengar. Shatter the pattern and the magic fails.'

'Very well, let us attempt this thing.'

They retreated twenty paces from the gate. Trull unlatched the box and gingerly drew forth one of the clay spheres. He fixed his gaze on the gate, then threw the munition.

The explosion triggered a coruscating conflagration from the portal. White and gold fires raged beneath the arch, then the violence settled back to form a swirling golden wall.

'That is the warren itself,' Onrack said. 'The ward is broken. Still, I do not recognize it.'

'Nor I,' Trull muttered, closing the munitions box once more. Then his head snapped up. 'Something's coming.'

'Yes.' Onrack was silent then for a long moment. He suddenly lifted his sword. 'Flee, Trull Sengar – back across the bridge. Flee!'

The Tiste Edur spun and began running.

Onrack proceeded to back up a step at a time. He could feel the power of the ones on the other side of the gate, a power brutal and alien. The breaking of the ward had been noted, and the emotion reaching through the barrier was one of indignant outrage.

A quick look over his shoulder showed that Trull Sengar had crossed the bridge and was now nowhere in sight. Three more steps and Onrack would himself reach the bridge. And there, he would make his stand. He expected to be destroyed, but he intended to purchase time for his companion.

The gate shimmered, blindingly bright, then four riders cantered through. Riding white, long-limbed horses with wild manes the colour of rust. Ornately armoured in enamel, the warriors were a match for their mounts –
pale-skinned and tall, their faces mostly hidden behind slitted visors, cheek and chin guards. Curved scimitars that appeared to have been carved from ivory were held in gauntleted fists. Long silver hair flowed from beneath the helms.

They rode directly towards Onrack. Canter to gallop. Gallop to charge.

The battered T'lan Imass widened his stance, lifted his obsidian sword and stood ready to meet them.

The riders could only come at him on the narrow bridge two at a time, and even then it was clear that they simply intended their horses to ride Onrack down. But the T'lan Imass had fought in the service of the Malazan Empire, in Falar and in Seven Cities – and he had faced horse warriors in many a battle. A moment before the front riders reached him, Onrack leapt forward. Between the two mounts. Ignoring the sword that whirled in from his left, the T'lan Imass slashed his blade into the other warrior's midsection.

Two ivory blades struck him simultaneously, the one on his left smashing through clavicle and cutting deep into his shoulder blade, then through in a spray of bone shards. The scimitar on his right chopped down through the side of his face, sheering it off from temple to the base of the jaw.

Onrack felt his own obsidian blade bite deep into the warrior's armour. The enamel shattered.

Then both attackers were past him, and the remaining two arrived.

The T'lan Imass dropped into a crouch and positioned his sword horizontally over his head. A pair of ivory blades hammered down on it, the impacts thundering through Onrack's battered frame.

They were all past him now, emerging out onto the concourse to wheel their horses round, visored heads turned to regard the lone warrior who had somehow survived their attacks.

Hoofs thudding the clay-limned cobbles, the four warriors reined in, weapons lowering. The one whose armour had been shattered by Onrack's obsidian sword was leaning forward, one arm pressed against his stomach. Spatters of blood speckled his horse's flank.

Onrack shook himself, and pieces of shattered bone fell away to patter on the ground. He then settled his own weapon, point to the ground, and waited while one of the riders walked his horse forward.

A gauntleted hand reached up to draw the visor upward, revealing features that were startlingly similar to Trull Sengar's, apart from the white, almost luminous skin. Eyes of cold silver fixed on the T'lan Imass with distaste. 'Do you speak, Lifeless One? Can you understand the Language of Purity?'

'It seems no purer than any other,' Onrack replied.

The warrior scowled. 'We do not forgive ignorance. You are a servant of Death. There is but one necessity when dealing with a creature such as you, and that is annihilation. Stand ready.'

'I serve no-one,' Onrack said, raising his sword once more. 'Come, then.'

But the wounded one held up a hand. 'Hold, Enias. This world is not ours – nor is this deathless savage one of the trespassers we seek. Indeed, as you yourself must sense, none of them are here. This portal has not been used in millennia. We must needs take our quest elsewhere. But first, I require healing.' The warrior gingerly dismounted, one arm still pressed against his midsection. 'Orenas, attend me.'

'Allow me to destroy this thing first, Seneschal—'

'No. We shall tolerate its existence. Perhaps it will have answers for us, to guide us further on our quest. Failing that, we can destroy it later.'

The one named Orenas slipped down from his horse and approached the seneschal.

Enias edged his horse closer to the T'lan Imass, as if still mindful of a fight. He bared his teeth. 'There is not much left of you, Lifeless One. Are those the scorings of fangs? Your chest has been in the jaws of some beast, I think. The same that stole your arm? By what sorcery do you hold on to existence?'
'You are of Tiste blood,' Onrack observed.

The man's face twisted into a sneer. 'Tiste blood? Only among the Liosan is the Tiste blood pure. You have crossed paths with our tainted cousins, then. They are little more than vermin. You have not answered my questions.'

'I know of the Tiste Andii, but I have yet to meet them. Born of Darkness, they were the first—'

'The first! Oh, indeed. And so tragically imperfect. Bereft of Father Light's purifying blood. They are a most sordid creation. We tolerate the Edur, for they contain something of the Father, but the Andii – death by our hands is the only mercy they deserve. But I grow weary of your rudeness, Lifeless One. I have asked you questions and you are yet to answer a single one.'

'Yes.'

'Yes? What does that mean?'

'I agree that I have not answered them. Nor do I feel compelled to do so. My kind has much experience with arrogant creatures. Although that experience is singular: in answer to their arrogance we proclaimed eternal war, until they ceased to exist. I have always believed the T'lan Imass should seek out a new enemy. There is, after all, no shortage to be noted among arrogant beings. Perhaps you Tiste Liosan are numerous enough in your own realm to amuse us for a time.'

The warrior stared, as if shocked speechless.

Behind him, one of his companions laughed. 'There is little value in conversing with lesser creatures, Enias. They will seek to confound you with falsehoods, to lead you away from the righteous path.'

'I see now,' Enias replied, 'the poison of which you have long warned me, Malachar.'

'There will be more to come, young brother, on the trail we must follow.' The warrior strode up to Onrack. 'You call yourself a T'lan Imass, yes?'

'I am Onrack, of the Logros T'lan Imass.'

'Are there others of your kind in this ruined realm, Onrack?'

'If I did not answer your brother's questions, why imagine I would answer yours?'

Malachar's face darkened. 'Play such games with young Enias, but not with me—'

'I am done with you, Liosan.' Onrack sheathed his sword and swung away.

'You are done with us! Seneschal Jorrude! If Orenas has completed his ministrations, I humbly request your attention. The Lifeless One seeks to flee.'

'I hear you, Malachar,' the seneschal rumbled, striding forward. 'Hold, Lifeless One! We have not yet released you. You will tell us what we wish to know, or you will be destroyed here and now.'

Onrack faced the Liosan once more. 'If that was a threat, the pathos of your ignorance proves an amusing distraction. But I weary of it, and of you.'

Four ivory scimitars lifted threateningly.

Onrack drew his sword once more.

And hesitated, his gaze drawn to something beyond them. Sensing a presence at their backs, the warriors turned.

Trull Sengar stood fifteen paces away, the box of munitions at his feet. There was something odd about his smile. 'This seems an uneven fight. Friend Onrack, do you require assistance? Well, you need not answer, for it
Dust swirled upward around the Tiste Edur. A moment later, four T'lan Imass stood on the muddy cobbles. Three held weapons ready. The fourth figure stood a pace behind and to Trull's right. This one was massively boned, its arms disproportionately long. The fur riding its shoulders was black, fading to silver as it rose up to surround the bonecaster's head in a mangled hood.

Onrack allowed his sword's point to rest on the muddy cobbles once more. With his link, born of the Ritual, now severed, he could only communicate with these T'lan Imass by speaking out loud. 'I, Onrack, greet you, Bonecaster, and recognize you as from the Logros, as I once was. You are Monok Ochem. One of many chosen to hunt the renegades, who, as did those of my own hunt, followed their trail into this realm. Alas, I alone of my hunt survived the flood.' His gaze shifted to the three warriors. The clan leader, its torso and limbs tightly wrapped in the outer skin of a dhenrabi and a denticulated grey flint sword in its hands, was Ibra Gholan. The remaining two, both armed with bone-hafted, double-bladed axes of chalcedony, were of Ibra's clan, but otherwise unknown to Onrack. 'I greet you as well, Ibra Gholan, and submit to your command.'

Bonecaster Monok Ochem strode forward with a heavy, shambling gait. 'You have failed the Ritual, Onrack,' it said with characteristic abruptness, 'and so must be destroyed.'

'That privilege will be contested,' Onrack replied. 'These horse warriors are Tiste Liosan and would view me as their prisoner, to do with as they please.'

Ibra Gholan gestured to his two warriors to join him and the three walked towards the Liosan.

The seneschal spoke. 'We release our prisoner, T'lan Imass. He is yours. Our quarrel with you is at an end, and so we shall leave.'

The T'lan Imass halted, and Onrack could sense their disappointment.

The Liosan commander regarded Trull for a moment, then said, 'Edur – would you travel with us? We have need of a servant. A simple bow will answer the honour of our invitation.'

Trull Sengar shook his head. 'Well, that is a first for me. Alas, I will accompany the T'lan Imass. But I recognize the inconvenience this will cause you, and so I suggest that you alternate in the role as servant to the others. I am a proponent of lessons in humility, Tiste Liosan, and I sense that among you there is some need.'

The seneschal smiled coldly. 'I will remember you, Edur.' He whirled. 'On your horses, brothers. We now leave this realm.'

Monok Ochem spoke. 'You may find that more difficult than you imagine.'

'We have never before been troubled by such endeavours,' the seneschal replied. 'Are there hidden barriers in this place?'

'This warren is a shattered fragment of Kurald Emurlahn,' the bonecaster said. 'I believe your kind have remained isolated for far too long. You know nothing of the other realms, nothing of the Wounded Gates. Nothing of the Ascendants and their wars—'

'We serve but one Ascendant,' the seneschal snapped. 'The Son of Father Light. Our lord is Osric.'

Monok Ochem cocked its head. 'And when last has Osric walked among you?'

All four Liosan visibly flinched.

In his affectless tone, the bonecaster continued, 'Your lord, Osric, the Son of Father Light, numbers among the contestants in the other realms. He has not returned to you, Liosan, because he is unable to do so. Indeed, he is unable to do much of anything at the moment.'

The seneschal took a step forward. 'What afflicts our lord?'

Monok Ochem shrugged. 'A common enough fate. He is lost.'
'Lost?'

'I suggest we work together to weave a ritual,' the bonecaster said, 'and so fashion a gate. For this, we shall need Tellann, your own warren, Liosan, and the blood of this Tiste Edur. Onrack, we shall undertake your destruction once we have returned to our own realm.'

'That would seem expedient,' Onrack replied.

Trull's eyes had widened. He stared at the bonecaster. 'Did you say my blood?'

'Not all of it, Edur ... if all goes as planned.'
The day the faces in the rock awakened was celebrated among the Teblor by a song. The memories of his people were, Karsa Orlong now knew, twisted things. Surrendered to oblivion when unpleasant, burgeoning to a raging fire of glory when heroic. Defeat had been spun into victory in the weaving of every tale.

He wished Bairoth still lived, that his sagacious companion did more than haunt his dreams, or stand before him as a thing of rough-carved stone in which some chance scarring of his chisel had cast a mocking, almost derisive expression.

Bairoth could have told him much of what he needed to know at this moment. While Karsa's familiarity with their homeland's sacred glade was far greater than either Bairoth’s or Delum Thord’s, and so ensured the likenesses possessed some accuracy, the warrior sensed that something essential was missing from the seven faces he had carved into the stone trees. Perhaps his lack of talent had betrayed him, though that did not seem the case with the carvings of Bairoth and Delum. The energy of their lives seemed to emanate from their statues, as if merged with the petrified wood's own memory. As with the entire forest, in which there was the sense that the trees but awaited the coming of spring, of rebirth beneath the wheel of the stars, it seemed that the two Teblor warriors were but awaiting the season’s turn.

But Raraku defied every season. Raraku itself was eternal in its momentousness, perpetually awaiting rebirth. Patience in the stone, in the restless, ever-murmuring sands.

The Holy Desert seemed, to Karsa’s mind, a perfect place for the Seven Gods of the Teblor. It was possible, he reflected as he slowly paced before the faces he had carved into the boles, that something of that sardonic sentiment had poisoned his hands. If so, the flaw was not visible to his eyes. There was little in the faces of the gods that could permit expression or demeanour – his recollection was of skin stretched over broad, robust bone, of brows that projected like ridges, casting the eyes in deep shadow. Broad, flat cheekbones, a heavy, chinless jaw ... a bestiality so unlike the features of the Teblor ...

He scowled, pausing to stand before Urugal which, as with the six others, he had carved level with his own eyes. Serpents slithered over his dusty, bared feet, his only company in the glade. The sun had begun its descent, though the heat remained fierce.

After a long moment of contemplation, Karsa spoke out loud. 'Bairoth Gild, look with me upon our god. Tell me what is wrong. Where have I erred? That was your greatest talent, wasn’t it? Seeing so clearly my every wrong step. You might ask: what did I seek to achieve with these carvings? You would ask that, for it is the only question worth answering. But I have no answer for you – ah, yes, I can almost hear you laugh at my pathetic reply. I have no answer. ‘Perhaps, Bairoth, I imagined you wished their company. The great Teblor gods, who one day awakened.’

In the minds of the shamans. Awakened in their dreams. There, and there done. Yet now I know the flavour of those dreams, and it is nothing like the song. Nothing at all.

He had found this glade seeking solitude, and it had been solitude that had inspired his artistic creations. Yet
now that he was done, he no longer felt alone here. He had brought his own life to this place, the legacies of his deeds. It had ceased to be a refuge, and the need to visit was born now from the lure of his efforts, drawing him back again and again. To walk among the snakes that came to greet him, to listen to the hiss of sands skittering on the moaning desert wind, the sands that arrived in the glade to caress the trees and the faces of stone with their bloodless touch.

Raraku delivered the illusion that time stood motionless, the universe holding its breath. An insidious conceit. Beyond the Whirlwind's furious wall, the hourglasses were still turned. Armies assembled and began their march, the sound of their boots, shields and gear a deathly clatter and roar. And, on a distant continent, the Teblor were a people under siege.

Karsa continued staring at the stone face of Urugal. You are not Teblor. Yet you claim to be our god. You awakened, there in the cliff, so long ago. But what of before that time? Where were you then, Urugal? You and your six terrible companions?

A soft chuckle from across the clearing brought Karsa around.

'And which of your countless secrets is this one, friend?'

'Leoman,' Karsa rumbled, 'it has been a long time since you last left your pit.'

Edging forward, the desert warrior glanced down at the snakes. 'I was starved for company. Unlike you, I see.' He gestured at the carved boles. 'Are these yours? I see two Toblakai – they stand in those trees as if alive and but moments from striding forth. It disturbs me to be reminded that there are more of you. But what of these others?'

'My gods.' He noted Leoman's startled expression and elaborated, 'The Faces in the Rock. In my homeland, they adorn a cliffside, facing onto a glade little different from this one.'

Toblakai—'

'They call upon me still,' Karsa continued, turning back to study Urugal's bestial visage once more. 'When I sleep. It is as Ghost Hands says – I am haunted.'

'By what, friend? What is it your ... gods ... demand of you?'

Karsa shot Leoman a glance, then he shrugged. 'Why have you sought me out?'

Leoman made to say one thing, then chose another. 'Because my patience is at an end. There has been news of events concerning the Malazans. Distant defeats. Sha'ik and her favoured few are much excited ... yet achieve nothing. Here we await the Adjunct's legions. In one thing Korbolo Dom is right – the march of those legions should be contested. But not as he would have it. No pitched battles. Nothing so dramatic or precipitous. In any case, Toblakai, Mathok has given me leave to ride out with a company of warriors – and Sha'ik has condescended to permit us beyond the Whirlwind.'

Karsa smiled. 'Indeed. And you are free to harass the Adjunct? Ah, I thought as much. You are to scout, but no further than the hills beyond the Whirlwind. She will not permit you to journey south. But at least you will be doing something, and for that I am pleased for you, Leoman.'

The blue-eyed warrior stepped closer. 'Once beyond the Whirlwind, Toblakai—'

'She will know none the less,' Karsa replied.

'And so I will incur her displeasure.' Leoman sneered. 'There is nothing new in that. And what of you, friend? She calls you her bodyguard, yet when did she last permit you into her presence? In that damned tent of hers? She is reborn indeed, for she is not as she once was—'

'She is Malazan,' Toblakai said.

'What?'
'Before she became Sha'ik. You know this as well as I—'

'She was reborn! She became the will of the goddess, Toblakai. All that she was before that time is without meaning—'

'So it is said,' Karsa rumbled. 'Yet her memories remain. And it is those memories that chain her so. She is trapped by fear, and that fear is born of a secret which she will not share. The only other person who knows that secret is Ghost Hands.'

Leoman stared at Karsa for a long moment, then slowly settled into a crouch. The two men were surrounded by snakes, the sound of slithering on sand a muted undercurrent. Lowering one hand, Leoman watched as a flare-neck began entwining itself up his arm. 'Your words, Toblakai, whisper of defeat.'

Shrugging, Karsa strode to where his tool kit waited at the base of a tree. 'These years have served me well. Your company, Leoman. Sha'ik Elder. I once vowed that the Malazans were my enemies. Yet, from what I have seen of the world since that time, I now understand that they are no crueller than any other lowlander. Indeed, they alone seem to profess a sense of justice. The people of Seven Cities, who so despise them and wish them gone – they seek nothing more than the power that the Malazans took from them. Power that they used to terrorize their own people. Leoman, you and your kind make war against justice, and it is not my war.'

'Justice?' Leoman bared his teeth. 'You expect me to challenge your words, Toblakai? I will not. Sha'ik Reborn says there is no loyalty within me. Perhaps she is right. I have seen too much. Yet here I remain – have you ever wondered why?'

Karsa drew out a chisel and mallet. 'The light fades – and that makes the shadows deeper. It is the light, I now realize. That is what is different about them.'

'The Apocalyptic, Toblakai. Disintegration. Annihilation. Everything. Every human ... lowlander. With our twisted horrors – all that we commit upon each other. The depredations, the cruelties. For every gesture of kindness and compassion, there are ten thousand acts of brutality. Loyalty? Aye, I have none. Not for my kind, and the sooner we obliterate ourselves the better this world will be.'

'The light,' Karsa said, 'makes them look almost human.'

Distracted as he was, the Toblakai did not notice Leoman's narrowing eyes, nor the struggle to remain silent.

One does not step between a man and his gods.

The snake's head lifted in front of Leoman's face and hovered there, tongue flicking.

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'The House of Chains,' Heboric muttered, his expression souring at the words.

Bidithal shivered, though it was hard to tell whether from fear or pleasure. 'Reaver. Consort. The Unbound – these are interesting, yes? For all the world like shattered—'

'From whence came these images?' Heboric demanded. Simply looking upon the wooden cards with their lacquered paintings – blurred as they were – was filling the ex-priest's throat with bile. 'I sense ... flaws. In each and every one. That is no accident, no failing of the hand that brushed them into being.

'There is no doubting,' L'oric said in answer to his question, 'their veracity. The power emanating from them is a sorcerous stench. I have never before witnessed such a vigorous birth within the Deck. Not even Shadow felt—'

'Shadow!' Bidithal snapped. 'Those deceivers could never unveil that realm's true power! No, here, in this new House, the theme is pure. Imperfection is celebrated, the twist of chaotic chance mars one and all—'

'Silence!' Sha'ik hissed, her arms wrapped tight about herself. 'We must think on this. No-one speak. Let me think!'
Heboric studied her for a moment, squinting to bring her into focus, even though she sat beside him. The cards from the new House had arrived the same day as the news of the Malazan defeats on Genabackis. And the time since then had been one of seething discord among Sha'ik's commanders, sufficient to dampen her pleasure at hearing of her brother Ganoes Paran's survival, and now leading her to uncharacteristic distraction.

The House of Chains was woven into their fates. An insidious intrusion, an infection against which they'd had no chance to prepare. But was it an enemy, or the potential source for renewed strength? It seemed Bidithal was busy convincing himself that it was the latter, no doubt drawn in that direction by his growing disaffection with Sha'ik Reborn. L'oric, on the other hand, seemed more inclined to share Heboric's own misgivings; whilst Febryl was unique in remaining silent on the entire matter.

The air within the tent was close, soured by human sweat. Heboric wanted nothing more than to leave, to escape all this, yet he sensed Sha'ik clinging to him, a spiritual grip as desperate as anything he'd felt from her before.

'Show once more the new Unaligned.'

Yes. For the thousandth time.

Scowling, Bidithal searched through the Deck, then drew out the card, which he laid down in the centre of the goat-hair mat. 'If any of the new arrivals is dubious,' the old man sneered, 'it is this one. Master of the Deck? Absurd. How can one control the uncontrollable?'

There was silence.

The uncontrollable? Such as the Whirlwind itself?

Sha'ik had clearly not caught the insinuation. 'Ghost Hands, I would you take this card, feel it, seek to sense what you can from it.'

'You make this request again and again, Chosen One,' Heboric sighed. 'But I tell you, there is no link between the power of my hands and the Deck of Dragons. I am of no help to you—'

'Then listen closely and I shall describe it. Never mind your hands — I ask you now as a once-priest, as a scholar. Listen. The face is obscured, yet hints—'

'It is obscured,' Bidithal interrupted in a derisive tone, 'because the card is no more than the projection of someone's wishful thinking.'

'Cut me off again and you will regret it, Bidithal,' Sha'ik said. 'I have heard you enough on this subject. If your mouth opens again I will tear out your tongue. Ghost Hands, I will continue. The figure is slightly above average in height. There is the crimson streak of a scar – or blood perhaps – down one side of the face – a wounding, yes? He – yes, I am certain it's a man, not a woman – he stands on a bridge. Of stone, shot through with cracks. The horizon is filled with flames. It seems he and the bridge are surrounded, as if by followers, or servants—'

'Or guardians,' L'oric added. 'Your pardon, Chosen One.'

'Guardians. Yes, a good possibility. They have the look of soldiers, do they not?'

'On what,' Heboric asked, 'do these guardians stand? Can you see the ground they stand upon?'

'Bones – there is much fine detail there, Ghost Hands. How did you know?'

'Describe those bones, please.'

'Not human. Very large. Part of a skull is visible, long-snouted, terribly fanged. It bears the remnants of a helmet of some sort—'

'A helmet? On the skull?'
'Yes.'

Heboric fell silent. He began rocking yet was only remotely aware of the motion. There was a sourceless keening growing in his head, a cry of grief, of anguish.

'The Master,' Sha'ik said, her voice trembling, 'he stands strangely. Arms held out, bent at the elbows so that the hands depend, away from the body – it is the strangest posture—'

'Are his feet together?'

'Almost impossibly so.'

*As if forming a point.* Dull and remote to his own ears, Heboric asked, 'And what does he wear?'

'Tight silks, from the way they shimmer. Black.'

'Anything else?'

'There is a chain. It cuts across his torso, left shoulder down to right hip. It is a robust chain, black wrought iron. There are wooden discs on his shoulders – like epaulets, but large, a hand’s span each—'

'How many in all?'

'Four. You know something now, Ghost Hands. Tell me!'

'Yes,' L'oric murmured, 'you have thoughts on this—'

'He lies,' Bidithal growled. 'He has been forgotten by everyone – even his god – and he now seeks to invent a new importance.'

Febryl spoke in a mocking rasp. 'Bidithal, you foolish man. He is a man who touches what we cannot feel, and sees what we are blind to. Speak on, Ghost Hands. Why does this Master stand so?'

'Because,' Heboric said, 'he is a sword.'

*But not any sword. He is one sword, above all, and it cuts cold. That sword is as this man’s own nature. He will cleave his own path. None shall lead him. He stands now in my mind. I see him. I see his face. Oh, Sha’ik ...*

'A Master of the Deck,' L’oric said, then sighed. 'A lode-stone to order ... in opposition to the House of Chains – yet he stands alone, guardians or no, while the servants of the House are many.'

Heboric smiled. ' Alone? He has always been thus.'

'Then why is your smile that of a broken man, Ghost Hands?'

*I grieve for humanity. This family, so at war with itself. To that, L’oric, I shall not answer.*'

'I shall now speak with Ghost Hands alone,' Sha’ik pronounced.

But Heboric shook his head. 'I am done speaking, for now, even with you, Chosen One. I will say this and nothing more: have faith in the Master of the Deck. He shall answer the House of Chains. He shall answer it.'

Feeling ancient beyond his years, Heboric climbed to his feet. There was a stir of motion beside him, then young Felisin’s hand settled on his forearm. He let her guide him from the chamber.

Outside, dusk had arrived, marked by the cries of the goats as they were led into the enclosures. To the south, just beyond the city’s outskirts, rumbled the thunder of horse hoofs. Kamist Reloe and Korbolo Dom had absented themselves from the meeting to oversee the exercises of the troops. Training conducted in the Malazan style, which Heboric had to admit was the renegade Fist’s only expression of brilliance thus far. For the first time, a Malazan army would meet its match in all things, barring Moranth munitions. Tactics and disposition of forces would be identical, ensuring that numbers alone would decide the day. The threat of the munitions would be answered with sorcery, for the Army of the Whirlwind possessed a full cadre of High
Mages, whilst Tavore had – as far as they knew – none. Spies in Aren had noted the presence of the two Wickan children, Nil and Nether, but both, it was claimed, had been thoroughly broken by Coltaine's death.

Yet why would she need mages? She carries an otataral sword, after all. Even so, its negating influence cannot be extended over her entire army. Dear Sha’ik, you may well defeat your sister after all.

'Where would you go, Ghost Hands?' Felisin asked.

'To my home, lass.'

'That is not what I meant.'

He cocked his head. 'I do not know—'

'If indeed you do not, then I have seen your path before you have, and this I find hard to believe. You must leave here, Ghost Hands. You must retrace your path, else what haunts you will kill you—'

'And that matters? Lass—'

'Look beyond yourself for a moment, old man! Something is contained within you. Trapped within your mortal flesh. What will happen when your flesh fails?'

He was silent for a long moment, then he asked, 'How can you be so sure of this? My death might simply negate the risk of escape – it might shut the portal, as tightly sealed as it had been before—'

'Because there is no going back. It’s here – the power behind those ghostly hands of yours – not the otataral, which is fading, ever fading—'

'Fading?'

'Yes, fading! Have not your dreams and visions worsened? Have you not realized why? Yes, my mother has told me – on the Otataral Isle, in the desert – that statue. Heboric, an entire island of otataral was created to contain that statue, to hold it prisoner. But you have given it a means to escape – there, through your hands. You must return!'

'Enough!' he snarled, flinging her hand away. 'Tell me, did she also tell you of herself on that journey?'

'That which she was before no longer matters—'

'Oh, but it does, lass! It does matter!'

'What do you mean?'

The temptation came close to overwhelming him. Because she is Malazan! Because she is Tavore's sister! Because this war is no longer the Whirlwind's – it has been stolen away, twisted by something far more powerful, by the ties of blood that bind us all in the harshest, tightest chains! What chance a raging goddess against that?

Instead, he said nothing.

'You must undertake the journey,' Felisin said in a low voice. 'But I know, it cannot be done alone. No. I will go with you—'

He staggered away at her words, shaking his head. It was a horrible idea, a terrifying idea. Yet brutally perfect, a nightmare of synchronicity.

'Listen! It need not be just you and I – I will find someone else. A warrior, a loyal protector—'

'Enough! No more of this! Yet it will take her away – away from Bidithal and his ghastly desires. It will take her away . . . from the storm that is coming. 'With whom else have you spoken of this?' he demanded.

'No-one, but I thought... Leoman. He could choose for us someone from Mathok's people—'
'Not a word, lass. Not now. Not yet.'

Her hand gripped his forearm once more. 'We cannot wait too long, Ghost Hands.'

'Not yet, Felisin. Now, take me home, please.'

'Will you come with me, Toblakai?'

Karsa dragged his gaze from Urugal’s stone face. The sun had set with its characteristic suddenness, and the stars overhead were bright. The snakes had begun dispersing, driven into the eerily silent forest in search of food. 'Would you I run beside you and your puny horses, Leoman? There are no Teblor mounts in this land. Nothing to match my size—'

'Teblor mounts? Actually, friend, you are wrong in that. Well, not here, true, as you say. But to the west, in the Jhag Odhan, there are wild horses that are a match to your stature. Wild now, in any case. They are Jhag horses – bred long ago by the Jaghut. It may well be that your Teblor mounts are of the same breed – there were Jaghut on Genabackis, after all.'

'Why have you not told me this before?'

Leoman lowered his right hand to the ground, watched as the flare-neck unwound down the length of his arm. 'In truth, this is the first time you have ever mentioned that you Teblor possessed horses. Toblakai, I know virtually nothing of your past. No-one here does. You are not a loquacious man. You and I, we have ever travelled on foot, haven't we?'

'The Jhag Odhan. That is beyond Raraku.'

'Aye. Strike west through the Whirlwind, and you will come to cliffs, the broken shoreline of the ancient sea that once filled this desert. Continue on until you come to a small city – Lato Revae. Immediately to the west lies the tip of the Thalas Mountains. Skirt their south edge, ever westward, until you come to River Ugarat. There is a ford south of Y’Ghatan. From the other side, strike west and south and west, for two weeks or more, and you will find yourself in the Jhag Odhan. Oh, there is some irony in this – there were once nomadic bands of Jaghut there. Hence the name. But these Jaghut were fallen. They had been predated on for so long they were little more than savages.'

'And are they still there?'

'No. The Logros T’lan Imass slaughtered them. Not so long ago.'

Karsa bared his teeth. 'T’lan Imass. A name from the Teblor past.'

'Closer than that,' Leoman muttered, then he straightened. 'Seek leave from Sha’ik to journey into the Jhag Odhan. You would make an impressive sight on the battlefield, astride a Jhag horse. Did your kind fight on horseback, or simply use them for transport?'

Karsa smiled in the darkness. 'I will do as you say, Leoman. But the journey will take long – do not wait for me. If you and your scouts are still beyond the Whirlwind upon my return, I will ride out to find you.'

'Agreed.'

'What of Felisin?'

Leoman was silent for a moment, then he replied, 'Ghost Hands has been awakened to the ... threat.'

Karsa sneered. 'And what value will that be? I should kill Bidithal and be done with it.'

'Toblakai, it is more than you that troubles Ghost Hands. I do not believe he will remain in camp much longer. And when he leaves, he will take the child with him.'

'And that is a better option? She will become no more than his nurse.'
'For a time, perhaps. I will send someone with them, of course. If Sha'ik did not need you – or at least believe she does – I would ask you.'

'Madness, Leoman. I have travelled once with Ghost Hands. I shall not do so again.'

'He holds truths for you, Toblakai. One day, you will need to seek him out. You might even need to ask for his help.'

'Help? I need no-one's help. You speak unpleasant words. I will hear them no more.'

Leoman's grin was visible in the gloom. 'You are as you always are, friend. When will you journey into the Jhag Odhan, then?'

'I shall leave tomorrow.'

'Then I had best get word to Sha'ik. Who knows, she might even condescend to see me in person, whereupon I might well succeed in ending her distraction with this House of Chains—'  

'This what?'

Leoman waved a dismissive hand. 'The House of Chains. A new power in the Deck of Dragons. It is all they talk about these days.'

'Chains,' Karsa muttered, swinging round to stare at Urugal. 'I so dislike chains.'

'I will see you in the morning, Toblakai? Before you depart?'

'You shall.'

Karsa listened to the man stride away. His mind was a maelstrom. Chains. They haunted him, had haunted him ever since he and Bairoth and Delum rode out from the village. Perhaps even before then. Tribes fashioned their own chains, after all. As did kinship, and companions, and stories with their lessons in honour and sacrifice. And chains as well between the Teblor and their seven gods. Between me and my gods. Chains again, there in my visions – the dead I have slain, the souls Ghost Hands says I drag behind me. I am – all that I am – has been shaped by such chains.

This new House – is it mine?

The air in the clearing was suddenly cold, bitterly so. A final, thrashing rush as the last of the snakes fled the clearing. Karsa blinked his eyes into focus, and saw Urugal's indurated visage ...

A presence, there in the dark holes of the face's eyes.

Karsa heard a howling wind, filling his mind. A thousand souls moaning, the snapping thunder of chains. Growling, he steeled himself before the onslaught, fixed his gaze on his god's writhing face.

'Karsa Orlong. We have waited long for this. Three years, the fashioning of this sacred place. You wasted so much time on the two strangers – your fallen friends, the ones who failed where you did not. This temple is not to be sanctified by sentimentality. Their presence offends us. Destroy them this night.'

The seven faces were all wakeful now, and Karsa could feel the weight of their regard, a deathly pressure behind which lurked something . . . avid, dark and filled with glee.

'By my hand,' Karsa said to Urugal, 'I have brought you to this place. By my hand, you have been freed from your prison of rock in the lands of the Teblor – yes, I am not the fool you believe me to be. You have guided me in this, and now you are come. Your first words are of chastisement? Careful, Urugal. Any carving here can be shattered by my hand, should I so choose.'

He felt their rage, buffeting him, seeking to make him wither beneath the onslaught, yet he stood before it unmov ing, and unmoved. The Teblor warrior who would quail before his gods was no more.
'You have brought us closer,' Urugal eventually rasped. 'Close enough to sense the precise location of what we desire. And there you must now go, Karsa Orlong. You have delayed the journey for so long – your journey to ourselves, and on to the path we have set before you. You have hidden too long in the company of this petty spirit who does little more than spit sand.'

'This path, this journey – to what end? What is it you seek?'

'Like you, warrior, we seek freedom.'

Karsa was silent. *Avid indeed.* Then he spoke. 'I am to travel west. Into the Jhag Odhan.'

He sensed their shock and excitement, then the chorus of suspicion that poured out from the seven gods.

'West! Indeed, Karsa Orlong. But how do you know this?'

*Because, at last, I am my father's son.* 'I shall leave with the dawn, Urugal. And I will find for you what you desire.' He could feel their presence fading, and knew instinctively that these gods were not as close to freedom as they wanted him to believe. Nor as powerful.

Urugal had called this clearing a temple, but it was a contested one, and now, as the Seven withdrew, and were suddenly gone, Karsa slowly turned from the faces of the gods, and looked upon those for whom this place had been in truth sanctified. By Karsa's own hands. In the name of those chains a mortal could wear with pride.

'My loyalty,' the Teblor warrior quietly said, 'was misplaced. I served only glory. Words, my friends. And words can wear false nobility. Disguising brutal truths. The words of the past, that so clothed the Teblor in a hero's garb – this is what I served. While the true glory was before me. Beside me. You, Delum Thord. And you, Bairoth Gild.'

From the stone statue of Bairoth emerged a distant, weary voice. 'Lead us, Warleader.'

Karsa flinched. Do *I dream this?* Then he straightened. 'I have drawn your spirits to this place. Did you travel in the wake of the Seven?'

'We have walked the empty lands,' Bairoth Gild replied. 'Empty, yet we were not alone. Strangers await us all, Karsa Orlong. This is the truth they would hide from you. We are summoned. We are here.'

'None,' came Delum Thord's voice from the other statue, 'can defeat you on this journey. You lead the enemy in circles, you defy every prediction, and so deliver the edge of your will. We sought to follow, but could not.'

'Who, Warleader,' Bairoth asked, his voice bolder, 'is our enemy, now?'

Karsa drew himself up before the two Uryd warriors. 'Witness my answer, my friends. Witness.'

Delum spoke, 'We failed you, Karsa Orlong. Yet you invite us to walk with you once again.'

Karsa fought back an urge to scream, to unleash a warcry – as if such a challenge might force back the approaching darkness. He could make no sense of his own impulses, the torrential emotions threatening to engulf him. He stared at the carved likeness of his tall friend, the awareness in those unmarred features – Delum Thord before the Forkassal – the Forkrul Assail named Calm – had, on a mountain trail on a distant continent, so casually destroyed him.

Bairoth Gild spoke. 'We failed you. Do you now ask that we walk with you?'

'Delum Thord. Bairoth Gild.' Karsa's voice was hoarse. 'It is I who failed you. I would be your warleader once more, if you would so permit me.'

A long moment of silence, then Bairoth replied, 'At last, something to look forward to.'

Karsa almost fell to his knees, then. Grief, finally unleashed. At an end, his time of solitude. His penance was done. The journey to begin again. *Dear Urugal, you shall witness. Oh, how you shall witness.*
The hearth was little more than a handful of dying coals. After Felisin Younger left, Heboric sat motionless in the gloom. A short time passed, then he collected an armload of dried dung and rebuilt the fire. The night had chilled him – even the hands he could not see felt cold, like heavy pieces of ice at the end of his wrists.

The only journey that lay ahead of him was a short one, and he must walk it alone. He was blind, but in this no more blind than anyone else. Death's precipice, whether first glimpsed from afar or discovered with the next step, was ever a surprise. A promise of the sudden cessation of questions, yet there were no answers waiting beyond. Cessation would have to be enough. *And so it must be for every mortal. Even as we hunger for resolution. Or, even more delusional: redemption.*

Now, after all this time, he was able to realize that every path eventually, inevitably dwindled into a single line of footsteps. There, leading to the very edge. Then ... gone. And so, he faced only what every mortal faced. The solitude of death, and oblivion's final gift that was indifference.

The gods were welcome to wrangle over his soul, to snipe and snap over the paltry feast. And if mortals grieved for him, it was only because by dying he had shaken them from the illusion of unity that comforted life's journey. One less on the path.

A scratch at the flap entrance, then the hide was drawn aside and someone entered.

'Would you make of your home a pyre, Ghost Hands?' The voice was L'oric's.

The High Mage's words startled Heboric into a sudden realization of the sweat running down his face, the gusts of fierce heat from the now raging hearth. Unthinking, he had fed the flames with piece after piece of dung.

'I saw the glow – difficult to miss, old man. Best leave it, now, let it die down.'

'What do you want, L'oric?'

'I acknowledge your reluctance to speak of what you know. There is no value, after all, in gifting Bidithal or Febryl with such details. And so I shall not demand that you explain what you've sensed regarding this Master of the Deck. Instead, I offer an exchange, and all that we say will remain between the two of us. No-one else.'

'Why should I trust you? You are hidden – even to Sha'ik. You give no reason as to why you are here. In her cadre, in this war.'

'That alone should tell you I am not like the others,' L'oric replied.

Heboric sneered. That earns you less than you might think. There can be no exchange because there is nothing you can tell me that I would be interested in hearing. The schemes of Febryl? The man's a fool. Bidithal's perversions? One day a child will slip a knife between his ribs. Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe? They war against an empire that is far from dead. Nor will they be treated with honour when they are finally brought before the Empress. No, they are criminals, and for that their souls will burn for eternity. The Whirlwind? That goddess has my contempt, and that contempt does naught but grow. Thus, what could you possibly tell me, L'oric, that I would value?'

'Only the one thing that might interest you, Heboric Light Touch. Just as this Master of the Deck interests me. I would not cheat you with the exchange. No, I would tell you all that I know of the Hand of Jade, rising from the otataral sands – the Hand that you have touched, that now haunts your dreams.'

'How could you know these—' He fell silent. The sweat on his brow was now cold.

'And how,' L'oric retorted, 'can you sense so much from a mere description of the Master's card? Let us not question these things, else we trap ourselves in a conversation that will outlive Raraku itself. So, Heboric, shall I begin?'

'No. Not now. I am too weary for this. Tomorrow, L'oric'
'Delay may prove ... disastrous.' After a moment, the High Mage sighed. 'Very well. I can see your exhaustion. Permit me, at least, to brew your tea for you.'

The gesture of kindness was unexpected, and Heboric lowered his head. 'L'oric, promise me this – that when the final day comes, you be a long way from here.'

'A difficult promise. Permit me to think on it. Now, where is the hen'bara?'

'Hanging from a bag above the pot.'

'Ah, of course.'

Heboric listened to the sounds of preparation, the rustle of flower-heads from the bag, the slosh of water as L'oric filled the pot. 'Did you know,' the High Mage murmured as he worked, 'that some of the oldest scholarly treatises on the warrens speak of a triumvirate. Rashan, Thyr and Meanas. As if the three were all closely related to one another. And then in turn seek to link them to corresponding Elder warrens.'

Heboric grunted, then nodded. 'All flavours of the same thing? I would agree. Tiste warrens. Kurald this and Kurald that. The human versions can't help but overlap, become confused. I am no expert, L'oric, and it seems you know more of it than I.'

'Well, there certainly appears to be a mutual insinuation of themes between Darkness and Shadow, and, presumably, Light. A confusion among the three, yes. Anomander Rake himself has asserted a proprietary claim on the Throne of Shadow, after all...'

The smell of the brewing tea tugged at Heboric's mind. 'He has?' he murmured, only remotely interested. 'Well, of a sort. He set kin to guard it, presumably from the Tiste Edur. It is very difficult for us mortals to make sense of Tiste histories, for they are such a long-lived people. As you well know, human history is ever marked by certain personalities, rising from some quality or notoriety to shatter the status quo. Fortunately for us, such men and women are few and far between, and they all eventually die or disappear. But among the Tiste... well, those personalities never go away, or so it seems. They act, and act yet again. They persist. Choose the worst tyrant you can from your knowledge of human history, Heboric, then imagine him or her as virtually undying. In your mind, bring that tyrant back again and again and again. How, having done so, would you imagine our history then?'

'Far more violent than that of the Tiste, L'oric. Humans are not Tiste. Indeed, I have never heard of a Tiste tyrant...'

'Perhaps I used the wrong word. I meant only – in human context – a personality of devastating power, or potential. Look at this Malazan Empire, born from the mind of Kellanved, a single man. What if he had been eternal?'

Something in L'oric's musings had reawakened Heboric. 'Eternal?' He barked a laugh. 'Perhaps he is at that. There is one detail you might consider, perhaps more relevant than anything else that's been said here. And that is, the Tiste are no longer isolated in their scheming. There are humans now, in their games – humans, who've not the patience of the Tiste, nor their legendary remoteness. The warrens of Kurald Galain and Kurald Emurlahn are no longer pure, unsullied by human presence. Meanas and Rashan? Perhaps they are proving the doors into both Darkness and Shadow. Or perhaps the matter is more complex than even that – how can one truly hope to separate the themes of Darkness and Light from Shadow? They are as those scholars said, an interdependent triumvirate. Mother, father and child – a family ever squabbling... only now the in-laws and grandchildren are joining in.'

He waited for a reply from L'oric, curious as to how his comments had been received, but none was forthcoming. The ex-priest looked up, struggled to focus on the High Mage—

—who sat motionless, a cup in one hand, the ring of the brewing pot in the other. Motionless, and staring at Heboric.

'L'oric? Forgive me, I cannot discern your expression—'
'Well that you cannot,' the High Mage rasped. 'Here I sought to raise the warning of Tiste meddling in human affairs – to have you then voice a warning in the opposite direction. As if it is not us who must worry, but the Tiste themselves.'

Heboric said nothing. A strange, whispering suspicion flitted through him for a moment, as if tickled into being by something in L'oric's voice. After a moment, he dismissed it. Too outrageous, too absurd to entertain.

L'oric poured the tea.

Heboric sighed. 'It seems I am to be ever denied the succour of that brew. Tell me, then, of the giant of Jade.'

'Aah, and in return you will speak of the Master of the Deck?'

'In some things I am forbidden to elaborate—'

'Because they relate to Sha'ik's own secret past?'

'Fener's tusk, L'oric! Who in this rat's nest might be listening in to our conversation right now? It is madness to speak—'

'No-one is listening, Heboric. I have made certain of that. I am not careless with secrets. I have known much of your recent history since the very beginning—'

'How?'

'We agreed to not discuss sources. My point is, no-one else is aware that you are Malazan, or that you are an escapee from the otataral mines. Except Sha'ik, of course. Since she escaped with you. Thus, I value privacy – with my knowledge and with my thoughts – and am ever vigilant. Oh, there have been probes, sorcerous questings – a whole menagerie of spells as various inhabitants seek to keep track of rivals. As occurs every night.'

'Then your absence will be detected—'

'I sleep restful in my tent, Heboric, as far as those questings are concerned. As do you in your tent. Each alone. Harmless.'

'You are more than a match for their sorceries, then. Which makes you more powerful than any of them.' He heard as much as saw L'oric's shrug, and after a moment the ex-priest sighed. 'If you wish details concerning Sha'ik and this new Master of the Deck, then it must be the three of us who meet. And for that to occur, you will have to reveal more of yourself to the Chosen One than you might wish.'

'Tell me this, at least. This new Master – he was created in the wake of the Malazan disaster on Genabackis. Or do you deny that? That bridge on which he stands – he was of, or is somehow related to, the Bridgeburners. And those ghostly guardians are all that remains of the Bridgeburners, for they were destroyed in the Pannion Domin.'

'I cannot be certain of any of that,' Heboric replied, 'but what you suggest seems likely.'

'So, the Malazan influence ever grows – not just on our mundane world, but throughout the warrens, and now in the Deck of Dragons.'

'You make the mistake of so many of the empire's enemies, L'oric. You assume that all that is Malazan is perforce unified, in intent and in goal. Things are far more complicated than you imagine. I do not believe this Master of the Deck is some servant of the Empress. Indeed, he kneels before no-one.'

'Then why the Bridgeburner guardians?'

Heboric sensed that the question was a leading one, but decided he would play along. 'Some loyalties defy Hood himself—'

'Aah, meaning he was a soldier in that illustrious company. Well, things are beginning to make sense.'
‘They are?’

‘Tell me, have you heard of a Spiritwalker named Kimloc?’

‘The name is vaguely familiar. But not from around here. Karakarang? Rutu Jelba?’

‘Now resident of Ehrlitan. His history is not relevant here, but somehow he must have come into recent contact with a Bridgeburner. There is no other explanation for what he has done. He has given them a song, Heboric. A Tanno song, and, curiously, it begins here. In Raraku. Raraku, friend, is the birthplace of the Bridgeburners. Do you know the significance of such a song?’

Heboric turned away, faced the hearth and its dry heat, and said nothing.

‘Of course,’ L’oric went on after a moment, ‘that significance has now diminished somewhat, since the Bridgeburners are no more. There can be no sanctification...’

‘No, I suppose not,’ Heboric murmured.

‘For the song to be sanctified, a Bridgeburner would have to return to Raraku, to the birthplace of the company. And that does not seem likely now, does it?’

‘Why is it necessary a Bridgeburner return to Raraku?’

‘Tanno sorcery is ... elliptical. The song must be like a serpent eating its tail. Kimloc’s Song of the Bridgeburners is at the moment without an end. But it has been sung, and so lives.’ L’oric shrugged. ‘It’s like a spell that remains active, awaiting resolution.’

‘Tell me of the giant of jade.’

The High Mage nodded. He poured out the tea and set the cup down in front of Heboric. ‘The first one was found deep in the otataral mines—’

‘The first one!’

‘Aye. And the contact proved, for those miners who ventured too close, fatal. Or, rather, they disappeared. Leaving no trace. Sections of two others have been discovered – all three veins are now sealed. The giants are ... intruders to our world. From some other realm.’

‘Arriving,’ Heboric muttered, ‘only to be wrapped in chains of otataral.’

‘Ah, you are not without your own knowledge, then. Indeed, it seems their arrival has, each time, been anticipated. Someone, or something, is ensuring that the threat these giants impose is negated—’

But Heboric shook his head at that and said, ‘No, I think you are wrong, L’oric. It is the very passage – the portal through which each giant comes – that creates the otataral.’

‘Are you certain?’

‘Of course not. There are too many mysteries surrounding the nature of otataral to be certain of anything. There was a scholar – I forget her name – who once suggested that otataral is created by the annihilation of all that is necessary for sorcery to operate. Like slag with all the ore burned out. She called it the absolute draining of energy – the energy that rightfully exists in all things, whether animate or otherwise.’

‘And had she a theory as to how that could occur?’

‘Perhaps the magnitude of the sorcery unleashed – a spell that is all-devouring of the energy it feeds on.’

‘But not even the gods could wield such magic.’

‘True, but I think it is nevertheless possible ... through ritual, such as a cadre – or army – of mortal sorcerers could achieve.’
'In the manner of the Ritual of Tellann,' L'oric nodded. 'Aye.'

'Or,' Heboric said softly as he reached for the cup, 'the calling down of the Crippled God...'

L'oric was motionless, staring fixedly at the tattooed ex-priest. He said nothing for a long time, whilst Heboric sipped the hen'bara tea. He finally spoke. 'Very well, there is one last piece of information I will tell you – I see now the need, the very great need to do so, though it shall... reveal much of myself.'

Heboric sat and listened, and as L'oric continued speaking, the confines of his squalid hut dimmed to insignificance, the heat of the hearth no longer reaching him, until the only sensation left came from his ghostly hands. Together, there at the ends of his wrists, they became the weight of the world.

The rising sun washed all tones from the sky to the east. Karsa checked his supplies one last time, the foodstuffs and waterskins, the additional items and accoutrements necessary for survival in a hot, arid land. A kit wholly unlike what he had carried for most of his life. Even the sword was different – ironwood was heavier than blood-wood, its edge rougher although almost – but not quite – as hard. It did not slice the air with the ease of his oiled bloodwood sword. Yet it had served him well enough. He glanced skyward; dawn's colours were almost entirely gone, now, the blue directly above vanishing behind suspended dust.

Here, in Raraku's heart, the Whirlwind Goddess had stolen the colour of the sun's own fire, leaving the landscape pallid and deathly. Colourless, Karsa Orlong? Bairoth Gild's ghostly voice was filled with wry humour. Not so. Silver, my friend. And silver is the colour of oblivion. Of chaos. Silver is when the last of the blood is washed from the blade—

'No more words,' Karsa growled.

Leoman spoke from nearby. 'Having just arrived, Toblakai, I am yet to even speak. Do you not wish my farewell?'

Karsa slowly straightened, slinging his pack over a shoulder. 'Words need not be spoken aloud, friend, to prove unwelcome. I but answered my own thoughts. That you are here pleases me. When I began my first journey, long ago, none came to witness.'

'I asked Sha'ik,' Leoman replied from where he stood ten paces away, having just passed through the trail's gap in the low, crumbled wall – the mud bricks, Karsa saw, were on their shaded side covered with rhizan, clinging with wings contracted, their mottled colourings making them almost identical to the ochre bricks. 'But she said she would not join me this morning. Even stranger, it seemed as if she already knew of your intentions, and was but awaiting my visit.'

Shrugging, Karsa faced Leoman. 'A witness of one suffices. We may now speak our parting words. Do not hide overlong in your pit, friend. And when you ride out with your warriors, hold to the Chosen One's commands – too many jabs from the small knife can awaken the bear no matter how deep it sleeps.'

'It is a young and weak bear, this time, Toblakai.'

Karsa shook his head. 'I have come to respect the Malazans, and fear that you would awaken them to themselves.'

'I shall consider your words,' Leoman replied. 'And now ask that you consider mine. Beware your gods, friend. If you must kneel before a power, first look upon it with clear eyes. Tell me, what would your kin say to you in parting?'

'"May you slay a thousand children."

Leoman blanched. 'Journey well, Toblakai.'

'I shall.'

Karsa knew that Leoman could neither see nor sense that he was flanked where he stood at the trail's gap in
the wall. Delum Thord on the left, Bairoth Gild on the right. Teblor warriors, blood-oil smeared in crimson
tones even the Whirlwind could not eradicate, and they stepped forward as the Teblor swung about to face the
western trail.

'Lead us. Lead your dead, Warleader.'

Bairoth's mocking laugh clicked and cracked like the potsherds breaking beneath Karsa Orlong's moccasins.
The Teblor grimaced. There would be, it seemed, a fierce price for the honour.

None the less, he realized after a moment, if there must be ghosts, it was better to lead them than to be
chased by them.

'If that is how you would see it, Karsa Orlong.'

In the distance rose the swirling wall of the Whirlwind. It would be good, the Teblor reflected, to see the
world beyond it again, after all these months. He set out, westward, as the day was born.

'He has left,' Kamist Reloe said as he settled onto the cushions.

Korbolo Dom eyed the mage, his blank expression betraying nothing of the contempt he felt for the man.
Sorcerers did not belong in war. And he had shown the truth of that when destroying the Chain of Dogs. Even
so, there were necessities to contemplate, and Reloe was the least of them. 'That leaves only Leoman,' he
rumbled from where he lay on the pillows and cushions.

'Who departs with his rats in a few days.'

'Will Febryl now advance his plans?'

The mage shrugged. 'It is hard to say, but there is a distinct avidness in his gaze this morning.'

Avidness. Indeed. Another High Mage, another insane wielder of powers better left untapped. 'There is one
who remains, who perhaps presents us with the greatest threat of them all, and that is Ghost Hands.'

Kamist Reloe sneered. 'A blind, doddering fool. Does he even know that hen'bara tea is itself the source of
the thinning fabric between his world and all that he would flee from? Before long, his mind will vanish
entirely within the nightmares, and we need concern ourselves with him no more.'

'She has secrets,' Korbolo Dom muttered, leaning forward to collect a bowl of figs. 'Far beyond those gifted
her by the Whirlwind. Febryl proceeds headlong, unmindful of his own ignorance. When the battle with the
Adjunct's army is finally joined, success or failure will be decided by the Dogslayers – by my army. Tavore's
otataral will defeat the Whirlwind – I am certain of it. All that I ask of you and Febryl and Bidithal is that I am
unobstructed in commanding the forces, in shaping that battle.'

'We are both aware,' Kamist growled, 'that this struggle goes far beyond the Whirlwind.'

'Aye, so it does. Beyond all of Seven Cities, Mage. Do not lose sight of our final goal, of the throne that will
one day belong to us.'

Kamist Reloe shrugged. 'That is our secret, old friend. We need only proceed with caution, and all that
opposes us will likely vanish before our very eyes. Febryl kills Sha'ik, Tavore kills Febryl, and we destroy
Tavore and her army.'

'And then become Laseen's saviour – as we crush this rebellion utterly. Gods, I swear I will see this entire
land empty of life if need be. A triumphant return to Unra, an audience with the Empress, then the driven knife.
And who will stop us? The Talon are poised to cut down the Claws. Whiskeyjack and the Bridgeburners are no
more, and Dujek remains a continent away. How fares the Jhistal priest?'

'Mallick travels without opposition, ever southward. He is a clever man, a wise man, and he will play out his
role to perfection.'
Korbolo Dom made no reply to that. He despised Mallick Rel, but could not deny his usefulness. Still, the man was not one to be trusted ... to which High Fist Pormqual would attest, were the fool still alive. 'Send for Fayelle. I would a woman's company now. Leave me, Kamist Reloe.'

The High Mage hesitated, and Korbolo scowled.

'There is the matter,' Kamist whispered, 'of L'oric ...'

'Then deal with him!' Korbolo snapped. 'Begone!'

Bowing his head, the High Mage backed out of the tent.

Sorcerers. Could he find a way to destroy magic, the Napan would not hesitate. The extinction of powers that could slaughter a thousand soldiers in an instant would return the fate of mortals to the mortals themselves, and this could not but be a good thing. The death of warrens, the dissolution of gods as memory of them and their meddling slowly vanished, the withering of all magic ... the world then would belong to men such as Korbolo himself. And the empire he would shape would permit no ambiguity, no ambivalence.

His will unopposed, the Napan could end, once and for all, the dissonant clangour that so plagued humanity – now and throughout its history.

*I will bring order. And from that unity, we shall rid the world of every other race, every other people, we shall overpower and crush every discordant vision, for there can in the end be only one way, one way of living, of ruling this realm. And that way belongs to me.*

A good soldier well knew that success was found in careful planning, in incremental steps.

Opposition had a way of stepping aside all on its own. *You are now at Hood's feet, Whiskeyjack. Where I have always wanted you. You and your damned company, feeding worms in a foreign land. None left to stop me, now ...*
CHAPTER ELEVEN

This was a path she did not welcome.

The Sha’ik Rebellion
Tursabaal

The breaths of the horses plumed in the chill morning air. Dawn had but just arrived, the air hinting nothing of the heat the coming day would deliver. Wrapped in the furs of a bhederin, old sweat making the lining of his helm clammy as the touch of a corpse, Fist Gamet sat motionless on his Wickan mount, his gaze fixed on the Adjunct.

The hill just south of Erougimon where Coltaine had died had come to be known as the Fall. Countless humps on the summit and slopes indicated where bodies had been buried, the metal-strewn earth already cloaked in grasses and flowers.

Ants had colonized this entire hill, or so it seemed. The ground swarmed with them, their red and black bodies coated in dust yet glittering none the less as they set about their daily tasks.

Gamet, the Adjunct and Tene Baralta had ridden out from the city before dawn. Outside the gates to the west, the army had begun to stir. The march would begin this day. The journey north, to Raraku, to Sha’ik and the Whirlwind. To vengeance.

Perhaps it was the rumours that had drawn Tavore out here to the Fall, but already Gamet regretted her decision to bring him along. This place showed him nothing he wanted to see. Nor, he suspected, was the Adjunct well pleased with what they had found.

Red-stained braids, woven into chains, draped across the summit, and coiled around the twin stumps of the cross that had once stood there. Dog skulls crowded with indecipherable hieroglyphs looked out along the crest through empty sockets. Crow feathers dangled from upright-thrust broken arrow shafts. Ragged banners lay pinned to the ground on which were painted various representations of a broken Wickan long-knife. Icons, fetishes, a mass of detritus to mark the death of a single man.

And all of it was aswarm in ants. Like mindless keepers of this now hallowed ground.

The three riders sat in their saddles in silence.

Finally, after a long while, Tavore spoke. ‘Tene Baralta.’ Inflectionless.

‘Aye, Adjunct?’

‘Who – who is responsible for... for all of this? Malazans from Aren? Your Red Blades?’

Tene Baralta did not immediately reply. Instead, he dismounted and strode forward, his eyes on the ground. Near one of the dog skulls he halted and crouched down. ‘Adjunct, these skulls – the runes on them are Khundryl.’ He pointed towards the wooden stumps. ‘The woven chains, Kherahn Dhobri.’ A gesture to the slope. ‘The banners... unknown, possibly Bhilard. Crow feathers? The beads at their stems are Semk.’

‘Semk!’ Gamet could not keep the disbelief from his voice. ‘From the other side of Vathar River! Tene, you must be in error ...’

The large warrior shrugged. He straightened and gestured towards the rumpled hills directly north of them. ‘The pilgrims only come at night – unseen, which is how they will have it. They’re hiding out there, even now. Waiting for night.’

Tavore cleared her throat. ‘Semk. Bhilard – these tribes fought against him. And now they come to worship.
How is this? Explain, please, Tene Baralta.'

'I cannot, Adjunct.' He eyed her, then added, 'But, from what I understand, this is ... modest, compared with what lines the Aren Way.'

There was silence once more, though Gamet did not need to hear her speak to know Tavore's thoughts.

_This – this is the path we now take. We must walk, step by step, the legacy. We? No. Tavore. Alone. “This is no longer Coltaine’s war!” she said to Temul. But it seems it remains just that. And she now realizes, down in the depths of her soul, that she will stride that man’s shadow . . . all the way to Raraku._

'You will both leave me now,' the Adjunct said. 'I shall rejoin you on the Aren Way.'

Gamet hesitated, then said, 'Adjunct, the Crow Clan still claim the right to ride at the forefront. They will not accept Temul as their commander.'

'I will see to their disposition,' she replied. 'For now, go.'

He watched Tene Baralta swing back onto his horse. They exchanged a glance, then both wheeled their mounts and set off at a canter along the track leading to the west gate.

Gamet scanned the rock-studded ground rolling past beneath his horse's hoofs. This was where the historian Duiker drove the refugees towards the city – this very sweep of empty ground. Where, at the last, that old man drew rein on his weary, loyal mare – the mare that Temul now rode – and watched as the last of his charge was helped through the gate.

Whereupon, it was said, he finally rode into the city.

Gamet wondered what had gone through the man's mind at that moment. Knowing that Coltaine and the remnants of the Seventh were still out there, fighting their desperate rearguard action. Knowing that they had achieved the impossible.

Duiker had delivered the refugees.

Only to end up staked to a tree. It was beyond him, Gamet realized, to comprehend the depth of that betrayal.

A body never recovered. No bones laid to rest.

'There is so much,' Tene Baralta rumbled at Gamet's side.

'So much?'

'To give answer to, Gamet. Indeed, it takes words from the throat, yet the silence it leaves behind – that silence screams'

Discomforted by Tene's admission, Gamet said nothing.

'Pray remind me,' the Red Blade went on, 'that Tavore is equal to this task.'

_Is that even possible? 'She is.' She must be. Else we are lost._

'One day, Gamet, you shall have to tell me what she has done, to earn such loyalty as you display.'

_Gods, what answer to make to that? Damn you, Tene, can you not see the truth before you? She has done . . . nothing. I beg you. Leave an old man to his faith._

'Wish whatever you like,' Gesler growled, 'but faith is for fools.'

Strings cleared the dust from his throat and spat onto the side of the track. Their pace was torturously slow, the three squads trailing the wagon loaded down with their supplies. 'What's your point?' he asked the sergeant beside him. 'A soldier knows but one truth, and that truth is, without faith, you are already as good as dead.'
Faith in the soldier at your side. But even more important – and no matter how delusional it is in truth – there is the faith that you cannot be killed. Those two and those two alone – they are the legs holding up every army.'

The amber-skinned man grunted, then waved at the nearest of the trees lining Aren Way. 'Look there and tell me what you see – no, not those Hood-damned fetishes – but what's still visible under all that mess. The spike holes, the dark stains of bile and blood. Ask the ghost of the soldier who was on that tree – ask that soldier about faith.'

'A faith betrayed does not destroy the notion of faith itself,' Strings retorted. 'In fact, it does the very opposite –'

'Maybe for you, but there are some things you can't step around with words and lofty ideals, Fid. And that comes down to who is in that vanguard somewhere up ahead. The Adjunct. Who just lost an argument with that pack of hoary Wickans. You've been lucky – you had Whiskeyjack, and Dujek. Do you know who my last commander was – before I was sentenced to the coastal guard? Korbolo Dom. I'd swear that man had a shrine to Whiskeyjack in his tent – but not the Whiskeyjack you know. Korbolo saw him differently. Unfulfilled potential, that's what he saw.'

Strings glanced over at Gesler. Stormy and Tarr were walking in step behind the two sergeants, close enough to hear, though neither had ventured a comment or opinion. 'Unfulfilled potential? What in Bern's name are you talking about?'

'Not me. Korbolo Dom. "If only the bastard had been hard enough," he used to say, "he could've taken the damned throne. Should've." As far as Dom is concerned, Whiskeyjack betrayed him, betrayed us all – and that's something that renegade Napan won't forgive.'

'Too bad for him,' Strings growled, 'since there's a good chance the Empress will send the whole Genabackan army over in time for the final battle. Dom can take his complaints to Whiskeyjack himself.'

'A pleasant thought,' Gesler laughed. 'But my point was, you've had commanders worthy of the faith you put in them. Most of the rest of us didn't have that luxury. So we got a different feeling about it all. That's it, that's all I was trying to say.'

The Aren Way marched past on both sides. Transformed into a vast, open-air temple, each tree cluttered with fetishes, cloths braided into chains, figures painted on the rough bark to approximate the soldiers who had once writhed there on spikes driven in by Korbolo Dom's warriors. Most of the soldiers ahead and behind Strings walked in silence. Despite the vast, empty expanse of blue sky overhead, the road was oppressive.

There had been talk of cutting the trees down, but one of the Adjunct's first commands upon arriving in Aren had been to forbid it. Strings wondered if she now regretted her decision.

His gaze travelled up to one of the Fourteenth's new standards, barely visible through clouds of roiling dust up ahead. She had understood the whole thing with the finger bones well enough, understood the turning of the omen. The new standard well attested to that. A grimy, thin-limbed figure holding a bone aloft, the details in shades of dun colours that were barely visible on the yellow ochre field, the border a woven braid of the imperial magenta and dark grey. A defiant figure standing before a sandstorm. That the standard could as easily apply to Sha'ik's army of the Apocalypse was a curious coincidence. As if Tavore and Sha'ik – the two armies, the forces in opposition – are in some way mirrored reflections of the other.

There were many strange ... occurrences in all this, nibbling and squirming beneath Strings's skin like bot-fly larvae, and it seemed indeed that he was feeling strangely fevered throughout the day. Strains of a barely heard song rose up from the depths of his mind on occasion, a haunting song that made his flesh prickle. And stranger still, the song was entirely unfamiliar.

Mirrored reflections. Perhaps not just Tavore and Sha'ik. What of Tavore and Coltaine? Here we are, reversing the path on that blood-soaked road. And it was that road that proved Coltaine to most of those he led. Will we see the same with our journey? How will we see Tavore the day we stand before the Whirlwind? And what of my own return? To Raraku, the desert that saw me destroyed only to rise once more, mysteriously renewed – a renewal that persists, since for an old man I neither look nor feel old. And so it remains for all of
us Bridgeburners, as if Raraku stole something of our mortality, and replaced it with . . . with something else.

He glanced back to check on his squad. None were lagging, which was a good sign. He doubted any of them were in the shape required for the journey they were now on. The early days would prove the most difficult, before marching in full armour and weapons became second nature — not that it would ever prove a comfortable second nature — this land was murderously hot and dry, and the handful of minor healers in each of the companies would recall this march as a seemingly endless nightmare of fending off heat prostration and dehydration.

There was no way yet to measure the worth of his squad. Koryk certainly had the look, the nature, of the mailed fist that every squad needed. And the stubborn set to Tarr's blockish features hinted at a will not easily turned aside. There was something about the lass, Smiles, that reminded Strings all too much of Sorry — the remorseless chill of her eyes belonged to those of a murderer, and he wondered at her past. Bottle had all the diffident bluster of a young mage, probably one versed in a handful of spells from some minor warren. The last soldier in his squad, of course, the sergeant had no worries about. He'd known men like Cuttle all his life. A burlier, more miserable version of Hedge. Having Cuttle there was like ... coming home.

The testing would come, and it would probably be brutal, but it would temper those who survived.

They were emerging from the Aren Way, and Gesler gestured to the last tree on their left. 'That's where we found him,' he said in a low tone.

'Who?'

'Duiker. We didn't let on, since the lad — Truth — was so hopeful. Next time we came out, though, the historian's body was gone. Stolen. You've seen the markets in Aren — the withered pieces of flesh the hawkers claim belonged to Coltaine, or Bult, or Duiker. The broken long-knives, the scraps of feathered cape ...'

Strings was thoughtful for a moment, then he sighed. 'I saw Duiker but once, and that at a distance. Just a soldier the Emperor decided was worth schooling.'

'A soldier indeed. He stood on the front line with all the others. A crusty old bastard with his short-sword and shield.'

'Clearly, something about him caught Coltaine's eye — after all, Duiker was the one Coltaine chose to lead the refugees.'

'I'd guess it wasn't Duiker's soldiering that decided Coltaine, Strings. It was that he was the Imperial Historian. He wanted the tale to be told, and told right.'

'Well, it's turned out that Coltaine told his own tale — he didn't need a historian, did he?'

Gesler shrugged. 'As you say. We weren't in their company long, just long enough to take on a shipload of wounded. I talked a bit with Duiker, and Captain Lull. And then Coltaine broke his hand punching me in the face—'

'He what?' Strings laughed. 'No doubt you deserved it—'

Stormy spoke behind them. 'Broke his hand, aye, Gesler. And your nose, too.'

'My nose has been broke so many times it does it on instinct,' the sergeant replied. 'It wasn't much of a punch.'

Stormy snorted. 'He dropped you to the ground like a sack of turnips! That punch rivalled Urko's, the time he —'

'Not even close,' Gesler drawled. 'I once saw Urko punch down the side of a mudbrick house. Three blows, no more than four, anyway, and the whole thing toppled in a cloud of dust. That Napan bastard could punch.'

'And that's important to you?' Strings asked.
Gesler's nod was serious. 'The only way any commander will ever earn my respect, Fid.'

'Planning on testing the Adjunct soon?'

'Maybe. Of course, I'll make allowances, she being noble-born and all.'

Once beyond Aren Way's battered gate and the abandoned ruins of a small village, they could now see the Seti and Wickan outriders on their flanks – a comforting sight to Strings. The raiding and sniping could begin at any time, now that the army had left the walls of Aren behind. Most of the tribes had, if the rumours were true, conveniently forgotten the truces they had won from the Malazan Empire. The old ways did naught but sleep restless beneath the surface of such peoples.

The landscape ahead and to either side was sun-blasted and broken, a place where even wild goats grew lean and listless. The mounded, flat-topped heaps of rubble that marked long-dead cities were visible on every horizon. Ancient raised roads, now mostly dismantled, stitched the rugged hillsides and ridges.

Strings wiped sweat from his brow. 'Green as we are, it's about time she called—'

Horns sounded along the massive train's length. Motion ceased, and the shouts of the water crews rose into the dusty air as they scrambled for the barrels. Strings swung about and studied his squad – they were already on the ground, sitting or sprawled, their long-sleeved undershirts darkened with sweat.

Among Gesler's and Borduke's squads, the reaction to the rest-halt had been identical, and Borduke's mage, Balgrid – slightly overweight and clearly unused to the armour he was wearing – looked pale and shivering. That squad's healer, a quiet, small man named Lutes, was already moving towards him.

'A Seti summer,' Koryk said, offering Strings a carnivorous smile. 'When the grasslands are driven to dust by the herds, when the earth underfoot clicks like breaking metal.'

'Hood take you,' Smiles snapped. 'This land's full of dead things for a reason.'

'Aye,' the Seti half-blood replied, 'only the tough survive. There are tribes aplenty out there – they've left enough sign in passing.'

'You have seen that, have you?' Strings said. 'Good. You're now the squad's scout.'

Koryk's white grin broadened. 'If you insist, Sergeant.'

'Unless it's night,' Strings added. 'Then it'll be Smiles. And Bottle, assuming his warren is suitable.'

Bottle scowled, then nodded. 'Well enough, Sergeant.'

'So what's Cuttle's role, then?' Smiles demanded. 'Lying around like a beached porpoise?'

_Beached porpoise? Grew up by the sea, did you?_ Strings glanced over at the veteran soldier. The man was asleep. I used to do that, back in the days when nothing was expected of me, when I wasn't in charge of a damned thing. _I miss those days._ Cuttle's task,' Strings replied, 'is keeping the rest of you alive when I'm not close by.'

'Then why isn't he the corporal?' Smiles wanted to know, a belligerent set to her petite features.

'Because he's a sapper, and you don't want a sapper for a corporal, lass.' _Of course, I'm a sapper, too. Best keep that to myself..._

Three soldiers from the company's infantry arrived with waterskins.

'Drink it down slow,' Strings instructed. Gesler caught his eye from a few paces away, near the wagon, and Strings headed over. Borduke joined them.

'Well, this is curious,' Gesler muttered. 'Borduke's sickly mage – his warren's Meanas. And my mage is Tavos Pond, and he's the same. Now, Strings, your lad, Bottle …'
"I'm not sure yet."

"He's also Meanas," Borduke growled, pulling at his beard in a habitual gesture Strings knew would come to irritate him. 'Balgrid's confirmed it. They're all Meanas.'

"Like I said." Gesler sighed. 'Curious.'

"That could be put to use," Strings said. 'Get all three of them working on rituals – illusions are damned useful, when done right. Quick Ben could pull a few – the key is in the details. We should drag them all together tonight—'

"Ah," said a voice from beyond the wagon, and Lieutenant Ranal strode into view, 'all my sergeants together in one place. Convenient.'

'Come to eat dust with the rest of us?' Gesler asked. 'Damned generous of you.'

'Don't think I haven't heard about you,' Ranal sneered. 'Had it been my choice, you'd be one of the lads carrying those waterskins, Gesler—'

'You'd go thirsty if I was,' the sergeant replied.

Ranal's face darkened. 'Captain Keneb wants to know if there's any mages in your squads. The Adjunct needs a tally of what's available.'

'None—'

'Three,' Strings interrupted, ignoring Gesler's glare. 'All minor, as would be expected. Tell the captain we'll be good for covert actions.'

'Keep your opinions to yourself, Strings. Three, you said. Very well.' He wheeled about and marched off.

Gesler rounded on Strings. 'We could lose those mages—'

'We won't. Go easy on the lieutenant, Gesler, at least for now. The lad knows nothing of being an officer in the field. Imagine, telling sergeants to keep their opinions quiet. With Oponn's luck, Keneb will explain a few things to the lieutenant, eventually.'

'Assuming Keneb's any better,' Borduke muttered. He combed his beard. 'Rumour has it he was the only one of his company to survive. And you know what that likely means.'

'Let's wait and see,' Strings advised. 'It's a bit early to start honing the knives—'

'Honing the knives,' Gesler said, 'now you're talking a language I understand. I'm prepared to wait and see, as you suggest, Fid. For now. All right, let's gather the mages tonight, and if they can actually get along without killing each other, then we might find ourselves a step or two ahead.'

Horns sounded to announce the resumption of the march. Soldiers groaned and swore as they clambered upright once more.

The first day of travel was done, and to Gamet it seemed they had travelled a paltry, pathetic distance from Aren. To be expected, of course. The army was a long way from finding its feet.

As am I. Saddle sore and light-headed from the heat, the Fist watched from a slight rise alongside the line of march as the camp slowly took shape. Pockets of order amidst a chaotic sea of motion. Seti and Wickan horse warriors continued to range well beyond the outlying pickets, far too few in number, however, to give him much comfort. And those Wickans – grandfathers and grandmothers one and all. Hood knows, I might well have crossed blades with some of those old warriors. Those ancient ones, they were never settled with the idea of being in the Empire. They were here for another reason entirely. For the memory of Coltaine. And the children – well, they were being fed the singular poison of bitter old fighters filled with tales of past glory. And so, ones who've never known the terror of war and ones who've forgotten. A dreadful pairing...
He stretched to ease the kinks in his spine, then forced himself into motion. Down from the ridge, along the edge of the rubble-filled ditch, to where the Adjunct's command tent sat, its canvas pristine, Temul's Wickans standing guard around it.

Temul was not in sight. Gamet pitied the lad. He was already fighting a half-dozen skirmishes, without a blade drawn, and he was losing. And *there's not a damned thing any of us can do about it.*

He approached the tent's entrance, scratched at the flap and waited.

'Come in, Gamet,' the Adjunct's voice called from within.

She was kneeling in the fore-chamber before a long, stone box, and was just settling the lid into place when he stepped through the entrance. A momentary glimpse – her otataral sword – then the lid was in place. 'There is some softened wax – there in that pot over the brazier. Bring it over, Gamet.'

He did so, and watched as she brushed the inset join between lid and base, until the container was entirely sealed. Then she rose and swept the windblown sand from her knees. 'I am already weary of this pernicious sand,' she muttered.

She studied him for a moment, then said, 'There is watered wine behind you, Gamet. Pour yourself some.'

'Do I look in need, Adjunct?'

'You do. Ah, I well know, you sought out a quiet life when you joined our household. And here I have dragged you into a war.'

He felt himself bridling and stood straighter. 'I am equal to this, Adjunct.'

'I believe you. None the less, pour yourself some wine. We await news.'

He swung about in search of the clay jug, found it and strode over. 'News, Adjunct?'

She nodded, and he saw the concern on her plain features, a momentary revelation that he turned away from as he poured out a cup of wine. *Show me no seams, lass. I need to hold on to my certainty.*

'Come stand beside me,' she instructed, a sudden urgency in her tone.

He joined her. They faced the clear space in the centre of the chamber.

Where a portal flowered, spreading outward like liquid staining a sheet of gauze, murky grey, sighing out a breath of stale, dead air. A tall, green-clad figure emerged. Strange, angular features, skin the shade of coal-dust marble; the man's broad mouth had the look of displaying a perpetual half-smile, but he was not smiling now.

He paused to brush grey dust from his cloak and leggings, then lifted his head and met Tavore's gaze. 'Adjunct, greetings from the Empress. And myself, of course.'

'Topper. I sense your mission here will be an unpleasant one. Fist Gamet, will you kindly pour our guest some wine?'

'Of course.' *Gods below, the damned master of the Claw.* He glanced down at his own cup, then offered it to Topper. 'I have yet to sip. Here.'

The tall man tilted his head in thanks and accepted the cup.

Gamet went to where the jug waited.

'You have come directly from the Empress?' Tavore asked the Clawmaster.

'I have, and before that, from across the ocean ... from Genabackis, where I spent a most glum evening in the company of High Mage Tayschrenn. Would it shock you to know that he and I got drunk that night?'

Gamet's head turned at that. It seemed such an unlikely image in his mind that he was indeed shocked.
The Adjunct looked equally startled, then she visibly steeled herself. 'What news have you to tell me?'

Topper swallowed down a large mouthful of wine, then scowled. 'Watered. Ah well. Losses, Adjunct. On Genabackis. Terrible losses ...'

Lying motionless in a grassy depression thirty paces beyond the squad's fire, Bottle closed his eyes. He could hear his name being called. Strings – who was called Fid by Gesler – wanted him, but the mage was not ready. Not yet. He had a different conversation to listen to, and managing that – without being detected — was no easy task.

His grandmother back in Malaz City would have been proud. 'Never mind those damned warrens, child, the deep magic is far older. Remember, seek out the roots and tendrils, the roots and tendrils. The paths through the ground, the invisible web woven from creature to creature. Every creature — on the land, in the land, in the air, in the water — they are all linked. And it is within you, if you have been awakened, and spirits below, you've been awakened, child! Within you, then, to ride those tendrils...'

And ride them he did, though he would not surrender his private fascination with warrens, with Meanas in particular. Illusions ... playing with those tendrils, with those roots of being, twisting and tying them into deceptive knots that tricked the eye, the touch, that deceived every sense, now that was a game worth playing...

But for the moment, he had immersed himself in the old ways, the undetectable ways – if one were careful, that is. Riding the life-sparks of capemoths, of rhizan, of crickets and chigger fleas, of roving bloodflies. Mindless creatures dancing on the tent's wall, hearing but not comprehending the sound shivers of the words coming from the other side of that tent wall.

Comprehension was Bottle's task. And so he listened. As the newcomer spoke, interrupted by neither the Adjunct nor Fist Gamet. Listened, and comprehended.

Strings glared down at the two seated mages. 'You can't sense him?'

Balgrid's shrug was sheepish. 'He's out there, hiding in the dark somewhere."

'And he's up to something,' Tavos Pond added. 'But we can't tell what.'

'Is strange,' Balgrid muttered.

Strings snorted and strode back to Gesler and Borduke. The other squad members were brewing tea at the small fire they had built to one side of the path. Cuttle's snores were loud from the tent beyond. 'The bastard's vanished,' Strings said.

Gesler grunted. 'Maybe he's deserted, and if that's the case the Wickans will hunt him down and come back with his head on a spear. There won't be—'

'He's here!'

They turned to see Bottle settling down by the fire. Strings stamped over. 'Where in Hood's name have you been?' he demanded.

Bottle looked up, his brows slowly lifting. 'Nobody else felt it?' He glanced over at Balgrid and Tavos Pond, who were both approaching. 'That portal? The one that opened in the Adjunct's tent?' He frowned at the blank expressions on the faces of the two other mages, then asked in a deadpan voice, 'Have you two mastered hiding pebbles yet? Making coins disappear?'

Strings lowered himself opposite Bottle. 'What was all that about a portal?'

'Bad news, Sergeant,' the young man replied. 'It all went foul on Genabackis. Dujek's army mostly wiped out. The Bridgeburners annihilated. Whiskeyjack's dead—'
'Dead!'
'Hood take us!'
'Whiskeyjack? Gods below!'

The curses grew more elaborate, along with postulations of disbelief, but Strings no longer heard them. His mind was numb, as if a wildfire had ripped through his inner landscape, scorching the ground barren. He felt a heavy hand settle on his shoulder and vaguely heard Gesler murmuring something, but after a moment he shook the man off, rose and walked into the darkness beyond the camp.

He did not know how long, or how far he walked. Each step was senseless, the world outside his body not reaching through to him, remaining beyond the withered oblivion of his mind. It was only when a sudden weakness took his legs that he sank down onto the wiry, colourless grasses.

The sound of weeping, coming from somewhere ahead, a sound of sheer despair that pierced through the fog and thrummed in his chest. He listened to the ragged cries, winced to hear how they seemed torn from a constricted throat, like a dam finally sundered by a flood of grief.

He shook himself, growing mindful once more of his surroundings. The ground beneath the thin skein of grasses was hard and warm beneath his knees. Insects buzzed and flitted through the dark. Only starlight illuminated the wastes stretching out to all sides. The encamped army was easily a thousand or more paces behind him.

Strings drew a deep breath, then rose. He walked slowly towards the sound of the weeping.

A lad, lean – no, damn near scrawny, crouched down with arms wrapped about his knees, head sunk low. A single crow feather hung from a plain leather headband. A few paces beyond stood a mare, bearing a Wickan saddle, a tattered vellum scroll hanging from the horn. The horse was placidly tugging at the grass, her reins dangling.

Strings recognized the youth, though for the moment he could not recall his name. But Tavore had placed him in command of the Wickans.

After a long moment, the sergeant moved forward, making no effort to stay quiet, and sat down on a boulder a half-dozen paces from the lad.

The Wickan's head snapped up. Tear-streaked warpaint made a twisted net of his narrow face. Venom flared in his dark eyes and he hissed, a hand unsheathing his long-knife as he staggered upright.

'Relax,' Strings muttered. 'I'm in grief's arms this night myself, though likely for an entirely different reason. Neither of us expected company, but here we are.'

The Wickan hesitated, then snapped the weapon back into its sheath and made to walk away.

'Hold a moment, Horsewarrior. There's no need to flee.'

The youth spun round, mouth twisting into a snarl.

'Face me. I will be your witness this night, and we alone will know of it. Give me your words of sorrow, Wickan, and I will listen. Hood knows, it would serve me well right now.'

'I flee no-one,' the warrior rasped.

'I know. I just wanted to get your attention.'

'Who are you?'

'Nobody. And that is how I will stay, if you like. Nor will I ask for your name—'

'I am Temul.'
'Ah, well. So your bravery puts me in my place. My name is Fiddler.'

'Tell me,' Temul's voice was suddenly harsh, and he wiped angrily at his face, 'did you think my grief a noble thing? Did I weep for Coltaine? For my fallen kin? I did not. My pity was for myself! And now you may go. Proclaim me – I am done with commanding, for I cannot command myself—'

'EASY there, I've no intention of proclaiming anything, Temul. But I can guess at your reasons. Those wrinkled Wickans of the Crow, is my guess. Them and the survivors who walked off Gesler's ship of wounded. They won't accept you as their leader, will they? And so, like children, they blunt you at every turn. Defy you, displaying a mocking regard to your face then whispering behind your back. And where does that leave you? You can't challenge them all, after all—'

'Perhaps I can! I shall!'

'Well, that will please them no end. Numbers alone will defeat your martial prowess. So you will die, sooner or later, and they will win.'

'YOU tell me nothing I do not know, Fiddler.'

'I know. I'm just reminding you that you've good reason to rail at the injustice, at the stupidity of those you would lead. I had a commander once, Temul, who was faced with the same thing you're facing. He was in charge of a bunch of children. Nasty children at that.'

'And what did he do?'

'Not much, and ended up with a knife in his back.'

There was a moment of silence, then Temul barked a laugh.

Fiddler nodded. 'Aye, I'm not one for stories with lessons in life, Temul. My mind bends to more practical choices.'

'Such as?'

'Well, I would imagine that the Adjunct shares your frustration. She wants you to lead, and would help you do so – but not so you lose face. She's too clever for that. No, the key here is deflection. Tell me, where are their horses right now?'

Temul frowned. 'Their horses?'

'Aye. I would think the Seti outriders could do without the Crow Clan for a day, don't you think? I'm sure the Adjunct would agree – those Seti are young, by and large, and untested. They need the room to find themselves. There's good reason, then, militarily, to keep the Wickans from their horses come tomorrow. Let them walk with the rest of us. Barring your loyal retinue, of course. And who knows, a day might not be enough. Could end up being three, or even four.'

Temul spoke softly, thoughtfully. 'To get to their horses, we would need to be quiet…'

'Another challenge for the Seti, or so I'm sure the Adjunct would note. If children your kin must be, then take away their favoured playthings – their horses. Hard to look tall and imperious when you're spitting dust behind a wagon. In any case, you'd best hurry, so as not to awaken the Adjunct—'

'She may already be asleep—'

'No, she isn't, Temul. I am certain of it. Now, before you leave, answer me a question, please. You've a scroll hanging from your mare's saddle. Why? What is written on it?'

'The horse belonged to Duiker,' Temul answered, turning to the animal. 'He was a man who knew how to read and write. I rode with him, Fiddler.' He spun back with a glare, 'I rode with him!'

'And the scroll?'
The young Wickan waved a hand. 'Men such as Duiker carried such things! Indeed, I believe it once belonged to him, was once in his very hands.'

'And the feather you wear ... to honour Coltaine?'

'To honour Coltaine, yes. But that is because I must. Coltaine did what he was expected to do. He did nothing that was beyond his abilities. I honour him, yes, but Duiker ... Duiker was different.' He scowled and shook his head. 'He was old, older than you. Yet he fought. When fighting was not even expected of him – I know this to be true, for I knew Coltaine and Bult and I heard them speak of it, of the historian. I was there when Coltaine drew the others together, all but Duiker. Lull, Bult, Chenned, Mincer. And all spoke true and with certainty. Duiker would lead the refugees. Coltaine even gave him the stone the traders brought—'

'The stone? What stone?'

'To wear about his neck, a saving stone, Nil called it. A soul trapper, delivered from afar. Duiker wore it, though he liked it not, for it was meant for Coltaine, so that he would not be lost. Of course, we Wickans knew he would not be lost. We knew the crows would come for his soul. The elders who have come, who hound me so, they speak of a child born to the tribe, a child once empty, then filled, for the crows came. They came.'

'Coltaine has been reborn?'

'He has been reborn.'

'And Duiker's body disappeared,' Strings muttered. 'From the tree.'

'Yes! And so I keep his horse for him, for when he returns. I rode with him, Fiddler!'

'And he looked to you and your handful of warriors to guard the refugees. To you, Temul – not just Nil and Nether.'

Temul's dark eyes hardened as he studied Strings, then he nodded. 'I go now to the Adjunct.'

'The Lady's pull on you, Commander.'

Temul hesitated, then said, 'This night... you saw...'

'I saw nothing,' Strings replied.

A sharp nod, then the lad was swinging onto the mare, the reins in one long-fingered, knife-scarred hand.

Strings watched him ride into the darkness. He sat motionless on the boulder for a time, then slowly lowered his head into his hands.

The three were seated now, in the lantern-glow of the tent's chamber. Topper's tale was done, and it seemed that all that remained was silence. Gamet stared down at his cup, saw that it was empty, and reached for the jug. Only to find that it too was empty.

Even as exhaustion tugged at him, Gamet knew he would not leave, not yet. Tavore had been told of, first, her brother's heroism, then his death. Not a single Bridgeburner left alive. Tayschrenn himself saw their bodies, witnessed their interment in Moon's Spawn. But lass, Ganoes redeemed himself— redeemed the family name. He did that much at least. But that was where the knife probably dug deepest. She had made harrowing sacrifices, after all, to resurrect the family's honour. Yet all along, Ganoes was no renegade; nor had he been responsible for Lorn's death. Like Dujek, like Whiskeyjack, his outlawry was nothing but a deception. There had been no dishonour. Thus, the sacrifice of young Felisin might have, in the end, proved ... unnecessary.

And there was more. Jarring revelations. It had, Topper explained, been the hope of the Empress to land Onearm's Host on the north coast, in time to deliver a double blow to the Army of the Apocalypse. Indeed, the expectation all along had been for Dujek to assume overall command. Gamet could understand Laseen's thinking – to place the fate of the imperial presence on Seven Cities in the hands of a new, young and untested
Adjunct was far too long a reach of faith.

*Though Tavore had believed the Empress had done just that. Now, to find this measure of confidence so lacking . . . gods, this had been a Hood-damned night indeed.*

Dujek Onearm was still coming, with a scant three thousand remaining in his Host, but he would arrive late, and, by both Topper's and Tayschrenn's unforgiving assessments, the man's spirit was broken. By the death of his oldest friend. Gamet wondered what else had happened in that distant land, in that nightmarish empire called the Pannion.

*Was it worth it, Empress? Was it worth the devastating loss?*

Topper had said too much, Gamet decided. Details of Laseen's plans should have been filtered through a more circumspect, less emotionally damaged agent. If the truth was so important, after all, then it should have been laid out for the Adjunct long before now – when it actually mattered. To tell Tavore that the Empress had no confidence in her, then follow that with the brutal assertion that she was now the empire's last hope for Seven Cities... well, few were the men or women who would not be rocked to their knees by that.

The Adjunct's expression revealed nothing. She cleared her throat. 'Very well, Topper. Is there more?'

'The Clawmaster's oddly shaped eyes widened momentarily, then he shook his head and rose. 'No. Do you wish me to convey a message to the Empress?'

'Tavore frowned. 'A message? No, there is no message. We have begun our march to the Holy Desert. Nothing more need be said.'

Gamet saw Topper hesitate, then the Clawmaster said, 'There is one more thing, Adjunct. There are probably worshippers of Fener among your army. I do not think the truth of the god's ... fall ... can be hidden. It seems the Tiger of Summer is the lord of war, now. It does an army little good to mourn; indeed, grief is anathema to an army as we all well know. There may prove some period of difficult adjustment – it would be well to anticipate and prepare for desertions—'

'There will be no desertions,' Tavore said, the flat assertion silencing Topper. 'The portal is weakening, Clawmaster – even a box of basalt cannot entirely block the effects of my sword. If you would leave this night, I suggest you do so now.'

'Topper stared down at her. 'We are badly hurt, Adjunct. And hurting. It is the hope of the Empress that you will exercise due caution, and make no precipitous actions. Suffer no distraction on your march to Raraku – there will be attempts to draw you from the trail, to wear you down with skirmishes and pursuits—'

'You are a Clawmaster,' Tavore said, sudden iron in her tone. 'Dujek's advice I will listen to, for he is a soldier, a commander. Until such time as he arrives, I shall follow my own instincts. If the Empress is dissatisfied, she is welcome to replace me. Now, that is all. Goodbye, Topper.'

'Scowling, the Clawmaster swung about and strode without ceremony into the Imperial Warren. The gate collapsed behind him, leaving only a sour smell of dust.'

Gamet let out a long sigh, pushed himself gingerly from the rickety camp chair. 'You have my sorrow, Adjunct, on the loss of your brother.'

'Thank you, Gamet. Now, get some sleep. And stop by—'

'T'amber's tent, aye, Adjunct.'

She quirked an eyebrow. 'Is that disapproval I hear?'

'It is. I'm not the only one in need of sleep. Hood take us, we've not even eaten this night.'

'Until tomorrow, Fist.'

He nodded. 'Aye. Goodnight, Adjunct.'
There was but one figure seated at the ebbing fire when Strings returned.

'What are you doing up, Cuttle?'

'I've done my sleep. You'll be dragging your feet tomorrow, Sergeant.'

'I don't think rest will come to me this night,' Strings muttered, sitting down cross-legged opposite the burly sapper.

'It's all far away,' Cuttle rumbled, tossing a last scrap of dung onto the flames.

'But it feels close.'

'At least you're not walking in the footprints of your fallen companions, Fiddler. But even so, it's all far away.'

'Well, I'm not sure what you mean but I'll take your word for it.'

'Thanks for the munitions, by the way.'

Strings grunted. 'It's the damnedest thing, Cuttle. We always find more, and they're meant to be used, but instead we hoard them, tell no-one we have them – in case they order us to put them to use—'

'The bastards.'

'Aye, the bastards.'

'I'll use the ones you've given me,' Cuttle avowed. 'Once I've crawled under Korbolo Dom's feet. I don't mind going to Hood at the same time, either.'

'Something tells me that's what Hedge did, in his last moment. He always threw them too close – that man had so many pieces of clay in him you could've made a row of pots from his insides.' He slowly shook his head, eyes on the dying fire. 'I wish I could have been there. That's all. Whiskeyjack, Trotts, Mallet, Picker, Quick Ben—'

'Quick's not dead,' Cuttle said. 'There was more after you'd left – I heard from my tent. Tayschrenn's made your wizard a High Mage.'

'Well, that doesn't surprise me, actually. That he'd survive, somehow. I wonder if Paran was still the company's captain—'

'He was. Died with them.'

'The Adjunct's brother. I wonder if she grieves this night.'

'Wondering's a waste of time, Fiddler. We got lads and lasses that need taking care of, right here. Korbolo Dom's warriors know how to fight. My guess is, we'll get whipped and sent back with our tails between our legs – and it'll be another chain, as we stagger back to Aren, only this time we won't get even close.'

'Well, that's a cheering prediction, Cuttle.'

'It don't matter. So long as I kill that Napan traitor – and his mage, too, if possible.'

'And what if you can't get close?'

'Then I take as many of them with me as I can. I ain't walking back, Fid, not again.'

'I'll remember that if the moment arrives. But what about taking care of these recruits of ours, Cuttle?'

'Well, that's the walk, isn't it? This march. We deliver them to that battle, we do that much, if we can. Then
we see what kind of iron they're holding.'

'Iron,' Strings smiled. 'It's been a long time since I last heard that saying. Since we're looking for revenge, you'll want it hot, I expect.'

'You expect wrong. Look at Tavore – there won't be any heat from her. In that she's just like Coltaine. It's obvious, Fiddler. The iron needs to be cold. Cold. We get it cold enough, who knows, we might earn ourselves a name.'

Strings reached across the fire and tapped the finger bone hanging from Cuttle's belt. 'We've made a start, I think.'

'We might have at that, Sergeant. Them and the standards. A start. She knows what's in her, give her that. She knows what's in her.'

'And it's for us to bring it out into view.'

'Aye, Fid, it is at that. Now, go away. These are the hours I spend alone.'

Nodding, the sergeant climbed to his feet. 'Seems I might be able to sleep after all.'

'It's my scintillating conversation what's done you in.'

'So it was.'

As Strings made his way to his small tent, something of Cuttle's words came back to him. Iron. Cold iron. Yes, it's in her. And now I'd better search and search hard ... to find it in me.
BOOK THREE

SOMETHING BREACHES
The art of Rashan is found in the tension that binds the games of light, yet its aspect is one of dissipation—the creation of shadow and of dark, although in this case the dark is not absolute, such as is the aspect of the ancient warren, Kurald Galain. No, this dark is particular, for it exists, not through an absence of light, but by virtue of being seen.

*The Mysteries of Rashan – a madman’s discourse*

Untural of Lato Revae
Glistening silver, the armour lay over a t-shaped stand. Oil had dripped down from the ragged knee-length tassels to form a pool on the flagstoned floor beneath. The sleeves were not loose, but appeared intended to be worn almost skin-tight. It had seen much use, and where mended the rings appeared to be a darker, carbon-stained iron.

Beside it, on a free-standing iron frame with horizontal hooks, waited a two-handed sword, the scabbard parallel directly beneath it on another pair of hooks. The sword was extraordinarily thin, with a long, tapered tip, edges on both sides, twin-fluted. Its surface was a strangely mottled oily blue, magenta and silver. The grip was round instead of flat, banded in gut, the pommel a single, large oblong sphere of polished haematite. The scabbard was of black wood, banded at the point and at the mouth in silver but otherwise unadorned. The harness belt attached to it was of small, almost delicate, black chain links.

Chain gauntlets waited on a wooden shelf on the wall behind the armour. The dull iron helm beside them was little more than a skullcap within a cage of studded bars, the bars reaching down like a massive hand, the gnarled fingers curves down to bridge nose, cheeks and jaw lines. A lobster tail of chain depended from the slightly flared neck rim.

Standing just within the entrance to the modest, low-ceilinged room, Cutter watched as Darist began preparations for donning his martial accoutrements. The Daru youth was finding it difficult to convince himself that such beautiful weapons and armour – which had clearly seen decades, if not centuries, of use – could belong to this silver-haired man, who carried himself like an absent-minded scholar, whose amber eyes seemed to hold a perpetual look of confused distraction beneath the glowing sheen. Who moved slowly as if protecting brittle bones—

Yet I have experienced the old Tiste Andii’s strength. And there is a mindfulness to his every movement which I should recognize – for I last saw it on another Tiste Andii, an ocean away. A racial trait? Perhaps, but it whispers like a song of threat, sunk deep in the marrow of my bones.

Darist stood facing his suit of armour, as if frozen in some startled contemplation – as if he’d forgotten how to put it on.

‘These Tiste Edur, Darist,’ Cutter said. ‘How many are there?’

‘Will we survive the coming attack, is your question? Unlikely, is my answer. At least five ships survived the storm. Two have reached our shore and managed landing. There would have been more, but they were engaged by a Malazan fleet that happened upon them by chance. We witnessed the clash from the Cliffs of Purahl...’ The Tiste Andii slowly glanced back at Cutter. ‘Your human kin did well – far better than the Edur no doubt anticipated.’

‘A sea battle between the Malazans and the Tiste Edur? When was this?’

‘Perhaps a week ago. There were but three Malazan war dromons, yet each managed to find company before plunging to the deep. There was a skilled mage among the humans – the exchange of sorcery was impressive—’

‘You and your kin watched? Why didn't you help? You must have known the Edur were seeking this island!’

Darist stepped towards the armour, lifted it seemingly effortlessly from its frame. 'We no longer leave this island. For many decades now, we hold to our decision to remain isolated.'
'Why?'

The Tiste Andii gave no answer. He slipped the mail suit over his shoulders. The sound it made as it flowed down was like liquid. He then reached for the sword.

'All looks as if it would snap with the first block of a heavier weapon.'

'It will not. There are many names for this particular sword.' Darist lifted it free of the hooks. 'Its maker named it Vengeance. T'an Aros, in our language. But I call it K'orladis.'

'Which means?'

'Grief.'

A faint chill rippled through Cutter. 'Who was its maker?'

'Very brother.' He sheathed the sword, slipped his arms through the chain harness. Then he reached for the gauntlets. 'Before he found one ... more suited to his nature.' Darist turned, his gaze travelling the length of Cutter, head to toe, then back again. 'Do you have skill with those knives hidden about your person?'

'Some, though I draw no pleasure from spilling blood.'

'What else are they for?' the Tiste Andii asked as he donned the helm.

Cutter shrugged, wishing he had an answer to that question.

'Do you intend to fight the Edur?'

'Since they are seeking the throne, yes.'

Darist slowly cocked his head. 'Yet this is not your battle. Why would you choose to borrow this cause?'

'On Genabackis – my homeland – Anomander Rake and his followers chose to fight against the Malazan Empire. It wasn't their battle, but they have now made it so.'

He was surprised to see a wry smile twist the Tiste Andii's weathered features beneath the crooked iron fingers of the guards.

'That is interesting. Very well, Cutter, join me – though I tell you now it will prove your final fight.'

'I hope not.'

Darist led him from the room, out into the broad hallway once more, then through a narrow, black-wood-framed archway. The passage within appeared to be a tunnel through a single piece of wood, like the hollowed core of a massive, toppled tree trunk. It stretched on into the gloom, inclining slightly upward.

Cutter walked behind the Tiste Andii, the sound of the man's armour soft as the hiss of rain on a beach. The tunnel ended abruptly with an upward turn, the ceiling opening to reveal a vertical shaft. A rough ladder of roots climbed towards a small, pale disc of light.

Darist's ascent was slow and measured, Cutter impatient on the rungs directly beneath until the thought that he might soon die struck him, at which point a dull lassitude settled into his muscles, and it became a struggle to keep up with the ancient Tiste Andii.

They eventually emerged onto a leaf-cluttered floor of flagstones. Sunlight speared shafts of dust from slitted windows and gaps in the roof overhead – the storm seemed to have missed this place entirely. One wall had mostly collapsed and it was towards this that Darist strode.

Cutter followed. 'Some sort of upkeep might well have made this defensible,' he muttered.

'These surface structures are not Andii – they are Edur, and were in ruin when we first arrived.'
'How close are they?'

'They range through the forest, working inland. Cautious. They know they are not alone.'

'How many can you sense?'

'This first party numbers perhaps a score. We shall meet them in the courtyard, permitting us sufficient room for swordplay yet allowing us a wall to which we can set our backs in the last few moments.'

'Hood's breath, Darist, if we drive them back you'll likely die of shock.'

The Tiste Andii glanced back at the Daru, then gestured. 'Follow me.'

A half-dozen similarly ruined chambers were traversed before they came to the courtyard. The vine-latticed walls were twice the height of a human, ragged-topped. Faded frescoes were hinted at beneath the overgrowth. Opposite the inner entrance through which they strode was an arched gateway, beyond which a trail of pine needles, snaking roots and moss-covered boulders wound into the shadows of enormous trees.

Cutter judged the yard to be twenty paces wide, twenty-five deep. 'There's too much room here, Darist,' he said. 'We'll get flanked—'

'I will command the centre. You remain behind, for those who might indeed try to get past me.'

Cutter recalled Anomander Rake's battle with the demon, on the Darujhistan street. The two-handed fighting style the Son of Darkness had employed demanded demanded plenty of room, and it now appeared that Darist would fight in a similar manner – but the sword's blade was, to Cutter's mind, far too thin for such fierce, wheeling swings. 'Is there sorcery invested in that blade of yours?' he asked.

'Not as investment is commonly known,' the Tiste Andii replied, drawing the weapon and wrapping both hands about the grip, one high under the hilt, the other just above the pommel. 'The power of Grief lies in the focused intent in its creation. The sword demands a singular will in its wielder. With such a will, it cannot be defeated.'

'And have you that singular will?'

Darist slowly lowered the tip to the ground. 'Had I, human, this would not be your last day this side of Hood's gate. Now, I suggest you draw your weapons. The Edur have discovered the path and now approach.'

Cutter found his hands were trembling as he drew out his leading knives. He possessed four others, two under each arm, sheathed in leather and peace-looped by thongs – which he now pulled clear. These four were weighted for throwing. Once done, he adjusted his grip on the knives in his hands, then had to dry his palms and repeat the task.

A soft whisper of sound made him look up, to see that Darist had slipped into a fighting stance, though the tip of the sword still rested on the flagstones.

And Cutter saw something else. The leaf clutter and detritus on the flagstones was in motion, crawling as if pushed by an unseen wind, gathering towards the gate's end of the courtyard, and out to heap against the walls to either side.

'Keep your eyes slitted,' Darist said in a low tone.

'Slitted?'

There was movement in the gloom beyond the gateway, furtive, then three figures stepped into view beneath the arch.

As tall as Darist, their skin a dusky pallor. Long brown hair, knotted and snarled with fetishes. Necklaces of claws and canines competed with the barbarity of their roughly tanned leather armour that was stitched with articulating strips of bronze. Their helms, also bronze, were shaped like bear or wolf skulls.
Among them, there was nothing of the natural majesty evident in Darist – or in Anomander Rake. A far more brutal cast, these Edur. Tip-heavy black-bladed scimitars were in their hands, sealskin-covered round shields on their forearms.

They hesitated before Darist, then the one in the centre snarled something in a language Cutter could not understand.

The silver-haired Tiste Andii shrugged, said nothing.

The Edur shouted something that was clearly a demand. Then they readied their weapons and swung their shields around.

Cutter could see more of the savage warriors gathered on the trail beyond the gate.

The three stepped from the archway, spread out to form a slight pincer position – the centre Edur a step further away than his companions on either side.

'They don't know how you will do this,' Cutter murmured. 'They've never fought against—'

The flankers moved forward in perfect unison.

Darist's sword snapped upward, and with that motion, a fierce gust of wind lifted in the courtyard, and the air around the three Edur was suddenly filled with skirling leaves and dust.

Cutter watched as the Tiste Andii attacked. The blade tipped horizontal, point threatening the Edur on the right, but the actual attack was with the pommel, against the warrior on the left. A blurring sideways dip to close, then the pommel struck the swiftly upraised shield, splitting it clean in half. Darist's left hand slipped off the pommel and slapped the warrior's sword away even as the Tiste Andii dropped into a squat, drawing the edge of Grief down his opponent's front.

It seemed there was no contact at all, yet blood gushed from a rent that began above the Edur's left collar bone and descended in a straight line down to his crotch.

The squat became a backward springing motion that landed Darist two paces back, his blade already hissing to fend off the other two warriors, both of whom leapt away in alarm.

The wounded Edur crumpled in a pool of his own blood, and as he fell Cutter saw that Grief had cut through the collar bone and every rib in the cage down the left side.

The warriors beyond the archway screamed battlecries and surged into the wind-whipped courtyard.

Their only chance of success lay in closing on Darist, inside the man's reach, closing and fouling that whispering blade, and the Edur lacked nothing in courage.

Cutter saw another cut down, then a third took the pommel on the side of his helm, and the bronze collapsed inward far too deep – the warrior's limbs flailed in strange jerking motions as he fell to the flagstones.

Both leading knives were in the Daru's left hand, and his right reached to a throwing knife. He sent the weapon darting out with a back-handed throw, saw it sink to the hilt in an Edur's eye socket – and knew the tip had snapped against the inside of the man's skull at the back. He threw the second one and swore as a shield lifted to take it.

In the storm of spinning leaves Darist's sword seemed to be everywhere at once, blocking attack after attack, then an Edur flung himself forward to grapple, and managed to wrap both arms around the Tiste Andii's legs.

A scimitar lashed in. There was a spray of blood from Darist's right shoulder. Grief's pommel dented the helm of the grappling warrior, and the Edur sagged. Another swing chopped into the Tiste Andii's hip, the blade bouncing back out from the bone. Darist staggered.

Cutter rushed forward as the remaining Edur closed. Through spinning, clattering leaves, into the calmed air at the centre. The Daru had already learned that direct, head-on confrontation was not an ideal tactic when
fighting with knives. He chose an Edur whose attention was fixed solely on Darist and was therefore turned slightly away – the warrior caught sight of him peripherally, and was quick to react.

A back-handed slash of the scimitar, followed by the shield swinging round.

Cutter punched his left knife at the blade, to intercept a third of the way down from the tip. Simultaneously, he stop-hit the swing with his other knife, midway along the man's forearm – the point of his weapon punching through leather and stabbing between the bones with both edges on. The hilt of his other weapon then contacted the scimitar – and knocked the weapon from a numbed hand.

The Edur's grunt was loud, and he swore as, yanking on the knife, Cutter moved past him. The blade was reluctant to pull free and dragged the impaled arm after it. The warrior's legs tangled and he fell to one knee.

Even as he lifted his shield, Cutter's free knife darted in over it, spearing him through the throat.

The shield's rim cracked hard against the Daru's out-thrust wrist, nearly springing the knife loose, but he managed to retain his grip.

Another tug and the other knife tore free of the Edur's forearm.

A shield struck him a body blow from his left, lifting Cutter upward, his moccasins leaving the flagstones. He twisted and slashed out at the attacker, and missed. The shield's impact had turned his left side into a mass of thrumming pain. He hit the ground and folded into a roll.

Something thumped in pursuit, bounced once, then twice, and as the Daru regained his feet an Edur's decapitated head cracked hard against his right shin.

The agony of this last blow – absurdly to his mind – overwhelmed all else thus far. He screamed a curse, hopped backward one-legged.

An Edur was rushing him.

A fouler word grated out from Cutter. He flung the knife from his left hand. Shield surged up to meet it, the warrior ducking from view.

Grimacing, Cutter lunged after the weapon – while the Edur remained blind – and stabbed overhand above the shield. The knife sank down behind the man's left collarbone, sprouting a geyser of blood as he pulled it back out.

There were shouts now in the courtyard – and suddenly it seemed the fighting was everywhere, on all sides. Cutter reeled back a step to see that other Tiste Andii had arrived – and, in their midst, Apsalar.

Three Edur were on the ground in her wake, all writhing amidst blood and bile.

The rest, barring their kin who had fallen to Apsalar, Cutter and Darist, were retreating, back through the archway.

Apsalar and her Tiste Andii companions pursued only so far as the gate.

Slowly, the spinning wind dwindled, the leaf fragments drifting down like ash.

Cutter glanced over to see Darist still standing, though he leaned against a side wall, his long, lean frame sheathed in blood, helm gone, his hair matted and hanging down over his face, dripping. The sword Grief remained in his two hands, point once more on the flagstones.

One of the new Tiste Andii moved to the three noisily dying Edur and unceremoniously slit their throats. When finished, she raised her gaze to study Apsalar for a long moment.

Cutter realized that all of Darist's kin were white-haired, though none were as old – indeed, they appeared very young, in appearance no older than the Daru himself. They were haphazardly armed and armoured, and none held their weapons with anything like familiarity. Quick, nervous glances were thrown at the gateway –
then over to Darist.

Sheathing her Kethra knives, Apsalar strode up to Cutter. 'I am sorry we were late.'

He blinked, then shrugged. 'I thought you'd drowned.'

'No, I made shore easily enough – though everything else went with you. There was sorcerous questing, then, but I evaded that.' She nodded to the youths. 'I found these camped a fair distance inland. They were ... hiding.'

'Hiding. But Darist said—'

'Ah, so that is Darist. Andarist, to be more precise.' She turned a thoughtful gaze on the ancient Tiste Andii. 'It was by his command. He didn't want them here ... because I imagine he expected they would die.'

'And so they shall,' Darist growled, finally lifting his head to meet her eyes. 'You have condemned them all, for the Edur will now hunt them down in earnest – the old hatreds, rekindled once more.'

She seemed unaffected by his words. 'The throne must be protected.'

Darist bared red-stained teeth, his eyes glittering in the half-shadows. 'If he truly wants it protected, then he can come here and do it himself.'

Apsalar frowned. 'Who?'

Cutter answered, 'His brother, of course. Anomander Rake.'

It had been a guess, but Darist's expression was all the affirmation needed. Anomander Rake's younger brother. In his veins, nothing of the Son of Darkness's Draconian blood. And in his hands, a sword that its maker had judged insufficient, when compared to Dragnipur. But this knowledge alone was barely a whisper – the twisted, dark storm of all that existed between the two siblings was an epic neither man was ever likely to orate, or so Cutter suspected.

And the skein of bitter grievances proved even more knotted than the Daru had first imagined, for it was then revealed that the youths were, one and all, close kin to Anomander – grandchildren. Their parents had one and all succumbed to their sire's flaw, the hunger for wandering, for vanishing into the mists, for shaping private worlds in forgotten, isolated places. 'The search for loyalty and honour', Darist had said, with a sneer, whilst Phaed – the young woman who had shown mercy to Apsalar's victims – bound his wounds.

A task not done quickly. Darist – Andarist – had been slashed at least a dozen times, each time the heavy scimitar parting chain then flesh down to the bone, in various places on his body. How he had managed to stand upright, much less continue fighting, belied his earlier claim that his will was not of sufficient purity to match the sword, Grief. Now that the skirmish had been suspended, however, the force that had fired the old warrior fast dissipated. His right arm was incapacitated; the wound on his hip dragged him onto the flagstones – and he could not rise again without help.

There were nine dead Tiste Edur. Their retreat had probably been triggered by a desire to regroup rather than being hard-pressed.

Worse, they were but an advance party. The two ships just off the shore were massive: each could easily hold two hundred warriors. Or so Apsalar judged, having scouted the inlet where they were moored.

'There is plenty of wreckage in the water,' she added, 'and both Edur ships have the look of having been in a fight—'

'Three Malazan war dromons,' Cutter said. 'A chance encounter. Darist says the Malazans gave a good account of themselves.'

They were seated on some tumbled rubble a dozen paces from the Tiste Andii, watching the youths hover and fuss over Darist. Cutter's left side ached, and though he did not look beneath his clothes he knew that
bruises were spreading. He struggled to ignore the discomfort and continued eyeing the Tiste Andii.

'They are not what I expected,' he said quietly. 'Not even schooled in the art of fighting—'

'True. Darist's desire to protect them could prove a fatal one.'

'Now that the Edur know they exist. Not a part of Darist's plan.'

Apsalar shrugged. 'They were given a task.'

He fell silent, pondering that brusque statement. He'd always believed that a singular capacity to inflict death engendered a certain wisdom – of the fragility of the spirit, of its mortality – as he had known, and experienced firsthand, with Rallick Nom in Darujhistan. But Apsalar revealed nothing of such wisdom; her words were hard with judgement, often flatly dismissive. She had taken focus and made of it a weapon ... or a means of self-defence.

She had not intended any of the three Edur she had taken down to die swiftly. Yet it seemed she drew no pleasure, as a sadist might. *It is more as if she was trained to do so . . . trained as a torturer. Yet Cotillion – Dancer — was no torturer. He was an assassin. So where does the vicious streak come from? Does it belong to her own nature?* An unpleasant, disturbing thought.

He lifted his left arm, gingerly, wincing. Their next fight would likely be a short one, even with Apsalar at their side.

'You are in no condition to fight,' she observed.

'Nor is Darist,' Cutter retorted.

'The sword will carry him. But you will prove a liability. I would not be distracted by protecting you.'

'What do you suggest? I kill myself now so I'm not in your way?'

She shook her head – as if the suggestion had been, on its face, entirely reasonable, just not what she had in mind – and spoke in a low voice. 'There are others on this island. Hiding well, but not well enough to escape my notice. I want you to go to them. I want you to enlist their help.'

'Who are these others?'

'You yourself identified them, Cutter. Malazans. Survivors, I would assume, from the three war dromons. There is one of power among them.'

Cutter glanced over at Darist. The youths had moved the old man so that he sat with his back against the wall beside the inside doorway, opposite the gate. His head was lowered, bearded chin to chest, and only the faint rise and fall of his chest indicated that he still lived. 'All right. Where will I find them?'

The forest was filled with ruins. Crumbled, moss-covered, often little more than overgrown heaps, but it was evident to Cutter as he padded along the narrow, faint trail Apsalar had described for him that this forest had risen from the heart of a dead city – a huge city, dominated by massive buildings. Pieces of statuary lay scattered here and there, figures of enormous stature, constructed in sections and fixed together with a glassy substance he did not recognize. Although mostly covered in moss, he suspected the figures were Edur.

An oppressive gloom suffused all that lay beneath the forest canopy. A number of living trees showed torn bark, and while the bark was black, the smooth, wet wood underneath was blood red. Fallen companions revealed that the fierce crimson turned black with death. The wounded upright trees reminded Cutter of Darist – of the Tiste Andii's black skin and the deep red cuts slashing through it.

He found he was shivering in the damp air as he padded along. His left arm was now entirely useless, and though he had retrieved his knives – including the broken-tipped one – he doubted that he would be able to put up much of a fight should the need arise.
He could make out his destination directly ahead. A mound of rubble, pyramidal and particularly large, its
summit sunbathed. There were trees on its flanks, but most were dead in the strangling grip of vines. A gaping
hole of impenetrable darkness yawned from the side nearest Cutter.

He slowed, then, twenty paces from the cave, halted. What he was about to do ran against every instinct.
'Malazans!' he called out, then winced at his own loudness. *But the Edur are closing on the Throne – no-one
nearby to hear me. I hope. 'I know you are within! I would speak with you!'

Figures appeared at the flanking edges of the cave, two on each side, crossbows cocked and trained on
Cutter. Then, from the centre, emerged three more, two women and a man. The woman on the left gestured and
said, 'Come closer, hands out to your sides.'

Cutter hesitated, then stretched out his right hand. 'My left arm won't lift, I'm afraid.'

'Come closer.'

He approached.

The speaker was tall, muscular. Her hair was long, stained red. She wore tanned leathers. A longsword was
scabbarded at her hip. Her skin was a deep bronze in hue. Cutter judged she was ten or more years older than
him, and he felt a shiver run through him when he lifted his gaze and met her tilted, gold-hued eyes.

The other woman was unarmed, older, and her entire right side, head, face, torso and leg, was horrifically
burned – the flesh fused with wisps of clothing, mangled and melted by the ravages of a sorcerous attack. It
was a wonder that she was standing – or even alive.

Hanging back a step from these two was the man. Cutter guessed that he was Dal Honese, dusky-skinned,
grey-shot black curled hair on his head cut short – though his eyes were, incongruously, a deep blue. His
features were even enough, though crisscrossed with scars. He wore a battered hauberk, a plain longsword at
his belt, and an expression so closed he could be Apsalar's brother.

The flanking marines were in full armour, helmed and visored.

'Are you the only survivors?' Cutter asked.

The first woman scowled.

'I have little time,' the Daru went on. 'We need your help. The Edur are assailing us—'

'Edur?'

Cutter blinked, then nodded. 'The seafarers you fought. Tiste Edur. They are seeking something on this
island, something of vast power – and we'd rather it not fall into their hands. And why should you help?
Because if it *does* fall into their hands, the Malazan Empire is likely finished. In fact, so is all of humanity—'

The burned woman cackled, then broke into a fit of coughing that frothed her mouth with red bubbles. After
a long moment, the woman recovered. 'Oh, to be young again! All of humanity, is it? Why not the whole
world?'

'The Throne of Shadow is on this island,' Cutter said.

At this, the Dal Honese man started slightly.

The burned woman was nodding. 'Yes yes yes, true words. The sense of things arrives – in a flood! Tiste
Edur, Tiste Edur, a fleet set out on a search, a fleet from far away, and now they've found it. Ammanas and
Cotillion are about to be usurped, and what of it? The Throne of Shadow – we fought the Edur for *that!* Oh,
what a waste – our ships, the marines – my own life, for the *Throne of Shadow*? She spasmed into coughing
once more.

'Not our battle,' the other woman growled. 'We weren't even looking for a fight, but the fools weren't
interested in actually talking, in exchanging emissaries – Hood knows, this is not our island, not within the
Malazan Empire. Look elsewhere—’

‘No,’ the Dal Honese rumbled.

The woman turned in surprise. ‘We were clear enough, Traveller, in our gratitude to you for saving our lives. But that hardly permits you to assume command—’

‘The Throne must not be claimed by the Edur,’ the man named Traveller said. ‘I have no desire to challenge your command, Captain, but the lad speaks without exaggeration when he describes the risks ... to the empire and to all of humanity. Like it or not, the Warren of Shadow is now human-aspected ...’ he smiled crookedly, ‘and it well suits our natures.’ The smile vanished. ‘This battle is ours – we face it now or we face it later.’

‘You claim this fight in the name of the Malazan Empire?’ the captain asked.

‘More than you know,’ Traveller replied.

The captain gestured to one of her marines. ‘Gentur, get the others out here, but leave Mudslinger with the wounded. Then have the squads count quarrels – I want to know what we have.’

The marine named Gentur uncocked his crossbow then slipped back into the cave. A few moments later more soldiers emerged, sixteen in all when counting those who had originally come out.

Cutter walked up to the captain. ‘There is one of power among you,’ he murmured, casting a glance at the burned woman – who was leaning over and spitting out murky blood. ‘Is she a sorceress?’

The captain followed his gaze and frowned. ‘She is, but she is dying. The power you—’

The air reverberated to a distant concussion and Cutter wheeled. ‘They’ve attacked again! With magic this time – follow me!’ Without a backward look, the Daru set off down the trail. He heard a faint curse behind him, then the captain began shouting orders.

The path led directly to the courtyard, and from the thundering detonations pounding again and again, Cutter judged the troop would have no difficulty in finding the place of battle – he would not wait for them. Apsalar was there, and Darist, and a handful of untrained Tiste Andii youths – they would have little defence against sorcery.

But Cutter believed he did.

He sprinted on through the gloom, his right hand closed about his aching left arm, seeking to hold it in place, though each jostling stride lanced pain into his chest.

The nearest wall of the courtyard came into view. Colours were playing wildly in the air, thrashing the trees to all sides, deep reds and magenta and blues, a swirling chaos. The waves of concussions were increasing in frequency, pounding within the courtyard.

There were no Edur outside the archway – an ominous sign.

Cutter raced for the opening. Movement to his right caught his attention, and he saw another company of Edur, coming up from a coast trail but still sixty paces distant. The Malazans will have to deal with those . . . Queen of Dreams help them. The gate was before him, and he caught first sight of what was happening in the courtyard.

Four Edur stood in a line in the centre, their backs to him. A dozen or more Edur warriors waited on each flank, scimitars held ready. Waves of magic rolled out from the four, pulsing, growing ever stronger – and each one flowed over the flagstones in a tumbling storm of colours, to hammer into Darist.

Who stood alone, at his feet a dead or unconscious Apsalar. Behind him, the scattered bodies of Anomander Rake’s grandchildren. Somehow, Darist still held his sword upright – though he was a shredded mass of blood, bones visible through the wreckage of his chest. He stood before the crashing waves, yet would not take a single step back, even as they tore him apart. The sword Grief was white hot, the metal singing a terrible,
keening note that grew louder and more piercing with every moment that passed.

'Blind,' Cutter hissed as he closed, 'I need you now!'

Shadows blossomed around him, then four heavy paws thumped onto the flagstones, and the Hound's looming presence was suddenly at his side.

One of the Edur spun round. Unhuman eyes widened on seeing Blind, then the sorcerer snapped out something in a harsh, commanding tone.

Blind's forward rush halted in a skid of claws.

And the Hound cowered.

'Beru fend!' Cutter swore, scrabbling to draw a knife—

The courtyard was suddenly filled with shadows, a strange crackling sound ripping through the air—

And a fifth figure was among the four Edur sorcerers now, grey-clad, gloved, face hidden in a rough hood. In its hands, a rope, that seemed to writhe with a life of its own. Cutter saw it snap out to strike a sorcerer in one eye, and when the rope whipped back out, a stream of blood and minced brains followed. The sorcerer's magic winked out and the Edur toppled.

The rope was too fast to follow, as its wielder moved among the three remaining mages, but in its twisting wake a head tumbled from shoulders, intestines spilled out from a gaping rip, and whatever felled the last sorcerer happened in a blur that left no obvious result, except that the Edur was dead before he hit the ground.

There were shouts from the Edur warriors, and they converged from both sides.

It was then that the screams began. The rope lashed out from Cotillion's right hand; a long-knife was in his left, seeming to do little but lick and touch everyone it came close to – but the result was devastating. The air was a mist of suspended blood around the patron god of assassins, and before Cutter drew his fourth breath since the battle began, it was over, and around Cotillion there was naught but corpses.

A final snap of the rope whipped blood across a wall, then the god threw back his hood and wheeled to face Blind. He opened his mouth to say something, then shut it once more. An angry gesture, and shadows swept out to engulf the trembling Hound. When they dissipated a moment later Blind was gone.

There was the sound of fighting beyond the courtyard and Cutter turned. 'The Malazans need help!' he shouted to Cotillion.

'No they don't,' the god growled.

Both spun at a loud clatter, to see Darist lying motionless beside Apsalar, the sword lying nearby, its heat igniting the leaves it lay on.

Cotillion's face fell, as if with a sudden, deep sorrow. 'When he's done out there,' he said to Cutter, 'guide him to this sword. Tell him its names.'

'He?'

A moment later, with a final survey of the mayhem surrounding him, Cotillion vanished.

Cutter rushed over to Apsalar. He knelt down beside her.

Her clothes were crisped, smoke rising in tendrils in the now still air. Fire had swept through her hair, but only momentarily, it seemed, for she had plenty left; nor was her face burned, although a long red welt, already blistering, was visible in a diagonal slash down her neck. Faint jerks of her limbs – the after-effects of the sorcerous attack – showed him she still lived.

He tried to wake her, failed. A moment later he looked up, listened. The sounds of fighting had ceased and
now a single set of boots slowly approached, crunching on scorched ground.

Cutter slowly rose and faced the archway.

Traveller stepped into view. A sword broken three-quarters of the way up the blade was in one gauntleted hand. Though spattered with blood, he seemed unwounded. He paused to study the scene in the courtyard.

Somehow, Cutter knew without asking that he was the last left alive. Yet he moved none the less to look out through the archway. The Malazans were all down, motionless. Surrounding them in a ring were the corpses of half a hundred or more Tiste Edur. Quarrel-studded others lay on the trail approaching the clearing.

I called those Malazans to their deaths. That captain – with the beautiful eyes ... He returned to where Traveller walked among the fallen Tiste Andii. And the question he asked came from a constricted throat. 'Did you speak true, Traveller?'

The man glanced over.

'This battle,' Cutter elaborated. 'Was it truly a Malazan battle?'

Traveller's answering shrug chilled the Daru. 'Some of these are still alive,' he said, gesturing at the Tiste Andii.

'And there are wounded in the cave,' Cutter pointed out.

He watched as the man walked over to where lay Apsalar and Darist. 'She is a friend,' Cutter said.

Traveller grunted, then he flung his broken sword aside and stepped over Darist. He reached down for the sword.

'Careful—'

But the man closed his gauntleted hand on the grip and lifted the weapon.

Cutter sighed, closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them and said, 'It is named Vengeance ... or Grief. You can choose which best suits you.'

Traveller turned, met Cutter's eyes. 'Do you not wish it for yourself?'

The Daru shook his head. 'It demands its wielder possess a singular will. I am not for that sword, nor, I think, will I ever be.'

Traveller studied the blade in his hand. 'Vengeance,' he murmured, then nodded and crouched down to retrieve the scabbard from Darist's body. 'This old man, who was he?'

Cutter shrugged. 'A guardian. He was named Andarist. And now he's gone, and so the Throne is without a protector—'

Traveller straightened. 'I will abide here a time. As you said, there are wounded to tend to ... and corpses to bury.'

'I'll help—'

'No need. The god who strode through this place has visited the Edur ships – there are small craft aboard, and supplies. Take your woman and leave this island. If more Edur chance upon this location, your presence will only impede me.'

'How long will you plan on staying here, in Andarist's role?'

'Long enough to do him honour.'

A groan came from Apsalar, drawing Cutter to her. She began thrashing, as if fevered.
'Carry her from this place,' Traveller said. 'The sorcery's effects linger.'

He looked up, met those eyes – and saw sorrow there, the first emotion yet to be revealed from the man. 'I would help you bury—'

'I need no help. It will not be the first time I have buried companions. Go. Take her.'

He lifted her in his arms. Her thrashing stilled and she sighed as if sinking into deep, peaceful sleep. Then he stood studying Traveller for a moment.

The man turned away. 'Thank your god, mortal,' he growled, his back still to Cutter, 'for the sword ...'

An elongated mass of the stone floor had fallen away, down to the black rushing water of the subterranean river. Adhwart the gaping hole lay a bundle of spears, around which was tied a rope that reached down into the water, snaking about as the current tugged at it. The air of the rough-hewn chamber was chill and damp.

Kalam crouched at the edge and studied the swirling water below for a long moment.

'The well,' Sergeant Cord said from where he stood beside the assassin.

Kalam grunted, then asked, 'What in Hood's name inspired the captain and lieutenant to climb down there?'

'If you look long enough, with the torches gone from this room, you'll see a glow. There's something lying on the bottom, maybe twice a man's height in depth.'

'Something?'

'Looks like a man... all in armour. Lying spread-eagled.'

'So take the torches out. I want to see this.'

'Did you say something, Corporal? Your demon friend has disappeared, remember – vanished.'

Kalam sighed. 'Demons will do that, and in this case you should be thankful for that. Right now, Sergeant, I am of the opinion that you've all been cooped up in this mountain for far too long. I'm thinking maybe you've lost your minds. And I have also reconsidered your words about my position in your company, and I've reached a decision and it's this.' He turned his head and fixed his gaze on Cord's eyes. 'I'm not in your company, Cord. I'm a Bridgeburner. You're Ashok Regiment. And if that's not enough for you, I am resurrecting my old status ... as a Claw, a Leader of a Hand. And as such, I'm only outranked in the field by Clawmaster Topper, the Adjunct, and the Empress herself. Now, take the damned torches out of here!'

Cord suddenly smiled. 'You want to take command of this company? Fine, you can have it. Though we want to deal with Irriz ourselves.' He reached up to collect the first of the sputtering torches on the wall behind him.

The sudden alteration of attitude from Cord startled Kalam, then filled him with suspicion. Until I sleep, that is. Gods below, I was far better off on my own. Where did that damned demon go, anyway? 'And when you've done that, Sergeant, head back up to the others and begin preparations – we're leaving this place.'

'What about the captain and the lieutenant?'

'What about them? They were swept away and they either drowned or were sprung loose in some watering hole. Either way, they're not with us now, and I doubt they're coming back—'

'You don't know that—'

'They've been gone too long, Cord. If they didn't drown they would have had to reach the surface somewhere close. You can hold your breath only so long. Now, enough with this discussion – get going.'

'Aye ... sir.'
A torch in each hand, Cord headed up the stairs.

Darkness swiftly engulfed the chamber.

Kalam waited for his eyes to adjust, listening to the sergeant's bootsteps growing ever fainter.

And there, finally, far below, the glowing figure, indistinct, rippling beneath the rushing water.

The assassin retrieved the rope and coiled it to one side. About twenty arm-lengths had been played out, but the bundle of spears held a lot more. Then he pried a large chunk of stone from the ragged edge and tied the sodden, icy-cold end of the rope to it.

With Oponn's luck, the rock was sufficiently heavy to sink more or less straight down. He checked the knots once more, then pushed it from the ledge.

It plummeted, dragging the coiled rope down with it. The spears clacked tight, and Kalam peered down. The stone was suspended the full length of the rope — a distance that Kalam, and, no doubt, the captain and the lieutenant, had judged sufficient to make contact with the figure. But it hadn't, though it looked close. Meaning he's a big bastard. All right . . . let's see how big. He grasped the spears and began lifting and rolling the bundle, playing out ever greater lengths.

A pause to study the stone's progress, then more playing out of rope.

It finally reached the figure — given the sudden bowing of the line as the current took the slack. Kalam looked down once more. 'Hood's breath!' The rock lay on the figure's chest... and the distance made that stone look small.

The armoured figure was enormous, three times a man's height at least. The captain and the lieutenant had been deceived by the scale. Probably fatally so.

He squinted down at it, wondering at the strange glow, then grasped the rope to retrieve the stone —

And, far below, a massive hand flashed up and closed on it — and pulled.

Kalam shouted as he was pulled down into the torrent. As he plunged into the icy water, he reached up in an attempt to grasp the bundle of spears.

There was a fierce tug, and the spears snapped with an explosive splintering sound directly overhead.

The assassin still held on to the rope, even as the current swept him along. He felt himself being pulled down.

The cold was numbing. His ears popped.

Then he was drawn close by a pair of massive chain-clad fists — close, and face to face with the broad grille of the creature's helm. In the swirling darkness beneath that grille, the glimmer of a rotted, bestial visage, most of the flesh in current-fluttering strips. Teeth devoid of lips —

And the creature spoke in Kalam's mind. The other two eluded me . . . but you I will have. I am so hungry—'

Hungry? Kalam answered. Try this.

He drove both long-knives into the creature's chest.

A thundering bellow, and the fists shot upward, pushing Kalam away — harder and faster than he had thought possible. Both weapons yanked — almost breaking the grip of his hands, but he held on. The current had no time to grasp him as he was thrown upward, shooting back through the hole in an exploding geyser of water. The ledge caught one of his feet and tore the boot off. He struck the chamber's low stone ceiling, driving the last of his breath from his lungs, then dropped.

He landed half on the pit's ledge, and was nearly swept back into the river, but he managed to splay himself,
clawing to regain the floor, moving clear of the hole. Then he lay motionless, numbed, his boot lying beside him, until he was able to draw in a ragged lungful of bitter cold air.

He heard feet on the stairs, then Cord burst into the chamber and skidded to a halt directly above Kalam. The sergeant's sword was in one hand, a torch flaring in the other. He stared down at the assassin. 'What was that noise? What happened? Where are the damned spears—'

Kalam rolled onto his side, looked down over the ledge.

The frothing torrent was impenetrable – opaqued red with blood. 'Stop,' the assassin gasped.

'Stop what? Look at that water! Stop what?'

'Stop ... drawing ... from this well...'

It was a long time before the shivers left his body, to be replaced with countless aches from his collision with the chamber's ceiling. Cord had left then returned with others from his company, as well as Sinn, carrying blankets and more torches.

There was some difficulty in prying the long-knives from Kalam's hands. The separation revealed that the grips had somehow scorched the assassin's palms and fingerpads.

'Cold,' Ebron muttered, 'that's what did that. Burned by cold. What did you say that thing looked like?'

Kalam, huddled in blankets, looked up. 'Like something that should have been dead a long time ago, Mage. Tell me, how much do you know of B'ridys – this fortress?'

'Probably less than you,' Ebron replied. 'I was born in Karakarang. It was a monastery, wasn't it?'

'Aye. One of the oldest cults, long extinct.' A squad healer crouched beside him and began applying a numbing salve to the assassin's hands. Kalam leaned his head against the wall and sighed. 'Have you heard of the Nameless Ones?'

Ebron snorted. 'I said Karakarang, didn't I? The Tanno cult claims a direct descent from the cult of the Nameless Ones. The Spiritwalkers say their powers, of song and the like, arose from the original patterns that the Nameless Ones fashioned in their rituals – those patterns supposedly crisscross this entire subcontinent, and their power remains to this day. Are you saying this monastery belonged to the Nameless Ones? Yes, of course you are. But they weren't demons, were they—'

'No, but they were in the habit of chaining them. The one in the pool is probably displeased with its last encounter, but not as displeased as you might think.'

Ebron frowned, then paled. 'The blood – if anyone drinks water tainted with that...'

Kalam nodded. 'The demon takes that person's soul... and makes the exchange. Freedom.'

'Not just people, either!' Ebron hissed. 'Animals, birds – insects! Anything!'

'No, I think it will have to be big – bigger than a bird or insect. And when it does escape—'

'It'll come looking for you,' the mage whispered. He suddenly wheeled to Cord. 'We have to get out of here. Now! Better still—'

'Aye,' Kalam growled, 'get as far away from me as you can. Listen – the Empress has sent her new Adjunct, with an army — there will be a battle, in Raraku. The Adjunct has little more than recruits. She could do with your company, even as beaten up as it is—'

'They march from Aren?'

Kalam nodded. 'And have likely already started. That gives you maybe a month ... of staying alive and out of
'We can manage,' Cord grated.

Kalam glanced over at Sinn. 'Be careful, lass.'

'I will. I think I'll miss you, Kalam.'

The assassin spoke to Cord. 'Leave me my supplies. I will rest here a while longer. So we don't cross paths, I will be heading due west from here, skirting the north edge of the Whirlwind ... for a time. Eventually, I will try to breach it, and make my way into Raraku itself.'

'Lady's luck to you,' Cord replied, then he gestured. 'Everyone else, let's go.' At the stairway, the sergeant glanced back at the assassin. 'That demon ... did it get the captain and the lieutenant, do you think?'

'No. It said otherwise.'

'It spoke to you?'

'In my mind, aye. But it was a short conversation.'

Cord grinned. 'Something tells me, with you, they're all short.'

A moment later and Kalam was alone, still racked with waves of uncontrollable shivering. Thankfully, the soldiers had left a couple of torches. It was too bad, he reflected, that the azalan demon had vanished. Seriously too bad.

It was dusk when the assassin emerged from the narrow fissure in the rock, opposite the cliff, that was the monastery's secret escape route. The timing was anything but pleasant. The demon might already be free, might already be hunting him – in whatever form fate had gifted it. The night ahead did not promise to be agreeable.

The signs of the company's egress were evident on the dusty ground in front of the fissure, and Kalam noted that they had set off southward, preceding him by four or more hours. Satisfied, he shouldered his pack and, skirting the outcropping that was the fortress, headed west.

Wild bhok'arala kept pace with him for a time, scampering along the rocks and voicing their strangely mournful hooting calls as night gathered. Stars appeared overhead through a blurry film of dust, dulling the desert's ambient silver glow to something more like smudged iron. Kalam made his way slowly, avoiding rises where he would be visible along a skyline.

He froze at a distant scream to the north. An enkar'al. Rare, but mundane enough. Unless the damned thing recently landed to drink from a pool of bloody water. The bhok'arala had scattered at that cry, and were nowhere to be seen. There was no wind that Kalam could detect, but he knew that sound carried far on nights like these, and, worse, the huge winged reptiles could detect motion from high above ... and the assassin would make a good meal.

Cursing to himself, Kalam faced south, to where the Whirlwind's solid wall of whirling sand rose, three and a half, maybe four thousand paces distant. He tightened the straps of his pack, then gingerly reached for his knives. The effects of the salve were fading, twin throbbing pulses of pain slowly rising. He had donned his fingerless gloves and gauntlets – risking the danger of infection – but even these barriers did little to lessen the searing pain as he closed his hands on the weapons and tugged them loose.

Then he set off down the slope, moving as quickly as he dared. A hundred heartbeats later he reached the blistered pan of Raraku's basin. The Whirlwind was a muted roar ahead, steadily drawing a flow of cool air towards it. He fixed his gaze on that distant, murky wall, then began jogging.

Five hundred paces. The pack's straps were abraiding the telaba on his shoulders, wearing through to the lightweight chain beneath. His supplies were slowing him down, but without them, he knew, he was as good as dead here in Raraku. He listened to his breathing grow harsher.
A thousand paces. Blisters had broken on his palms, soaking the insides of his gauntlets, making the grips of
the long-knives slippery, uncertain. He was drawing in great lungfuls of night air now, a burning sensation
settling into his thighs and calves.

Two thousand paces left, in so far as he could judge. The roar was fierce, and sheets of sand whipped around
him from behind. He could feel the rage of the goddess in the air.

Fifteen hundred remaining—

A sudden hush – as if he'd entered a cave – then he was cartwheeling through the air, the contents of his pack
loose and spinning away from the shredded remains on his back. Filling his ears, the echoes of a sound – a
bone-jarring impact – that he had not even heard. Then he struck the ground and rolled, knives flying from his
hands. His back and shoulders were sodden, covered in warm blood, his chain armour shredded by the
enkar'al's talons.

A mocking blow, for all the damage inflicted. The creature could more easily have ripped his head off.

And now a familiar voice entered his skull, 'Aye, I could have killed you outright, but this pleases me more.
Run, mortal, to that saving wall of sand.'

'I freed you,' Kalam growled, spitting out blood and grit. 'And this is your gratitude?'

'You delivered pain. Unacceptable. I am not one to feel pain. I only deliver it.'

'Well,' the assassin grated as he slowly rose to his hands and knees, 'it comforts me to know in these, my last
moments, that you'll not live long in this new world with that attitude. I'll wait for you other side of Hood's
gate, Demon.'

Enormous talons snapped around him, their tips punching through chain – one in his lower back, three others
in his abdomen – and he was lifted from the ground.

Then flung through the air once more. This time he descended from a distance of at least three times his own
height, and when he struck blackness exploded in his mind.

Consciousness returned, and he found himself lying sprawled on the cracked pan, the ground directly
beneath him muddy with his own blood. The stars were swimming wildly overhead, and he was unable to
move. A deep thrumming reverberation rang in the back of his skull, coming up from his spine.

'Ah, awake once more. Good. Shall we resume this game?'

'As you like, Demon. Alas, I'm no longer much of a plaything. You broke my back.'

'Your error was in landing head first, mortal.'

'My apologies.' But the numbness was fading – he could feel a tingling sensation, spreading out through his
limbs. 'Come down and finish it, Demon.'

He felt the ground shake as the enkar'al settled on the ground somewhere to his left. Heavy thumping steps as
the creature approached. 'Tell me your name, mortal. It is the least I can do, to know the name of my first kill
after so many thousands of years.'

'Kalam Mekhar.'

'And what kind of creature are you? You resemble Imass...' 

'Ah, so you were imprisoned long before the Nameless Ones, then.'

'I know nothing of Nameless Ones, Kalam Me/char.'

He could sense the enkar'al at his side now, a massive, looming presence, though the assassin kept his eyes
shut. Then he felt its carnivore's breath gust down on him, and knew the reptile's jaws were opening wide.
Kalam rolled over and drove his right fist down into the creature's throat.

Then released the handful of blood-soaked sand, gravel and rocks it had held.

And drove the dagger in his other hand deep between its breast bones.

The huge head jerked back, and the assassin rolled in the opposite direction, then regained his feet. The motion took all feeling from his legs and he toppled to the ground once more – but in the interval he had seen one of his long-knives, lying point embedded in the ground about fifteen paces distant.

The enkar'al was thrashing about now, choking, talons ripping into the bleached earth in its frenzied panic.

Sensation ebbed back into his legs, and Kalam began dragging himself across the parched ground. Towards the long-knife. The serpent blade, I think. How appropriate.

Everything shuddered and the assassin twisted around to see that the creature had leapt, landing splay-legged directly behind him – where he had been a moment ago. Blood was weeping from its cold eyes, which flashed in recognition – before panic overwhelmed them once more. Blood and gritty froth shot out from between its serrated jaws.

He resumed dragging himself forward, and was finally able to draw his legs up and manage a crawl.

Then the knife was in his right hand. Kalam slowly turned about, his head swimming, and began crawling back. 'I have something for you,' he gasped. 'An old friend, come to say hello.'

The enkar'al heaved and landed heavily on its side, snapping the bones of one of its wings in the process. Tail lashing, legs kicking, talons spasming open and shut, head thumping repeatedly against the ground.

'Remember my name, Demon,' Kalam continued, crawling up to the beast's head. He drew his knees under him, then raised the knife in both hands. The point hovered over the writhing neck, rose and fell until in time with its motion. 'Kalam Mekhar ... the one who stuck in your throat.' He drove the knife down, punching through the thick pebbled skin, and the blood of a severed jugular sprayed outward.

Kalam reeled back, barely in time to avoid the deadly fount, and dropped into another roll.

Three times over, to end finally on his back once more. Paralysis stealing through him once again.

He stared upward at the spinning stars ... until the darkness devoured them.

In the ancient fortress that had once functioned as a monastery for the Nameless Ones, but had been old even then – its makers long forgotten – there was only darkness. On its lowermost level there was a single chamber, its floor rifted above a rushing underground river.

In the icy depths, chained by Elder sorcery to the bedrock, lay a massive, armoured warrior. Thelomen Toblakai, pure of blood, that had known the curse of demonic possession, a possession that had devoured its own sense of self – the noble warrior had ceased to exist long, long ago.

Yet now, the body writhed in its magical chains. The demon was gone, fled with the outpouring of blood – blood that should never have existed, given the decayed state of the creature, yet existed it had, and the river had swept it to freedom. To a distant waterhole, where a bull enkar'al – a beast in its prime – had been crouching to drink.

The enkar'al had been alone for some time – not even the spoor of others of its kind could be found anywhere nearby. Though it had not sensed the passage of time, decades had in fact passed since it last encountered its own kind. Indeed, it had been fated – given a normal course of life – to never again mate. With its death, the extinction of the enkar'al anywhere east of the Jhag Odhan would have been complete.

But now its soul raged in a strange, gelid body – no wings, no thundering hearts, no prey-laden scent to draw from the desert's night air. Something held it down, and imprisonment was proving a swift path to mindless
madness.

Far above, the fortress was silent and dark. The air was motionless once more, barring the faint sighs from draughts that flowed in from the outer chambers.

Rage and terror. Unanswered, except by the promise of eternity.

Or so it would have remained.

Had the Beast Thrones stayed unoccupied.

Had not the reawakened wolf gods known an urgent need ... for a champion.

Their presence reached into the creature's soul, calmed it with visions of a world where there were enkar'al in the muddy skies, where bull males locked jaws in the fierce heat of the breeding season, the females banking in circles far above. Visions that brought peace to the ensnared soul – though with it came a deep sorrow, for the body that now clothed it was ... wrong.

A time of service, then. The reward – to rejoin its kin in the skies of another realm.

Beasts were not strangers to hope, nor unmindful of such things as rewards.

Besides, this champion would taste blood ... and soon.

For the moment, however, there was a skein of sorcerous bindings to unravel...

Limbs stiff as death. But the heart laboured on.

A shadow slipping over Kalam's face awakened him. He opened his eyes.

The wrinkled visage of an old man hovered above him, swimming behind waves of heat. Dal Honese, hairless, jutting ears, his expression twisted into a scowl. 'I was looking for you!' he accused, in Malazan. 'Where have you been? What are you doing lying out here? Don't you know it's hot?'

Kalam closed his eyes again. 'Looking for me?' He shook his head. 'No-one's looking for me,' he continued, forcing his eyes open once more despite the glare lancing up from the ground around the two men. 'Well, not any more, that is—'

'Idiot. Heat-addled fool. Stupid – but maybe I should be crooning, encouraging even? Will that deceive him? Likely. A change in tactics, yes. You! Did you kill this enkar'al? Impressive! Wondrous! But it stinks. Nothing worse than a rotting enkar'al, except for the fact that you've fouled yourself. Lucky for you your urinating friend found me, then led me here. Oh, and it's marked the enkar'al, too – what a stench! Sizzling hide! Anyway, it'll carry you. Yes, back to my haunted abode—'

'Who in Hood's name are you?' Kalam demanded, struggling to rise. Though the paralysis was gone, he was crusted in dried blood, the puncture wounds burning like coals, his every bone feeling brittle.

'Me? You do not know? You do not recognize the very famosity exuding from me? Famosity? There must be such a word. I used it! The act of being famous. Of course. Most devoted servant of Shadow! Highest Archpriest Iskaral Pust! God to the bhok'arala, bane of spiders, Master Deceiver of all the world's Soletaken and D'ivers! And now, your saviour! Provided you have something for me, that is, something to deliver. A bone whistle? A small bag, perchance? Given to you in a shadowy realm, by an even shadowier god? A bag, you fool, filled with dusky diamonds?'

'You're the one, are you?' Kalam groaned. 'The gods help us. Aye, I have the diamonds—' He tried to sit up, reaching for the pouch tucked under his belt – and caught a momentary glimpse of the azalan demon, flowing amidst shadows behind the priest, until oblivion found him.

When he awoke once more he was lying on a raised stone platform that suspiciously resembled an altar. Oil
lamps flickered from ledges on the walls. The room was small, the air acrid.

Healing salves had been applied – and likely sorcery as well – leaving him feeling refreshed, though his joints remained stiff, as if he had not moved for some time. His clothing had been removed, a thin blanket stiff with grime laid over him. His throat ached with a raging thirst.

The assassin slowly sat up, looking down at the purple weals where the enkar'al's talons had plunged, then almost jumped at a scurrying sound across the floor – a bhok'aral, casting a single, absurdly guilty, glance over a knobby shoulder a moment before darting out through the doorway.

A dusty jug of water and a clay cup lay on a reed mat on the stone floor. Flinging the blanket aside, Kalam moved towards it.

A bloom of shadows in one corner of the chamber caught his attention as he poured a cup, so he was not surprised to see Iskaral Pust standing there when the shadows faded.

The priest was hunched down, looking nervously at the doorway, then tiptoeing up to the assassin. 'All better now, yes?'

'Is there need to whisper?' Kalam asked.

The man flinched. 'Quiet! My wife!'

'Is she sleeping?'

Iskaral Pust's small face was so like a bhok'aral's that the assassin was wondering at the man's bloodlines – no, Kalam, don't be ridiculous – 'Sleeping?' the priest sputtered. 'She never sleeps! No, you fool, she hunts!'

'Hunts? What does she hunt?'

'Not what. Who. She hunts for me, of course.' His eyes glittered as he stared at Kalam. 'But has she found me? No! We've not seen each other for months! Hee hee!' He jutted his head closer. 'It's a perfect marriage. I've never been happier. You should try it.'

Kalam poured himself another cup. 'I need to eat—'

But Iskaral Pust was gone.

He looked around, bemused.

Sandalled feet approached from the corridor without, then a wild-haired old woman leapt in through the doorway. Dal Honese – not surprisingly. She was covered in cobwebs. She glared about. 'Where is he? He was here, wasn't he? I can smell him! The bastard was here!'

Kalam shrugged. 'Look, I'm hungry—'

'Do I look appetising?' she snapped. A quick, appraising glance at Kalam. 'Mind you, you do!' She began searching the small room, sniffing at corners, crouching to peer into the jug. 'I know every room, every hiding place,' she muttered, shaking her head. 'And why not? When veered, I was everywhere—'

'You're a Soletaken? Ah, spiders…'

'Oh, aren't you a clever and long one!'

'Why not veer again? Then you could search—'

'If I veered, I'd be the one hunted! Oh no, old Mogora's not stupid, she won't fall for that! I'll find him! You watch!'

She scurried from the room.

Kalam sighed. With luck, his stay with these two would be a short one.
Iskaral Pust's voice whispered in his ear. 'That was close!'

Cheekbone and orbital ridge were both shattered, the pieces that remained held in place by strips of withered tendon and muscle. Had Onrack possessed anything more than a shrunken, mummified nugget for an eye, it would have been torn away by the Tiste Liosan's ivory scimitar.

There was, of course, no effect on his vision, for his senses existed in the ghostly fire of the Tellann Ritual – the unseen aura hovering around his mangled body, burning with memories of completeness, of vigour. Even so, the severing of his left arm created a strange, queasy sense of conflict, as if the wound bled in both the world of the ritual ghost-shape and in the physical world. A seeping away of power, of self, leaving the T'lan Imass warrior with vaguely confused thoughts, a malaise of ephemeral... thinness.

He stood motionless, watching his kin prepare for the ritual. He was outside them, now, no longer able to conjoin his spirit with theirs. From this jarring fact there was emerging, in Onrack's mind, a strange shifting of perspective. He saw only their physicality now – the ghost-shapes were invisible to his sight.

Withered corpses. Ghastly. Devoid of majesty, a mockery of all that was once noble. Duty and courage had been made animate, and this was all the T'lan Imass were, and had been for hundreds of thousands of years. Yet, without choice, such virtues as duty and courage were transformed into empty, worthless words. Without mortality, hovering like an unseen sword overhead, meaning was without relevance, no matter the nature – or even the motivation behind – an act. Any act.

Onrack believed he was finally seeing, when fixing his gaze upon his once-kin, what all those who were not T'lan Imass saw, when looking upon these horrific, undead warriors.

An extinct past refusing to fall to dust. Brutal reminders of rectitude and intransigence, of a vow elevated into insanity.

And this is how I have been seen. Perhaps how I am still seen. By Trull Sengar. By these Tiste Liosan. Thus. How, then, shall I feel? What am I supposed to feel? And when last did feelings even matter?

Trull Sengar spoke beside him. 'Were you anyone else, I would hazard to read you as being thoughtful, Onrack.' He was seated on a low wall, the box of Moranth munitions at his feet.

The Tiste Liosan had pitched a camp nearby, a picket line paced out and bulwarks of rubble constructed, three paces between each single-person tent, horses within a staked-out rope corral – in all, the precision and diligence verging on the obsessive.

'Conversely,' Trull continued after a moment, his eyes on the Liosan, 'perhaps your kind are indeed great thinkers. Solvers of every vast mystery. Possessors of all the right answers ... if only I could pose the right questions. Thankful as I am for your companionship, Onrack, I admit to finding you immensely frustrating.'

'Frustrating. Yes. We are.'

'And your companions intend to dismantle what's left of you once we return to our home realm. If I was in your place, I'd be running for the horizon right now.'

'Flee?' Onrack considered the notion, then nodded. 'Yes, this is what the renegades – those we hunt – did. And yes, now I understand them.'

'They did more than simply flee,' Trull said. 'They found someone or something else to serve, to avow allegiance to . . . while at the moment, at least, that option is not available to you. Unless, of course, you choose those Liosan.'

'Or you.'

Trull shot him a startled look, then grinned. 'Amusing.'

'Of course,' Onrack added, 'Monok Ochem would view such a thing as a crime, no different from that which
has been committed by the renegades.'

The T’lan Imass had nearly completed their preparations. The bonecaster had inscribed a circle, twenty paces across, in the dried mud with a sharpened bhederin rib, then had scattered seeds and dust-clouds of spores within the ring. Ibra Gholan and his two warriors had raised the equivalent of a sighting stone – an elongated chunk of mortared fired bricks from a collapsed building wall – a dozen paces outside the circle, and were making constant adjustments beneath the confusing play of light from the two suns, under Monok Ochem’s directions.

‘That won’t be easy,’ Trull observed, watching the T’lan Imass shifting the upright stone, ‘so I suppose I can expect to keep my blood for a while longer.’

Onrack slowly swung his misshapen head to study the Tiste Edur. ‘It is you who should be fleeing, Trull Sengar.’

‘Your bonecaster explained that they needed only a drop or two.’

My bonecaster . . . no longer. ‘True, if all goes well.’

‘Why shouldn’t it?’

‘The Tiste Liosan. Kurald Thyrllan – this is the name they give their warren. Seneschal Jorrude is not a sorcerer. He is a warrior-priest.’

Trull frowned. ‘It is the same for the Tiste Edur, for my people, Onrack—’

‘And as such, the seneschal must kneel before his power. Whereas a sorcerer commands power. Your approach is fraught, Trull Sengar. You assume that a benign spirit gifts you that power. If that spirit is usurped, you may not even know it. And then, you become a victim, a tool, manipulated to serve unknown purposes.’

Onrack fell silent, and watched the Tiste Edur ... as a deathly pallor stole the life from Trull’s eyes, as the expression became one of horrified revelation. And so I give answer to a question you were yet to ask. Alas, this does not make me all-knowing. The spirit that grants the seneschal his power may be corrupted. There is no way to know ... until it is unleashed. And even then, malign spirits are highly skilled at hiding. The one named Osric is ... lost. Osric, as humans know him. No, I do not know the source of Monok Ochem’s knowledge in this matter. Thus, the hand behind the seneschal’s power is probably not Osric, but some other entity, hidden behind the guise and the name of Osric. Yet these Tiste Liosan proceed unawares.’

It was clear that Trull Sengar was, for the moment, unable to offer comment, or pose questions, so Onrack simply continued – wondering at the sudden extinction of his own reticence – ‘The seneschal spoke of their own hunt. In pursuit of trespassers who crossed through their fiery warren. But these trespassers are not the renegades we hunt. Kurald Thyrllan is not a sealed warren. Indeed, it lies close to our own Tellann – for Tellann draws from it. Fire is life and life is fire. Fire is the war against the cold, the slayer of ice. It is our salvation. Bonecasters have made use of Kurald Thyrllan. Probably, others have as well. That such incursions should prove cause for enmity among the Liosan was never considered. For it seemed there were no Tiste Liosan.

‘Monok Ochem considers this, now. He cannot help but consider this. Where are these Liosan from? How distant – how remote – their home? Why are they now awakened to resentment? What does the one hidden behind the guise of Osric now seek? Where—’

‘Stop! Please, Onrack, stop! I need to think – I need—’ Trull rose suddenly, flinging a dismissive gesture at the T’lan Imass, then strode off.

‘I think,’ Onrack said quietly to himself as he watched the Tiste Edur storm away, ‘that I will revert to reticence.’

A small chunk of mortared brick had now been positioned in the centre of the ring; its top was being inscribed with slashes and grooves by the bonecaster, and Onrack realized that Monok Ochem had already discerned the celestial patterns of the two suns and the numerous moons that wheeled overhead.
Colours played constantly over this landscape in sullen blood hues, occasionally overwhelmed by deep blues that limned everything in a cold, almost metallic sheen. At the moment, magenta dominated, a lurid tone as of reflected conflagration. Yet the air remained still and damp, eternally pensive.

A world aswarm in shadows. The hounds that Onrack had inadvertently freed from their stone prisons had cast scores of them. The battered warrior wondered where the two beasts had gone. He was fairly certain that they were no longer in this realm, in this place known as the Nascent.

Shadow and spirit reunited ... the beasts had possessed something ... unusual. As if each was shaped of two distinct powers, two aspects chained together. Onrack had unleashed those hounds, yet, on second consideration, perhaps not freed them. Shadow from Dark. That which is cast . . . from that which has cast it. The warrior lowered his gaze to study his own multiple shadows. Was there tension between him and them? Clearly, there was a binding. But he was the master and they his slaves.

Or so it seemed ... Silent kin of mine. You precede. You follow. You strive on my flanks. Huddle beneath me. Your world finds its shape from my bone and flesh. Yet your breadth and length belong to Light. You are the bridge between worlds, yet you cannot be walked. No substance, then. Only perception.

'Onrack, you are closed to us.'

He lifted his gaze. Monok Ochem stood before him. 'Yes, Bonecaster. I am closed to you. Do you doubt me?'

'I would know your thoughts.'

'They are ... insubstantial.'

Monok Ochem cocked his head. 'None the less.'

Onrack was silent for a long moment. 'Bonecaster. I remain bound to your path.'

'Yet you are severed.'

'The renegade kin must be found. They are our ... shadows. I now stand between you and them, and so I can guide you. I now know where to look, the signs to seek. Destroy me and you shall lose an advantage in your hunt.'

'You bargain for ... persistence?'

'I do, Bonecaster.'

'Tell us, then, the path the renegades have taken.'

'I shall... when it becomes relevant.'

'Now.'

'No.'

Monok Ochem stared down at the warrior, then swung away and returned to the circle.

Tellann commanded that place now. Tundra flowers had erupted from the mud, along with lichen and mosses. Blackflies swarmed at ankle height. A dozen paces beyond stood the four Tiste Liosan, their enamel armour glowing in the strange magenta light.

Trull Sengar watched from a position fifteen paces to Onrack's left, his arms tightly crossed about himself, a haunted expression on his lean face.

Monok Ochem approached the seneschal. 'We are ready, Liosan.'

Jorrude nodded. 'Then I shall begin my prayers, Undead Priest. And there shall be proof that our Master, Osric, is far from lost to us. You shall know his power.'
The bonecaster said nothing.

‘And when,’ Trull asked, ‘shall I start spraying blood around? Which one of you has the pleasure of wounding me?’

‘The choice is yours,’ Monok Ochem replied.

‘Good. I choose Onrack – he’s the only one here I’m pre pared to trust. Apologies to those of you who might take offence at that.’

‘That task should be mine,’ Seneschal Jorrude said. ‘Blood lies at the heart of Osric’s power—’

Onrack was alone noting the slight start from the bonecaster at that, and the warrior nodded to himself. Much answered with those words.

‘—and indeed,’ Jorrude continued, ‘I shall have to spill some of my own as well.’

But Trull Sengar shook his head. ‘No. Onrack ... or no-one.’ And he then uncrossed his arms, revealing a clay ball in each hand.

There was a snort from Jorrude, and the Liosan named Enias growled, ‘Grant me leave to kill him, Seneschal. I shall ensure that there is no shortage of Edur blood.’

‘Do so, and I guarantee the same lack of shortage,’ Trull responded, ‘concerning Liosan blood. Bonecaster, do you recognize these munitions?’

‘They are known by the Malazans as cussers,’ answered Ibra Gholan, the clan leader. ‘One will suffice, given our collective proximities.’

Trull grinned over at the T’lan Imass warrior. ‘Even that dhenrabi skin on your shoulders won’t help much, will it?’

‘True,’ Ibra Gholan replied. ‘While armour is not entirely ineffectual, such value invariably proves wanting.’

Monok Ochem turned to the seneschal. ‘Agree to the stipulation,’ he said. ‘Begin your prayers, Liosan.’

‘Such commands are not for you to utter,’ Jorrude snarled. He glared at Trull. ‘You, Edur, have much to learn. We shall create this gate, and then there will come a reckoning.’

Trull Sengar shrugged. ‘As you like.’

Adjusting his bloodstained cloak, the seneschal strode into the centre of the circle. Then he lowered himself onto his knees, chin settling onto his chest, closing his gleaming, silver eyes.

Blackflies formed a humming cloud around him.

Whatever link existed between Jorrude and his god proved both strong and swift. Gold fire flickered into life here and there beyond the circumference of the circle. The remaining three Tiste Liosan returned to their own camp and began packing.

Monok Ochem strode into the circle, followed by the two clansmen Haran Epal and Olar Shayn. The clan leader faced Onrack and said, ‘Guard your companion close, if you would he survive. Cleave to that singular concern, Onrack. No matter what you might witness.’

‘I shall,’ Onrack replied. In many essential matters, the warrior realized, he had no need for a binding of souls with his kin ... to know their minds. He strode to Trull Sengar. ‘Follow me,’ he instructed. ‘We must now enter the circle.’

The Tiste Edur scowled, then nodded. ‘Take the box of munitions, then. My hands are full.’

Trull had fixed straps to the box. Onrack collected it then led his companion into the circle.
The three Liosan had completed breaking their camp and were now saddling their white horses.

The fires continued flickering in and out of existence around the periphery, none large enough to pose a threat. But Onrack could sense the approach of the Liosan god. Or at least the outermost layers of its disguise. Cautious, mistrustful – not of the seneschal, of course – but for this to work, the hidden spirit would have to come to this realm’s very edge.

And when Jorrude offered up his own blood, the bridge of power between him and his god would be complete.

The thud of horse hoofs announced the arrival of the other three Liosan, the four mounts in tow.

Onrack drew forth from beneath rotted furs a small crescent-shaped obsidian knife, single-edged on the inward-curving line, and held it out to Trull. ‘When I so instruct you, Trull Sengar, cut yourself. A few drops will suffice.’

The Tiste Edur frowned. ‘I thought you were—’

‘I would not be distracted, in the moment of crossing.’

‘Distracted?’

‘Say nothing. Attend to yourself.’

His frown deepening, Trull crouched to return the two cussers to the box, affixed the lid once more and slung the contrivance over a shoulder, then straightened and accepted the stone blade.

The flames were now growing, unbroken immediately beyond the inscribed ring. Kurald Thyrllan, but the ascendant shaping it remained unseen. Onrack wondered at its nature. If these Liosan were any indication, it found sustenance from purity, as if such a thing was even possible. Intransigence. Simplicity.

The simplicity of blood, a detail whispering of antiquity, of primeval origins. A spirit, then, before whom a handful of savages once bowed. There had been many such entities, once, born of that primitive assertion of meaning to object, meaning shaped by symbols and portents, scratchings on rock-faces and in the depths of caves.

No shortage . . . but tribes died out, were winnowed out, were devoured by more powerful neighbours. The secret language of the scratchings, the caves with their painted images that came alive to the pounding of drums – those most mysterious cathedrals of thunder... all lost, forgotten. And with that fading away of secrets, so too the spirits themselves dwindled, usually into oblivion.

That some lingered was not surprising to Onrack. Even unto usurping the faith of a new tribe. What was new to the warrior, rising like a tightness into his desiccated throat, was the sense of... pathos.

In the name of purity, the Liosan worship their god. In the name of... of nostalgia, the god worships what was and shall never again return.

The spilling of blood was the deadliest of games.

As is about to be seen.

A harsh cry from the seneschal, and the flames rose into a wall on all sides, raging with unbridled power. Jorrude had laid open his left palm. Within the circle, a swirling wind rose, laden with the smells of a thaw – of spring in some northern clime.

Onrack turned to Trull. ‘Now.’

The Tiste Edur slashed the obsidian blade across the edge of his left hand, then stared down disbelieving at the gash – clear, the flesh neatly parted, frighteningly deep.

The blood emerged a moment later, welling forth, red roots racing and branching down his grey-skinned
The gate seemed to tear itself open, surrounding the group within the circle. Spiralling tunnels reached outward from it, each seeming to lead on into eternity. A roar of chaos on the flanks, miasmic grey fire in the spaces between the portals. Onrack reached out to catch a reeling Trull Sengar. The blood was spraying out from his left hand, as if the Edur’s entire body was being squeezed by some unseen, but unrelenting pressure.

Onrack glanced over – to see Monok Ochem standing alone, head tilted back as the winds of Tellann whipped the silver-tipped fur around his unhelmed head. Beyond the bonecaster, a momentary glimpse of Ibra Gholan, Olar Shayn and Haran Epal vanishing down a tunnel of fire.

The seneschal’s companions were now running towards their master’s prone, unconscious body.

Satisfied that the others were occupied – temporarily unmindful – Onrack dragged Trull close until their bodies made contact, the T’lan Imass managing a one-armed embrace. ‘Hold on to me,’ he rasped. ‘Trull Sengar, hold on to me – but free your left hand.’

Fingers clutched at Onrack’s ragged cloak, began dragging with growing weight. The T’lan Imass relinquished his one-armed hug and snapped out his hand – to close on Trull’s. The blood bit like acid into flesh that had forgotten pain. Onrack almost tore his grip free in the sudden, overwhelming agony, but then he tightened his hold and leaned close to the Tiste Edur. ‘Listen! I, Onrack, once of the Logros but now stranger to the Ritual, avow service to Trull Sengar of the Tiste Edur. I pledge to defend your life. This vow cannot be sundered. Now, lead us from here!’

Their hands still locked together, sealed for the moment by a slowing flow of blood, Onrack pulled Trull around until they faced one of the spiralling tunnels. Then they plunged forward.

Onrack saw the bonecaster wheel to face them. But the distance was too great, and the ritual had already begun tearing itself apart.

Then Monok Ochem veered into his Soletaken form. A blur, then a massive, hulking beast was thundering in pursuit.

Onrack sought to tear his grip from Trull to reach for his sword, to block the Soletaken and so ensure Trull’s escape – but the Edur had turned, had seen, and would not let go. Instead, he pulled, hard. Onrack stumbled back.

Knuckles pounded on the ground – the ape that Monok Ochem had become was, despite being gaunt with death, enormous. Patched grey and black skin, tufts of silver-tipped black hair on the broad shoulders and the nape of the neck, a sunken-eyed, withered face, jaws stretching wide to reveal canines – voicing a deep, grating roar.

Then Monok Ochem simply vanished. Swallowed by a surge of chaos.

Onrack stumbled over something, crashed down onto hard-packed ground, gravel skidding under him. Beside him, on his knees, was Trull Sengar.

The fall had broken their grip, and the Tiste Edur was staring down at his left hand – where only a thin, white scar remained.

A single sun blazed down on them, and Onrack knew they had returned to his native realm.

The T’lan Imass slowly climbed to his feet. ‘We must leave this place, Trull Sengar. My kin shall pursue. Perhaps only Monok Ochem remains, but he will not relent.’

Trull raised his head. ‘Remains? What do you mean? Where did the others go?’

Onrack looked down on the Tiste Edur. ‘The Liosan were too late to realize. The turning of Tellann succeeded in driving all awareness from the seneschal. They were entirely unprepared. Ibra Gholan, Olar Shayn and Haran Epal walked into the warren of Kurald Thyrllan.’
'Walked into? Why?'

Onrack managed a one-sided shrug. 'They went, Trull Sengar, to kill the Liosan god.'

Little more than bones and scraps of armour, what had once been an army lay in the thick grey ash, encircling a steeply sloped pit of some kind. There was no way to tell whether the army had faced outward – defending some sort of subterranean entrance – or inward, seeking to prevent an escape.

Lostara Yil stood ankle-deep in the trail's ashes. Watching Pearl walk gingerly among the bones, reaching down every now and then to drag some item free for a closer look. Her throat was raw, her hatred of the Imperial Warren deepening with every passing moment.

'The scenery is unchanging,' Pearl had noted, 'yet never the same. I have walked this path before – this very path. There were no ruins, then. And no heap of bones or hole in the ground.'

And no winds to shift the ashes.

But bones and other larger objects had a way of rising to the surface, eventually. Or so it was true in the sands – why should ashes be any different? None the less, some of those ruins were massive. Vast expanses of flagstones, unstained, devoid even of dust. Tall, leaning towers – like the rotted stubs of fangs. A bridge spanning nothing, its stones so precisely set that a knife-tip could not be slipped between them.

Slapping the dust from his gloved hands, Pearl strode up. 'Curious indeed.'

Lostara coughed, hacked out grey sputum. 'Just find us a gate and get us out of here,' she rasped.

'Ah, well, as to that, my dear, the gods are smiling down upon us. I have found a gate, and a lively one it is.'

She scowled at him, knowing he sought the inevitable question from her, but she was in no mood to ask it.

'Alas, I know your thoughts,' Pearl continued after a moment, with a quick wry grin. He pointed back towards the pit. 'Down there ... unfortunately. Thus, we are left with a dire choice. Continue on – and risk you spitting out your lungs – in search of a more easily approachable gate. Or take the plunge, as it were.'

'You're leaving the choice to me?'

'Why not? Now, I'm waiting. Which shall it be?'

She drew the scarf over her mouth and nose once more, tightened the straps on her pack, then marched off ... towards the pit.

Pearl fell in step. 'Courage and foolishness, the distinction so often proves problematic—'

'Except in hindsight.' Lostara kicked herself free of a rib cage that had fouled her stride, then swore at the resultant clouds of ash and dust. 'Who were these damned soldiers? Do you know?'

'I may possess extraordinary powers of observation and unfathomable depths of intelligence, lass, but I cannot read when there is nothing to be seen. Corpses. Human, in so far as I can tell. The only detail I can offer is that they fought this battle knee-deep in this ash ... meaning—'

'That whatever crisped this realm had already happened,' Lostara cut in. 'Meaning, they either survived the event, or were interlopers ... like us.'

'Very possibly emerging from the very gate we now approach.'

'To cross blades with whom?'

Pearl shrugged. 'I have no idea. But I have a few theories.'

'Of course you do,' she snapped. 'Like all men – you hate to say you don't know and leave it at that. You have
an answer to every question, and if you don't you make one up.'

'An outrageous accusation, my dear. It is not a matter of making up answers, it is rather an exercise in conjecture. There is a difference—'

'That's what you say, not what I have to listen to. All the time. Endless words. Does a man even exist who believes there can be too many words?'

'I don't know,' Pearl replied.

After a moment she shot him a glare, but he was studiously staring ahead.

They came to the edge of the slope and halted, looking down.

The descent would be treacherous, jumbled bones, swords jagged with decay, and an unknown depth of ash and dust. The hole at the base was perhaps ten paces across, yawning black.

'There are spiders in the desert,' Lostara muttered, 'that build such traps.'

'Slightly smaller, surely.'

She reached down and collected a thigh bone, momentarily surprised at its weight, then tossed it down the slope.

A thud.

Then the packed ash beneath their boots vanished.

And down they went, amidst explosions of dust, ashes and splinters of bone. A hissing rush – blind, choking – then they were falling through a dry downpour. To land heavily on yet another slope that tumbled them down a roaring, echoing avalanche.

It was a descent through splintered bones and bits of iron, and it seemed unending.

Lostara was unable to draw breath – they were drowning in thick dust, sliding and rolling, sinking then bursting free once more. Down, down through absolute darkness. A sudden, jarring collision with something – possibly wood – then a withered, rumpled surface that seemed tiled, and down once more.

Another thump and tumble.

Then she was rolling across flagstones, pushed on by a wave of ash and detritus, finally coming to a crunching halt, flat on her back, a flow of frigid air rising up on her left side – where she reached out, gropping, then down, to where the floor should have been. Nothing. She was lying on an edge, and something told her that, had she taken this last descent, Hood alone would greet her at its conclusion.

Coughing from slightly further up the slope on her right. A faint nudge as the heaped bones and ashes on that side shifted.

Another such nudge, and she would be pushed over the edge. Lostara rolled her head to the left and spat, then tried to speak. The word came out thin and hoarse. 'Don't.'

Another cough, then, 'Don't what?'

'Move.'

'Oh. That doesn't sound good. It's not good, is it?'

'Not good. Another ledge. Another drop ... this one I think for ever.'

'Judicious use of my warren seems appropriate at this point, don't you think?'

'Yes.'
'A moment, then ...'

A dull sphere of light emerged, suspended above them, its illumination struggling in the swirling clouds of dust.

It edged closer – grew larger. Brightened.

Revealing all that was above them.

Lostara said nothing. Her chest had contracted as if unwilling to take another breath. Her heart thundered. Wood. An X-shaped cross, tilting over them, as tall as a four-storey building. The glint of enormous, pitted spikes.

And nailed to the cruciform—

—a dragon.

Wings spread, pinned wide. Hind limbs impaled. Chains wrapped about its neck, holding its massive wedge–shaped head up, as if staring skyward—

—to a sea of stars marked here and there with swirls of glowing mist.

'It's not here ...' Pearl whispered.

'What? It's right above—'

'No. Well, yes. But... look carefully. It's enclosed in a sphere. A pocket warren, a realm unto itself—'

'Or the entranceway,' she suggested. 'Sealing—'

'A gate. Queen of Dreams, I think you're right. Even so, its power doesn't reach us ... thank the spirits and gods and demons and ascendants and—'

'Why, Pearl?'

'Because, lass – that dragon is aspected.'

'I thought they all were.'

'Aye. You keep interrupting me, Lostara Yil. Aspected, I was saying. But not to a warren. Gods! I cannot fathom—'

'Damn you, Pearl!'

'Otataral.'

'What?'

'Otataral. Her aspect is otataral, woman! This is an otataral dragon.'

Neither spoke for a time. Lostara began edging herself away from the ledge, shifting weight incrementally, freezing at every increase in the stream of dust slipping away beneath her.

Turning her head, she could make out Pearl. He had unveiled enough of his warren to draw himself upward, hovering slightly above the slope. His gaze remained fixed on the crucified dragon.

'Some help down here ...' Lostara growled.

He started, then looked down at her. 'Right. My deepest apologies, lass. Here, I shall extend my warren ...'

She felt herself lifted into the air.
'Make no struggle, lass. Relax, and you'll float up beside me, then pivot upright.'

She forced herself to grow still, but the result was one of rigid immobility.

Pearl chuckled. 'Lacks grace, but it will do.'

A half-dozen heart-beats later she was beside him, hovering upright.

'Try to relax again, Lostara.'

She glared at him, but he was staring upward once more. Reluctantly, she followed his gaze.

'It's still alive, you know,' Pearl whispered.

'Who could have done this?'

'Whoever it was, we have a lot for which to thank him, her ... or them. This thing devours magic. Consumes warrens.'

'All the old legends of dragons begin with the statement that they are the essence of sorcery. How, then, could this thing even exist?'

'Nature always seeks a balance. Forces strive for symmetry. This dragon answers every other dragon that ever existed, or ever will.'

Lostara coughed and spat once more, then she shivered. 'The Imperial Warren, Pearl. What was it before it was ... turned to ash?'

He glanced over at her, eyes narrowing. He shrugged and began brushing dust from his clothes. 'I see no value in lingering in this horrendous place—'

'You said there was a gate down here – not that one, surely—'

'No. Beyond that ledge. I suspect the last time it was used was by whoever or whatever nailed this dragon onto the cross. Surprisingly, they didn't seal the gate behind them.'

'Careless.'

'More like supremely confident, I would think. We'll make our descent a little more orderly this time, agreed? You need not move – leave this to me.'

'I despise that suggestion in principle, Pearl, but what I hate more is that I see no choice.'

'Haven't you had your fill of bared bones yet, lass? A simple sweet smile would have sufficed.'

She fixed him with a look of steel.

Pearl sighed. 'A good try, lass. We'll work on it.'

As they floated out over the ledge, Lostara looked up one last time, but not at the dragon, rather at the starscape beyond. 'What do you make of that night sky, Pearl? I do not recognize the constellations... nor have I ever before seen those glowing swirls in any night sky I've looked at.'

He grunted. 'That's a foreign sky – as foreign as can be. A hole leading into alien realms, countless strange worlds filled with creatures unimaginable—'

'You really don't know, do you?'

'Of course I don't!' he snapped.

'Then why didn't you just say so?''
'It was more fun conjecturing creatively, of course. How can a man be the object of a woman's interest if he's always confessing his ignorance?'

'You want me to be interested in you? Why didn't you say so? Now I will hang on your every word, of course. Shall I gaze adoringly into your eyes as well?'

He swung on her a glum look. 'Men really have no chance, do they?'

'Typical conceit to have thought otherwise, Pearl.'

They were falling gently through darkness. The sorcerous globe of light followed, but at some distance, smudged and faint behind the suspended dust.

Lostara looked downward, then snapped her head up and closed her eyes, fighting vertigo. Through gritted teeth she asked, 'How much farther do we sink, do you think?'

'I don't know.'

'You could've given a better answer than that!' When he made no reply she glanced over at him through slitted eyes.

He looked positively despondent.

'Well?' she demanded.

'If these are the depths of despair, lass, we're almost there.'

As it turned out, another hundred heartbeats passed before they reached the dust-laden floor. The sphere of light arrived a short while later, illuminating the surrounding area.

The floor was solid rock, uneven and littered with still more bones. No walls were in sight.

The magic that had slowly lowered them dissipated. Pearl took two strides then gestured, and, as if he had flung aside an invisible current, the glimmering outlines of a gate appeared before them. The Claw grunted.

'Now what?' Lostara asked.

'Thir. Or, to be more precise, the Elder Warren from which Thyr derived. I can't recall its name. Kurald something. Tiste. Not Edur, not Andii, but the other one. And ...' he added in a low voice, 'the last things to use it left tracks.'

Lostara stared down at the threshold. Somewhat obscured, but discernible none the less. Dragons. 'I can make out at least three sets,' she said after a moment.

'More like six, maybe more. Those two sets' – he pointed – 'were the last to leave. Big bastards. Well, that answers the question of who, or what, was capable of subduing the Otataral Dragon. Other dragons, of course. Even so, it could not have been easy.'

'Thir, you said. Can we use it?'

'Oh, I imagine so.'

'Well, what are we waiting for?'

He shrugged. 'Follow me, then.'

Staying close, she fell in step behind him.

They strode through the gate.

And stumbled into a realm of gold fire.
Wild storms on all horizons, a raging, blinding sky.

They stood on a scorched patch of glittering crystals, the past passage of immense heat having burnished the sharp-edged stones with myriad colours. Other such patches were visible here and there.

Immediately before them rose a pillar, shaped like an elongated pyramid, withered and baked, with only the surface facing them dressed smooth. Words in an unknown language had been carved on it.

The air was searing in Lostara’s lungs, and she was sodden with sweat.

But it was, for the moment, survivable.

Pearl walked up to the pillar.

'Ve have to get out of here!' Lostara shouted.

The firestorms were deafening, but she was certain he heard her, and chose to ignore it.

Lostara rarely tolerated being ignored. She strode after him. 'Listen to me!'

'Names! He spun to her. 'The names! The ones who imprisoned the Otataral Dragon! They’re all here!'

A growing roar caught her attention, and she turned to face right – to see a wall of flame rolling towards them. 'Pearl!'

He looked, visibly blanched. Stepped back – and his foot skidded out from beneath him, dropping him hard onto his backside. Blankly, he reached down under him, and when he brought his gloved hand back up, it was slick with blood.

'Did you—'

'No!' He clambered upright – and now they both saw the blood-trail, cutting crossways over the patch, vanishing into the flames on the other side.

'Something's in trouble!' Pearl said.

'So are we if we don’t get moving!'

The firestorm now filled half the sky – the heat—

He grasped her arm and they plunged around the pillar—

—into a glittering cavern. Where blood had sprayed, gouted out to paint walls and ceiling, and where the shattered pieces of a desiccated warrior lay almost at their feet.

A T’lan Imass.

Lostara stared down at it. Rotted wolf fur the colour of the desert, a broken bone-hafted double-bladed axe of reddish-brown flint almost entirely obscured beneath a pool of blood. Whatever it had attacked had struck back. The warrior’s chest was crushed flat. Both arms had been torn off at the shoulders. And the T’lan Imass had been decapitated. A moment’s search found the head, lying off to one side.

'Pearl – let’s get out of here.'

He nodded. Then hesitated.

'Now what?'

'Your favourite question,' he muttered. Then he scrambled over to collect the severed head. Faced her once more. 'All right. Let’s go.'

The strange cave blurred, then vanished.
And they were standing on a sun-bleached rock shelf, overlooking a stony basin that had once known a stream.

Pearl grinned over at her. 'Home.' He held up the ghastly head before him and spoke to it. 'I know you can hear me, T'lan Imass. I'll find for you the crotch of a tree for your final resting place, provided I get some answers.'

The warrior's reply was strangely echoing, the voice thick and halting. 'What is it you wish to know?'

Pearl smiled. 'That's better. First off, your name.'

'Olar Shayn, of the Logros T'lan Imass. Of Ibra Gholan's clan. Born in the Year of the Two-Headed Snake—'

'Olar Shayn. What in Hood's name were you doing in that warren? Who were you trying to kill?'

'We did not try; we succeeded. The wounds delivered were mortal. It will die, and my kin pursue to witness.'

'It? What, precisely?'

'A false god. I know no more than that. I was commanded to kill it. Now, find for me a worthy place of rest, mortal.'

'I will. As soon as I find a tree.'

Lostara wiped sweat from her brow, then went over to sit on a boulder. 'It doesn't need a tree, Pearl,' she said, sighing. 'This ledge should do.'

The Claw swung the severed head so that it faced the basin and the vista beyond. 'Is this pleasing enough, Olar Shayn?'

'It is. Tell me your name, and you shall know my eternal gratitude.'

' Eternal? I suppose that's not an exaggeration either, is it? Well, I am Pearl, and my redoubtable companion is Lostara Yil. Now, let's find a secure place for you, shall we?'

'Your kindness is unexpected, Pearl.'

'Always is and always will be,' he replied, scanning the ledge.

Lostara stared at her companion, surprised at how thoroughly her sentiments matched those of the T'lan Imass. 'Pearl, do you know precisely where we are?'

He shrugged. 'First things first, lass. I'd appreciate it if you allowed me to savour my merciful moment. Ah! Here's the spot, Olar Shayn!'

Lostara closed her eyes. From ashes and dust... to sand. At least it was home. Now, all that remained was finding the trail of a Malazan lass who vanished months ago. 'Nothing to it,' she whispered.

'Did you say something, lass?'

She opened her eyes and studied him where he crouched anchoring stones around the undead warrior's severed head. 'You don't know where we are, do you?'

He smiled. 'Is this a time, do you think, for some creative conjecture?'

Thoughts of murder flashed through her, not for the first time.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It is not unusual to see the warrens of Meanas and Rashan as the closest of kin. Yet are not the games of illusion and shadow games of light? At some point, therefore, the notion of distinctions between these warrens ceases to have meaning. Meanas, Rashan and Thyr. Only the most fanatic of practitioners among these warrens would object to this. The aspect all three share is ambivalence; their games the games of ambiguity. All is deceit, all is deception. Among them, nothing – nothing at all – is as it seems.

A Preliminary Analysis of the Warrens
Konoralandas

Fifteen hundred desert warriors had assembled at the southern edge of the ruined city, their white horses ghostly through the clouds of amber dust, the glint of chain vests and scaled hauberks flashing dully every now and then from beneath golden telabas. Five hundred spare mounts accompanied the raiders.

Korbolo Dom stood near Sha'ik and Ghost Hands atop a weathered platform that had once been the foundation of a temple or public building of some sort, allowing them a clear view of the assembling warriors.

The Napan renegade watched, expressionless, as Leoman of the Flails rode up for a last word with the Chosen One. He himself would not bother with any false blessings, for he would much prefer that Leoman never return. And if he must, then not in triumph in any case. And though his scarred face revealed nothing, he well knew that Leoman entertained no delusions about Korbolo's feelings for him.

They were allies only in so far as they both served Sha'ik. And even that was far less certain than it might have outwardly seemed. Nor did the Malazan believe that the Chosen One was deluded as to the spite and enmity that existed between her generals. Her ignorance existed solely in the plans that were slowly, incrementally settling into place to achieve her own demise. Of that Korbolo was certain.

Else she would have acted long before now.

Leoman reined in before the platform. 'Chosen One! We set out now, and when we return we shall bring you word of the Malazan army. Their disposition. Their rate of march—'

'But not,' Sha'ik cut in sternly, 'their mettle. No engagements, Leoman. The first blooding of her army will be here. By my hand.'

Mouth pressing into a thin line, Leoman nodded, then he said, 'Tribes will have conducted raids on them, Chosen One. Likely beginning a league beyond the walls of Aren. They will have already been blooded—'

'I cannot see such minor exchanges as making a difference either way,' Sha'ik replied. 'Those tribes are sending their warriors here – they arrive daily. Your forces would be the largest she would have to face – and I will not have that. Do not argue this point again, Leoman, else I forbid you to leave Raraku!'

'As you say, Chosen One,' Leoman grunted. His startling blue eyes fixed on Ghost Hands. 'If you require anything, old man, seek out Mathok.'

Korbolo's brows rose.

'An odd thing to say,' Sha'ik commented. 'Ghost Hands is under my protection, after all.'

'Minor requirements only, of course,' Leoman said, 'such as might prove distracting, Chosen One. You have an army to ready, after all—'

'A task,' Korbolo cut in, 'which the Chosen One has entrusted in me, Leoman.'

The desert warrior simply smiled. Then he collected his reins. 'May the Whirlwind guard you, Chosen One.'
'And you, Leoman.'

The man rode back to his waiting horse warriors.

_May your bones grow white and light as feathers, Leoman of the Flails._ Korbolo swung to Sha'ik. 'He will disobey you, Chosen One.'

'Of course he will.'

The Napan blinked, then his gaze narrowed. 'Then it would be madness to yield the wall of sand to him.'

She faced him, her eyes questioning. 'Do you fear the Adjunct's army, then? Have you not said to me again and again how superior you have made our forces? In discipline, in ferocity? This is not Onearm's Host you will be facing. It is a shaky mass of recruits, and even should they have known hardening in a minor engagement or two, what chance have they against your Dogslayers? As for the Adjunct... leave her to me. Thus, what Leoman does with his fifteen hundred desert wolves is, in truth, without relevance. Or are you now revising all your opinions, Korbolo Dom?'

'Of course not, Chosen One. But a wolf like Leoman should remain leashed.'

'Leashed? The word you'd rather have used is _killed_. Not a wolf, but a mad dog. Well, he shall not be killed, and if indeed he is a mad dog then where better to send him than against the Adjunct?'

'You are wiser in these ways than I, Chosen One.'

Ghost Hands snorted at that, and even Sha'ik smiled. The blood was suddenly hot in Korbolo's face.

'Febryl awaits you in your tent,' Sha'ik said. 'He grows impatient with your lateness, Korbolo Dom. You need not remain here any longer.'

From heat to ice. The Malazan did not trust himself to speak, and at the Chosen One's dismissive wave he almost flinched. After a moment, he managed to find his voice, 'I had best find out what he wants, then,' he said.

'No doubt he views it as important,' Sha'ik murmured. 'It is a flaw among ageing men, I think, that brittle self-importance. I advise you to calm him, Korbolo Dom, and so slow his pounding heart.'

'Sound advice, Chosen One.' With a final salute, Korbolo strode to the platform's steps.

Heboric sighed as the Napan's bootsteps faded behind them. 'The poor bastard's been left reeling. Would you panic them into acting, then? With Leoman now gone? And Toblakai as well? Who is there left to trust, lass?'

'I trust? Do you imagine I trust anyone but myself, Heboric? Oh, perhaps Sha'ik Elder knew trust ... in Leoman and Toblakai. But when they look upon me, they see an impostor – I can see that well enough, so do not attempt to argue otherwise.'

'And what about me?' Heboric asked.

'Ah, Ghost Hands, now we come to it, don't we? Very well, I shall speak plain. Do not leave. Do not leave me, Heboric. Not now. That which haunts you can await the conclusion of the battle to come. When that is done, I shall extend the power of the Whirlwind – back to the very edge of the Otataral Isle. Within that warren, your journey will be virtually effortless. Otherwise, wilful as you are, I fear you will not survive the long, long walk.'

He looked at her, though the effort earned him little more than a blur where she stood, enfolded in her white telaba. 'Is there anything you do not know about, lass?'

'Alas, far too much, I suspect. L'oric, for example. A true mystery, there. He seems able to fend off even the Whirlwind's Elder magic, evading my every effort to discern his soul. And yet he has revealed much to you, I think.'
'In confidence, Chosen One. I am sorry. All I can offer you is this: L'oric is not your enemy.'

'Well, that means more to me than you perhaps realize. Not my enemy. Does that make him my ally, then?'

Heboric said nothing.

After a moment, Sha'ik sighed. 'Very well. He remains a mystery, then, in the most important of details. What can you tell me of Bidithal's explorations of his old warren? Rashan.'

He cocked his head. 'Well, the answer to that, Chosen One, depends in part on your own knowledge. Of the goddess's warren – your Elder warren fragment that is the Whirlwind.'

'Kurald Emurlahn.'

He nodded. 'Indeed. And what do you know of the events that saw it torn apart?'

'Little, except that its true rulers had ceased to exist, thus leaving it vulnerable. The relevant fact is this, however: the Whirlwind is the largest fragment in this realm. And its power is growing. Bidithal would see himself as its first – and its penultimate – High Priest. What he does not understand is that there is no such role to be taken. I am the High Priestess. I am the Chosen One. I am the single mortal manifestation of the Whirlwind Goddess. Bidithal would enfold Rashan into the Whirlwind, or, conversely, use the Whirlwind to cleanse the Shadow Realm of its false rulers.' She paused, and Heboric sensed her shrug. 'Those false rulers once commanded the Malazan Empire. Thus. We are all here, preparing for a singular confrontation. Yet what each of us seeks from that battle is at odds. The challenge, then, is to cajole all those disparate motives into one, mutually triumphant effect.'

'That,' Heboric breathed, 'is quite a challenge, lass.'

'And so I need you, Ghost Hands. I need the secret you possess—'

'Of L'oric I can say nothing—'

'Not that secret, old man. No, the secret I seek lies in your hands.'

He started. 'My hands?'

'That giant of jade you touched – it is defeating the otataral. Destroying it. I need to discover how. I need an answer to otataral, Heboric.'

'But Kurald Emurlahn is Elder, Sha'ik – the Adjunct's sword—'

'Will annihilate the advantage I possess in my High Mages. Think! She knows she can't negate the Whirlwind with her sword ... so she will not even try! No, instead she will challenge my High Mages. Remove them from the field. She will seek to isolate me—'

'But if she cannot defeat the Whirlwind, what does that matter?'

'Because the Whirlwind, in turn, cannot defeat her!'

Heboric was silent. He had not heard this before, but after a moment's thought, it began to make sense. Kurald Emurlahn might be Elder, but it was also in pieces. Weakened, riven through with Rashan – a warren that was indeed vulnerable to the effects of otataral. The power of the Adjunct's sword and that of Sha'ik's Whirlwind Goddess would effectively cancel each other out.

Leaving the outcome in the hands of the armies themselves. And there, the otataral would cut through the sorcery of the High Mages. In turn leaving it all to Korbolo Dom. And Korbolo knows it, and he has his own ambitions. Gods, lass, what a mess. 'Alas, Chosen One,' he muttered, 'I cannot help you, for I do not know why the otataral in me is failing. I have, however, a warning. The power of the jade giant is not one to be manipulated. Not by me, nor by you. If the Whirlwind Goddess seeks to usurp it, she will do more than suffer in the attempt – she will likely get obliterated.'
'Then we must win knowledge without yielding an opportunity.'

'And how in Hood's name do you propose achieving that?'

'I would you give me the answer to that, Heboric.'

Me? 'Then we are lost. I have no control over that alien power. I have no understanding of it at all!'

'Perhaps not yet,' she replied, with a chilling confidence in her voice. 'But you grow ever closer, Heboric. Every time you partake of hen'bara tea.'

*The tea? That which you gave me so that I might escape my nightmares? Calling upon Sha'ik Elders knowledge of the desert, you said. A gift of compassion, I thought. A gift...* He felt something crumbling inside him. *A fortress in the desert of my heart, I should have known it would be a fortress of sand.*

He swung away, made insensate by layer upon layer of blindness. Numbed to the outside world, to whatever Sha'ik was now saying, to the brutal heat of the sun overhead.

Stay?

He felt no longer able to leave.

*Chains. She has made for me a house of chains...*

Felisin Younger came to the edge of the pit and looked down. The sun had left the floor, leaving naught but darkness below. There was no glimmer of hearthlight, confirming that no-one had come to take up residence in Leoman's abode.

A scraping sound nearby made her turn. Toblakai's once-slavemaster had crawled into view around a wall foundation. His sun-bluistered skin was caked in dust and excrement, the stumps at the ends of his arms and legs weeping a yellow, opaque liquid. The first signs of leprosy marred his joints at elbow and knee. Red-rimmed eyes fixed on Felisin and the man offered a blackened smile. 'Ah, child. See me your humble servant. Mathok's warrior—'

'What do you know of that?' she demanded.

The smile broadened. 'I bring word. See me your humble servant. Everyone's humble servant. I have lost my name, did you know that? I knew it once, but it has fled me. My mind. But I do what I am told. I bring word. Mathok's warrior. He cannot meet you here. He would not be seen. You understand? There, across the plaza, in the sunken ruin. He awaits.'

Well, she considered, the secrecy made sense. Their escape from the camp demanded it, although Heboric Ghost Hands was by far the one most likely to be under surveillance. And he had gone into his tent days ago and refused all visitors. Even so, she appreciated Mathok's caution.

Though she had not known that Toblakai's slavemaster was a part of their conspiracy. 'The sunken temple?'

'Yes, there. See me your humble servant. Go. He awaits.'

She set out across the flagstoned plaza. Hundreds of the camp's destitute had settled here, beneath palm-frond shelters, making no efforts at organization — the expanse reeked of piss and faeces, streams of the foul mess flowing across the stones. Hacking coughs, mumbled entreaties and blessings followed her as she made her way towards the ruin.

The temple's foundation walls were hip high; within, a steep set of stone stairs led down to the subterranean floor. The sun's angle had dipped sufficiently to render the area below in darkness.

Felisin halted at the top of the stairs and peered down, seeking to penetrate the gloom. 'Are you there?' she called.
A faint sound from the far end. The hint of movement.

She descended.

The sandy floor was still warm. Groping, she edged forward.

Less than ten paces from the back wall and she could finally make him out. He was seated with his back to the stone. The gleam of a helm, scale armour on his chest.

'We should wait for night,' Felisin said, approaching. 'Then make our way to Ghost Hands's tent. The time has come – he can hide no longer. What is your name?'

There was no reply.

Something black and smothering rose up to clamp over her mouth, and she was lifted from the ground. The blackness flowed like serpents around her, pinning her arms and binding her thrashing legs. A moment later she hung motionless, suspended slightly above the sandy floor.

A gnarled fingertip brushed her cheek and her eyes widened as a voice whispered in her ear. 'Sweetest child. Mathok's fierce warrior felt Rashan's caress a short while ago, alas. Now, there is only me. Only humble Bidithal, here to welcome you. Here to drink all pleasure from your precious body, leaving naught but bitterness, naught but dead places within. It is necessary, you understand.' His wrinkled hands were stroking, plucking, pinching, pawing her. 'I take no unsavoury pleasure in what I must do. The children of the Whirlwind must be riven barren, child, to make of them perfect reflections of the goddess herself – oh, you did not know that, did you? The goddess cannot create. Only destroy. The source of her fury, no doubt. So it must be with her children. My duty. My task. There is naught for you to do now but surrender.'

Surrender. It had been a long time since she had last been made to surrender, to give away all that was within her. A long time since she'd let darkness devour all that she was. Years ago, she had not known the magnitude of the loss, for there had been nothing to offer a contrast to misery, hunger and abuse.

But all that had changed. She had discovered, under Sha'ik's protective wing, the notion of inviolacy.

And it was that notion that Bidithal now proceeded to destroy.

Lying on the landing at the top of the stairs, the creature that had once been a slavemaster on Genabackis smiled at Bidithal's words, then the smile grew wider at her muffled cries.

Karsa Orlong's favoured child was in the hands of that sick old man. And all that would be done to her could not be undone.

The sick old man had been kindly with his offers of gifts. Not just the impending return of his hands and feet, but the promise of vengeance against the Teblor. He would find his name once more. He knew he would. And with it, the confusion would go away, the hours of blind terror would no longer plague him, and the beatings at the hands of the others in this plaza would cease. It would have to, for he would be their master.

They would pay for what they did. Everyone would pay. As soon as he found his name.

There was weeping now. Despair's own laughter, those racking heaves.

That lass would no longer look upon him with disgust. How could she? She was now like him. It was a good lesson. Viciously delivered – even the slavemaster could see that, could imagine it at least, and wince at the images he conjured in his head. But still, a good lesson.

Time to leave – footsteps approached from below. He slithered back into the daylight, and the sound he made over the gravel, potsherds and sand was strangely reminiscent of chains. Chains dragging in his wake.

Though there had been none to witness it, a strange glow had suffused L'oric's tent shortly after noon.
Momentary, then all was normal once more.

Now, as dusk finally approached, a second flare of light burgeoned briefly then died away, again unnoticed.

The High Mage staggered through the warren’s impromptu, momentary gate. He was drenched in blood. He stumbled with his burden across the hide-covered floor, then sank to his knees, dragging the misshapen beast into his arms, a single red hand pulling free to stroke its thick, matted hair.

Its whimpers of pain had ceased. Mercifully, for each soft cry had broken anew L’oric’s heart.

The High Mage slowly lowered his head, finally stricken with the grief he had been forced to hold back during his desperate, ineffectual efforts to save the ancient demon. He was filled with self-loathing, and he cursed his own complacency. Too long separated, too long proceeding as if the other realms held no danger to them.

And now his familiar was dead, and the mirrored dead-ness inside him seemed vast. And growing, devouring his soul as sickness does healthy flesh. He was without strength, for the rage had abated.

He stroked the beast’s blood-caked face, wondering anew at how its ugliness – now so still and free of pain – could nevertheless trigger depthless wellsprings of love from him. ‘Ah, my friend, we were more of a kind than either of us knew. No ... you knew, didn’t you? Thus the eternal sorrow in your eyes, which I saw but chose to ignore, each time I visited. I was so certain of the deceit, you see. So confident that we could go on, undetected, maintaining the illusion that our father was still with us. I was ...’ He crumpled then and could speak no further for a time.

The failure had been his, and his alone. He was here, ensnaring himself in these paltry games, when he should have been guarding his familiar’s back – as it had done for him for century upon century.

Oh, it had been close in any case – one less T’lan Imass, and the outcome might have proved different – no, now you lie to yourself, L’oric. That first axe-blow had done the damage, had delivered the fatal wound. All that transpired thereafter was born of dying rage. Oh, my beloved was no weakling, and the wielder of that stone axe paid for his ambush. And know this, my friend, I left the second one scattered through the fires. Only the clan leader escaped me. But I will hunt him down. This I swear.

But not yet. He forced clarity into his thoughts, as the weight of the familiar where it lay against his thighs slowly diminished, its very substance ebbing away. Kurald Thyrllan was undefended, now. How the T’lan Imass had managed to penetrate the warren remained a mystery, but they had done so, completing the task they had set out to do with their legendary brutality.

Would the Liosan have sensed the death? Perhaps only the seneschals, at first. Would they speak of it to the others? Not if they pause, for even a moment, and think about it. Of course, they had been the victims of the deceit all along. Osric had vanished – their god was gone – and Kurald Thyrllan was ripe for usurpation. And, eventually, those seneschals would realize that, had it truly been Osric behind the power that answered their prayers, then three T’lan Imass warriors would not have been enough – not nearly enough. My father is many things, but weak does not count among them.

The withered, bird-sized thing that had been his familiar slipped down to the tent floor. L’oric stared at it, then slowly wrapped himself in his own arms. I need ... I need help. Father’s companions. Which one? Anomander Rake? No. A companion, yes, on occasion, but never Osric’s friend. Lady Envy? Gods, no! Caladan Brood ... but he carries his own burdens, these days. Thus, but one left...

L’oric closed his eyes, and called upon the Queen of Dreams. ‘By your true name, T’riss, I would speak with you. In Osric my father’s name, hear my prayer ...’

A scene slowly formed in his mind, a place unfamiliar to him. A formal garden, high-walled, with a circular pool in the centre. Marble benches waited beneath the shadows of the surrounding growth. The flagstones around the pool were rippled with fine, white sand.

He found himself approaching the pool, staring down into the mirrored surface.
Where swam stars in inky blackness.

'The resemblance is there.'

He turned at the liquid voice, to see a woman now seated on the pool's edge. She looked to be no more than twenty, her hair copper-gold and long. A heart-shaped face, pale, the eyes a light grey. She was not looking at him, her languid gaze on the pool's unmarred surface instead. 'Although,' she added, with a faint smile, 'you have done well to hide your Liosan traits.'

'We are skilled in such things, Queen of Dreams.'

She nodded, still not meeting his eyes. 'As are all the Tiste. Anomander once spent almost two centuries in the guise of a royal bodyguard . . . human, in the manner you have achieved.'

'Mistress,' L'oric said, 'my father—'

'Sleeps. We all long ago made our choices, L'oric. Behind us, our paths stretch, long and worn deep. There is bitter paths in the prospect of retracing them. Yet, for those of us who remain ... awake, it seems we do nothing but just that. An endless retracing of paths, yet each step we take is forward, for the path has proved itself to be a circle. Yet – and here is the true pathos – the knowledge never slows our steps.'

""Wide-eyed stupid", the Malazans say.'

'Somewhat rough-edged, but accurate enough,' she replied. She reached a long-fingered hand down to the water.

L'oric watched it vanish beneath the surface, but it was the scene around them that seemed to waken, a faint turbulence, the hint of ripples. 'Queen of Dreams, Kurald Thyrllan has lost its protector.'

'Yes. Tellann and Thyr were ever close, and now more than ever.'

A strange statement... that he would have to think on later. 'I cannot do it alone—'

'No, you cannot. Your own path is about to become fraught, L'oric. And so you have come to me, in the hopes that I will find a suitable ... protector.'

'Yes.'

'Your desperation urges you to trust ... where no trust has been earned—'

'You were my father's friend!'

'Friend? L'oric, we were too powerful to know friendship. Our endeavours far too fierce. Our war was with chaos itself, and, at times, with each other. We battled to shape all that would follow. And some of us lost that battle. Do not misapprehend, I held no deep enmity for your father. Rather, he was as unfathomable as the rest of us – a bemusement we all shared, perhaps the only thing we shared.'

'You will not help?'

'I did not say that.'

He waited.

She continued holding her hand beneath the pool's placid surface, had yet to lift her head and meet his eyes. 'This will take some time,' she murmured. 'The present ... vulnerability ... will exist in the interval. I have someone in mind, but the shaping towards the opportunity remains distant. Nor do I think my choice will please you. In the meantime...'

'Yes?'

She shrugged. 'We had best hope that potentially interested entities remain suitably distracted.'
He saw her expression suddenly change, and when she spoke again the tone was urgent. 'Return to your realm, L'oric! Another circle has been closed – terribly closed.' She drew her hand from the pool.

L'oric gasped.

It was covered in blood.

His eyes snapped open, and he was kneeling in his tent once more. Night had arrived, and the sounds outside were muted, peaceful, a city settling down to its evening meal. Yet, he knew, something horrible had happened. He went still, questing outward. His powers – so weakened, so tremulous – 'Gods below!' A swirl of violence, knotted upon itself, radiating waves of agony – a figure, small, twisted inward, in shredded clothes soaked through with blood, crawling through darkness.

L'oric lurched to his feet, head spinning with anguish.

Then he was outside, and suddenly running.

He found her trail, a smeared track through sand and dust, out beyond the ruins, into the petrified forest. Towards, he knew instinctively, the sacred glade that had been fashioned by Toblakai.

But there would be no succour for her there. Another abode of false gods. And Toblakai was gone, off to cross blades with his own fate.

But she was without clear thought. She was only pain, lancing out to fire instincts of flight. She crawled as would any dying creature.

He saw her at the edge of the glade, small, bedraggled, pulling herself forward in torturous increments.

L'oric reached her side, a hand reaching to settle at the back of her head, onto sweat-snarled hair. She flinched away with a squeal, fingers clawing against his arm. 'Felisin! He's gone! It is L'oric. You are safe with me. Safe, now—'

But still she sought to escape.

'I shall call upon Sha'ik—'

'No!' she shrieked, curling tight on the sand. 'No! She needs him! She needs him still!' Her words were blunted by broken lips but understandable none the less.

L'oric sank back, struck mute by the horror. Not simply a wounded creature, then. A mind clear enough to weigh, to calculate, to put itself aside ... 'She will know, lass – she can't help but know.'

'No! Not if you help me. Help me, L'oric. Just you – not even Heboric! He would seek to kill Bidithal, and that cannot be.'

'Heboric? I want to kill Bidithal!' 'You mustn't. You can't. He has power—'

He saw the shudder run through her at that.

L'oric hesitated, then said, 'I have healing salves, elixirs ... but you will need to stay hidden for a time.'

'Here, in Toblakai's temple. Here, L'oric.'

'I will bring water. A tent.'

'Yes!' The rage that burned in him had contracted down to a white-hot core. He struggled to control it, his resolve sporadically weakened by doubts that he was doing the right thing. This was ... monstrous. There would be an answer to it. There would have to be an answer to it.
Even more monstrous, he realized with a chill, they had all known the risk. We knew he wanted her. Yet we did nothing.

Heboric lay motionless in the darkness. He had a faint sense of being hungry, thirsty, but it remained remote. Hen’bara tea, in sufficient amounts, pushed the needs of the outer world away. Or so he had discovered.

His mind was floating on a swirling sea, and it seemed eternal. He was waiting, still waiting. Sha’ik wanted truths. She would get them. And then he was done, done with her.

And probably done with life, as well.

So be it. He had grown older than he had ever expected to, and these extra weeks and months had proved anything but worth the effort. He had sentenced his own god to death, and now Fener would not be there to greet him when he finally stepped free of his flesh and bones. Nor would Hood, come to that.

It did not seem he would awaken from this – he had drunk far more of the tea than he ever had before, and he had drunk it scalding hot, when it was most potent. And now he floated on a dark sea, an invisible liquid warm on his skin, barely holding him up, flowing over his limbs and chest, around his face.

The giant of jade was welcome to him. To his soul, and to whatever was left of his days as a mortal man. The old gifts of preternatural vision had long vanished, the visions of secrets hidden from most eyes – secrets of antiquity, of history – were long gone. He was old. He was blind.

The waters slipped over his face.

And he felt himself sliding down – amidst a sea of stars that swirled in the blackness yet were sharp with sudden clarity. In what seemed a vast distance, duller spheres swam, clustering about the fiery stars, and realization struck him a hammer blow. The stars, they are as the sun. Each star. Every star. And those spheres – they are worlds, realms, each one different yet the same.

The Abyss was not as empty as he’d believed it to be. But . . . where dwell the gods? These worlds — are they warrens? Or are the warrens simply passageways connecting them?

A new object, growing in his vision as it drifted nearer. A glimmer of murky green, stiff-limbed, yet strangely contorted, torso twisted as if caught in the act of turning. Naked, spinning end over end, starlight playing across its jade surface like beads of rain.

And behind it, another, this one broken – a leg and an arm snapped clean off yet accompanying the rest in its silent, almost peaceful sailing through the void.

Then another.

The first giant cartwheeled past Heboric, and he felt he could simply extend a hand to brush its supple surface as it passed, but he knew it was in truth far too distant for that. Its face came into view. Too perfect for human, the eyes open, an expression too ambiguous to read, though Heboric thought he detected resignation within it.

There were scores now, all emerging from what seemed a single point in the inky depths. Each one displaying a unique posture; some so battered as to be little more than a host of fragments and shards, others entirely unmarred. Sailing out of the blackness. An army.

Yet unarmed. Naked, seemingly sexless. There was a perfection to them – their proportions, their flawless surfaces – that suggested to the ex-priest that the giants could never have been alive. They were constructs, statues in truth, though no two were alike in posture or expression.

Bemused, he watched them spin past. It occurred to him that he could turn, to see if they simply dwindled down to another point far behind him, as if he but lay alongside an eternal river of green stone.

His own motion was effortless.
As he swung round, he saw—
—and cried out.

A cry that made no sound.

A vast – impossibly vast – red-limned wound cut across the blackness, suppurating flames along its ragged edges. Grey storms of chaos spiralled out in lancing tendrils.

And the giants descended into its maw. One after another. To vanish. Revelation filled his mind.

*Thus, the Crippled God was brought down to our world. Through this . . . this terrible puncture. And these giants . . . follow. Like an army behind its commander.*

*Or an army in pursuit.*

Were all of the jade giants appearing somewhere in his own realm? That seemed impossible. They would be present in countless locations, if that was the case. Present, and inescapably visible. No, the wound was enormous, the giants diminishing into specks before reaching its waiting oblivion. A wound such as that could swallow thousands of worlds. Tens, hundreds of thousands.

Perhaps all he witnessed here was but hallucination, the creation of a hen’bara-induced fever.

Yet the clarity was almost painful, the vision so brutally ... strange ... that he believed it to be true, or at the very least the product of what his mind could comprehend, could give shape to – statues and wounds, storms and bleeding, an eternal sea of stars and worlds ...

A moment’s concentration and he was turning about once more. To face that endless progression.

And then he was moving towards the nearest giant.

It was naught but torso and head, its limbs shorn off and spinning in its wake.

The mass burgeoned swiftly before him, too fast, too huge. Sudden panic gripped Heboric. He could see *into* that body, as if the world within the jade was scaled to his own. The evidence of that was terrible – and horrifying.

Figures. Bodies like his own. Humans, thousands upon thousands, all trapped within the statue. Trapped ... and screaming, their faces twisted in terror.

A multitude of those faces suddenly swung to him. Mouths opened in silent cries – of warning, or hunger, or fear – there was no way to tell. If they screamed, no sound reached him.

Heboric added his own silent shriek and desperately willed himself to one side, out of the statue’s path. For he thought he understood, now – they were prisoners, ensnared within the stone flesh, trapped in some unknown torment.

Then he was past, flung about in the turbulent wake of the broken body’s passage. Spinning end over end, he caught a flash of more jade, directly in front of him.

A hand.

A finger, plunging down as if to crush him.

He screamed as it struck.

He felt no contact, but the blackness simply vanished, and the sea was emerald green, cold as death.

And Heboric found himself amidst a crowd of writhing, howling figures.

The sound was deafening. There was no room to move – his limbs were trapped against him. He could not breathe.
A prisoner.

There were voices roaring through his skull. Too many, in languages he could not recognize, much less comprehend. Like storm-waves crashing on a shore, the sound hammered through him, surging and falling, the rhythm quickening as a faint reddish gleam began to stain the green. He could not turn, but did not need to, to know that the wound was moments from swallowing them all.

Then a string of words reached through the tumult, close as if whispered in his ear, and he understood them.

‘You came from there. What shall we find, Handless One? What lies beyond the gash?’

Then another voice spoke, louder, more imperious: ‘What god now owns your hands, old man? Tell me! Even their ghosts are not here – who is holding on to you? Tell me!’

‘There are no gods,’ a third voice cut in, this one female.

‘So you say!’ came yet another, filled with spite. ‘In your empty, barren, miserable world!’

‘Gods are born of belief, and belief is dead. We murdered it, with our vast intelligence. You were too primitive—’

‘Killing gods is not hard. The easiest murder of all. Nor is it a measure of intelligence. Not even of civilization. Indeed, the indifference with which such death-blows are delivered is its own form of ignorance.’

‘More like forgetfulness. After all, it’s not the gods that are important, it is the stepping outside of oneself that gifts a mortal with virtue—’

‘Kneel before Order? You blind fool—’

‘Order? I was speaking of compassion—’

‘Fine, then go ahead! Step outside yourself, Leandris! No, better yet. Step outside.’

‘Only the new one can do that, Cassa. And he’d better be quick about it.’

Twisting, Heboric managed to look down, to catch a glimpse of his left forearm, the wrist, the hand – that was not there. A god. A god has taken them. I was blind to that – the jade’s ghost hands made me blind to that —

He tilted his head back, as the screams and shrieks suddenly rose higher, deafening, mind-numbing. The world turned red, the red of blood—


Darkness.

Heboric opened his eyes. Saw above him the colourless canvas of his tent. The air was cold.

A barely human sound escaped him, and he rolled onto his side beneath the blankets, curling tight into a ball. Shivers thrummed through him.

A god. A god has found me.

But which god?

It was night, perhaps only a bell from dawn. The camp outside was silent, barring the distant, sorrow-filled howls of desert wolves.

After a while, Heboric stirred once more. The dung fire was out. No lanterns had been lit. He drew aside the blankets and slowly sat up.

Then stared down at his hands, disbelieving.
They remained ghostly, but the otataral was gone. The power of the jade remained, pulsing dully. Yet now there were slashes of black through it. Lurid – almost liquid – barbs banded the backs of his hands, then tracked upward, shifting angle as they continued up his forearms.

His tattoos had been transformed.

And, in this deepest darkness, he could see. Unhumanly sharp, every detail crisp as if it was day outside.

His head snapped round at a sound and a motion – but it was simply a rhizan, alighting light as a leaf on the tent roof.

A rhizan! On the tent roof?

Heboric’s stomach rumbled in sudden hunger.

He looked down at his tattoos once more. I have found a new god. Not that I was seeking one. And I know who. What.

Bitterness filled him. ‘In need of a Destriant, Treach? So you simply ... took one. Stole from him his own life. Granted, not much of a life, but still, I owned it. Is this how you recruit followers? Servants? By the Abyss, Treach, you have a lot to learn about mortals.’

The anger faded. There had been gifts, after all. An exchange of sorts. He was no longer blind. Even more extraordinary, he could actually hear the sounds of neighbours sleeping in their tents and yurts.

And there, faint on the near-motionless air ... the smell of ... violence. But it was distant. The blood had been spilled some time earlier in the night. Some domestic dispute, probably. He would have to teach himself to filter out much of what his newly enlivened senses told him.

Heboric grunted under his breath, then scowled. ‘All right, Treach. It seems we both have some learning to do. But first ... something to eat. And drink.’

When he rose from his sleeping mat, the motion was startlingly fluid, though it was some time before Heboric finally noted the absence of aches, twinges, and the dull throb of his joints.

He was far too busy filling his belly.

Forgotten, the mysteries of the jade giants, the innumerable imprisoned souls within them, the ragged wound in the Abyss.

Forgotten, as well, that faint blood-scented tremor of distant violence ...

The burgeoning of some senses perforce took away from others. Leaving him blissfully unaware of his newfound singlemindedness. Two truths he had long known did not, for some time, emerge to trouble him.

No gifts were truly clean in the giving.

And nature ever strives for balance. But balance was not a simple notion. Redress was not simply found in the physical world. A far grimmer equilibrium had occurred ... between the past and the present.

Felisin Younger’s eyes fluttered open. She had slept, but upon awakening discovered that the pain had not gone away, and the horror of what he had done to her remained as well, though it had grown strangely cold in her mind.

Into her limited range of vision, close to the sand, a serpent slipped into view directly in front of her face. Then she realized what had awoken her – there were more snakes, slithering over her body. Scores of them.

Toblakai’s glade. She remembered now. She had crawled here. And L’oric had found her, only to set off once again. To bring medicine, water, bedding, a tent. He had not yet returned.
Apart from the whispering slither of the snakes, the glade was silent. In this forest, the branches did not move. There were no leaves to flutter in the cool, faint wind. Dried blood in folds of skin stung as she slowly sat up. Sharp pains flared beneath her belly, and the raw wound where he had cut flesh away – there, between her legs – burned fiercely.

'I shall bring this ritual to our people, child, when I am the Whirlwind’s High Priest. All girls shall know this, in my newly shaped world. The pain shall pass. All sensation shall pass. You are to feel nothing, for pleasure does not belong in the mortal realm. Pleasure is the darkest path, for it leads to the loss of control. And we mustn’t have that. Not among our women. Now, you shall join the rest, those I have already corrected...'

Two such girls had arrived, then, bearing the cutting instruments. They had murmured encouragement to her, and words of welcome. Again and again, in pious tones, they had spoken of the virtues that came of the wounding. Propriety. Loyalty. A leavening of appetites, the withering of desire. All good things, they said to her. Passions were the curse of the world. Indeed, had it not been passions that had enticed her own mother away, that were responsible for her own abandonment? The lure of pleasure had stolen Felisin's mother... away from the duties of motherhood...

Felisin leaned over and spat into the sand. But the taste of their words would not go away. It was not surprising that men could think such things, could do such things. But that women could as well... that was indeed a bitter thing to countenance.

But they were wrong. Walking the wrong trail. Oh, my mother abandoned me, but not for the embrace of some lover. No, it was Hood who embraced her.

Bidithal would be High Priest, would he? The fool. Sha’ik would find a place for him in her temple – or at least a place for his skull. A cup of bone to piss in, perhaps. And that time was not long in coming.

Still... too long. Bidithal takes girls into his arms every night. He makes an army, a legion of the wounded, the bereft. And they will be eager to share out their loss of pleasure. They are human, after all, and it is human nature to transform loss into a virtue. So that it might be lived with, so that it might be justified.

A glimmer of dull light distracted her, and she looked up. The carved faces in the trees around her were glowing. Bleeding grey, sorcerous light. Behind each there was... a presence.

Toblakai’s gods.

'Welcome, broken one.' The voice was the sound of limestone boulders grinding together. 'I am named Ber’ok. Vengeance swarms about you, with such power as to awaken us. We are not displeased with the summons, child.'

'You are Toblakai’s god,' she muttered. 'You have nothing to do with me. Nor do I want you. Go away, Ber’ok. You and the rest – go away.’

'We would ease your pain. I shall make of you my special... responsibility. You seek vengeance? Then you shall have it. The one who has damaged you would take the power of the desert goddess for himself. He would usurp the entire fragment of warren, and twist it into his own nightmare. Oh, child, though you might believe otherwise – now – the wounding is of no matter. The danger lies in Bidithal’s ambition. A knife must be driven into his heart. Would it please you to be that knife?'

She said nothing. There was no way to tell which of the carved faces belonged to Ber’ok, so she could only look from one to the next. A glance to the two fully rendered Toblakai warriors revealed that they possessed no emanation, were grey and lifeless in the pre-dawn darkness.

'Serve us,' Ber’ok murmured, ‘and we in turn shall serve you. Give us your answer quickly – someone comes.'

She noted the wavering lantern light on the trail. L’oric. 'How?' she asked the gods. 'How will you serve me?'

'We shall ensure that Bidithal’s death is in a manner to match his crimes, and that it shall be... timely.'

'And how am I to be the knife?'
'Child,' the god calmly replied, 'you already are.'
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Teblor have long earned their reputation as slayers of children, butchers of the helpless, as mortal demons delivered unto the Nathii in a curse altogether undeserved. The sooner the Teblor are obliterated from their mountain fastnesses the sooner the memory of them will finally begin to fade. Until Teblor is no more than a name used to frighten children, we see our cause as clear and singular.

The Crusade of 1147
Ayed Kourbourn

The wolves loped through the almost luminescent fog, their eyes flashing when they swung their massive heads in his direction. As if he was an elk, struggling through deep snow, the huge beasts kept pace on either side, ghostly, with the implacable patience of the predators they were.

Though it was unlikely these mountain beasts had ever before hunted a Teblor warrior. Karsa had not expected to find snow, particularly since his route took him alongside the north shoulder of the jagged range – it was fortunate that he would not have to climb through any passes. On his right, less than two leagues distant, he could still see the ochre sands of the desert basin, and well knew that down there, the sun blazed hot – the same sun that looked down upon him now, a blurred orb of cold fire.

The snow was shin-deep, slowing his steady jog. Somehow, the wolves managed to run across its wind-hardened, crusty surface, only occasionally plunging a paw through. The fog enshrouding hunters and prey was in fact snow crystals, glittering with bright, blinding light.

Somewhere to the west, Karsa had been told, the range of mountains would end. There would be sea on his right, a narrow rumpled passage of hills ahead and on his left. Across those hills, then southward, there would be a city. Lato Revae. The Teblor had no interest in visiting it, though he would have to skirt it. The sooner he left civilized lands behind, the better. But that was two river crossings distant, with weeks of travel between now and then.

Though he ran alone along the slope, he could feel the presence of his two companions. Ghost spirits at the most, but perhaps nothing more than fractured selves of his own mind. Sceptical Bairoth Gild. Stolid Delum Thord. Facets of his own soul, so that he might persist in this dialogue of self-doubt. Perhaps, then, nothing more than an indulgence.

Or so it would seem, if not for the countless, blood-scoring edges of Bairoth Gild's commentary. At times, Karsa felt as if he was a slave once more, hunched beneath endless flagellation. The notion that he was delivering this to himself was beyond contemplating.

'Not entirely beyond, Warleader, if you'd spare yourself but a moment to regard your own thoughts."

'Not now, Bairoth Gild,' Karsa replied. 'I am running short on breath as it is."

'Altitude, Karsa Orlong,' came Delum Thord's voice. 'Though you do not feel it, with each step westward you are descending. Soon you will leave the snow behind. Raraku may have once been an inland sea, but it was a sea couched in the lap of high mountains. Your entire journey thus far, Warleader, has been a descent."

Karsa could spare that thought only a grunt. He had felt no particular descent, but horizons played deceptive games in this land. The desert and mountains ever lied, he had long since discovered.

'When the snow is gone,' Bairoth Gild murmured, 'the wolves will attack."

'I know. Now be quiet – I see bare rock ahead."

As did his hunters. They numbered at least a dozen, taller at the shoulder than those of Karsa's homeland,
and furred in tones of dun, grey and speckled white. The Teblor watched as four of the beasts sprinted ahead, two on each side, making for the exposed rock.

Growling, Karsa unslung his wooden sword. The bitter cold air had left his hands slightly numb. Had the western end of the Holy Desert held any sources of water, he would not have climbed to these heights, but there was little point in second-guessing that decision now.

The panting breaths of the wolves were audible on either side and behind him.

'They want the sure footing, Warleader. Then again, so do you. Beware the three in your wake – they will strike first, likely a pace or two before you reach the rock.'

Karsa bared his teeth at Bairoth's unnecessary advice. He well knew what these beasts would do, and when.

A sudden thumping of paws, flurries of snow springing into the air, and all the wolves raced past a surprised Karsa. Claws clattered on the bared rock, water spraying from the sun's melt, and the beasts wheeled to form a half-circle before the Teblor.

He slowed his steps, readying his weapon. For once, even Bairoth Gild was silenced – no doubt as uncertain as he himself was.

A rasping, panting stranger's voice hissed through Karsa's mind: 'We enjoyed that, Toblakai. You have run without pause for three nights and almost four days. That we are impressed would be a tragic understatement. We have never before seen the like. See our heaving flanks? You have exhausted us. And look at you — you breathe deep and there is red around your eyes, yet you stand ready, with not a waver in your legs, or from the strange sword in your hands. Will you now do us harm, warrior?'

Karsa shook his head. The language was Malazan. 'You are like a Soletaken, then. But many, not one. This would be... D'ivers? I have killed Soletaken – this fur on my shoulders is proof enough of that, if you doubt me. Attack me if you will, and when I have killed all of you, I will have a cloak even the gods will envy.'

'We are no longer interested in killing you, warrior. Indeed, we accost you now to deliver a warning.'

'What kind of warning?'

'You are on someone's trail.'

Karsa shrugged. 'Two men, both heavy, though one is taller. They walk side by side.'

'Side by side, yes. And what does that tell you?'

'Neither leads, neither follows.'

'Danger rides your shoulders, Toblakai. About you is an air of threat – another reason why we will not cross you. Powers vie for your soul. Too many. Too deadly. But heed our warning: should you cross one of those travellers... the world will come to regret it. The world, warrior.'

Karsa shrugged a second time. 'I am not interested in fighting anyone at the moment, D'ivers. Although, if I am in turn crossed, then I am not the one to answer for whatever regret the world then experiences. Now, I am done with words. Move from my path, or I will kill you all.'

The wolves hesitated. 'Tell them that Ryllandaras sought to dissuade you. Before you make your last living act one that sees this world destroyed.'

He watched them wheel and make their way down the slope.

Bairoth Gild's laugh was a faint thunder in his mind. Karsa nodded. 'None would accept the blame for what has not yet occurred,' he rumbled. 'That, by itself, constitutes a curiously potent warning.'

'You do indeed grow into yourself, Karsa Orlong. What will you do?'
Karsa bared his teeth as he reslung his sword over a fur-clad shoulder. 'Do, Bairoth Gild? Why, I would meet these dire travellers, of course.'

This time, Bairoth Gild did not laugh.

Strains of meltwater flowed over the brittle rock beneath Karsa's moccasins. Ahead, the descent continued into a crowded maze of sandstone mesas, their level tops capped with ice and snow. Despite the bright, mid-afternoon sun in the cloudless sky, the narrow, twisting channels between the mesas remained in deep shadow.

But the snow underfoot had vanished, and already he could feel a new warmth in the air. There seemed but one way down, and it was as much a stream as a trail. Given the lack of signs, the Teblor could only assume that the two strangers ahead of him had taken the same route.

He moved slower now, his legs heavy with fatigue. The truth of his exhaustion had not been something he would reveal to the D'ivers wolves, but that threat was behind him now. He was close to collapse – hardly ideal if he was about to cross blades with a world-destroying demon.

Still his legs carried him forward, as if of their own accord. As if fated.

'And fate, Karsa Orlong, carries its own momentum.'

'Returned at last to hound me once more, Bairoth Gild? At the very least, you should speak words of advice. This Ryllandaras, this D'ivers – portentous words, yes?'

'Absurdly so, Warleader. There are no powers in this world – or any other – that pose such absolute threat. Spoken through the frenzied currents of fear. Likely personal in nature – whoever walks ahead has had dealings with the one named Ryllandaras, and it was the D'ivers who suffered with the meeting.'

'You are probably right, Bairoth Gild. Delum Thord, you have been silent a long while. What are your thoughts?'

'I am troubled, Warleader. The D'ivers was a powerful demon, after all. To take so many shapes, yet remain one. To speak in your mind as would a god . . .'

Karsa grimaced. 'A god... or a pair of ghosts. Not a demon, Delum Thord. We Teblor are too careless with that word. Forkrul Assail. Soletaken. D'ivers. None are demons in truth, for none were summoned to this world, none belong to any other realm but this one. They are in truth no different from us Teblor, or the lowlanders. No different from rhizan and capemoths, from horses and dogs. They are all of this world, Delum Thord.'

'As you say, Warleader. But we Teblor were never simplistic in our use of the word. Demon also refers to behaviour, and in this manner all things can be demonic. The one named Ryllandaras hunted us, and had you not driven it into exhaustion, it would have attacked, despite your words to the contrary.'

Karsa considered, then nodded. 'True enough, Delum Thord. You advise caution. This was always your way, so I am not surprised. I will not ignore your words for that, however.'

'Of course you will, Karsa Orlong.'

A last stretch of sunlight, then the Teblor was in shadow. The run-off swept around his ankles as the track narrowed, the footing growing treacherous. Once more he could see his breath.

A short climb to his left ran a broad ledge of some kind, out of the shadow and looking bone dry. Karsa swung from the trail and clambered up the gully's eroded bank until he was able to pull himself onto it. He straightened. Not a natural ledge after all. A road, running parallel to the gorge as it girdled the first mesa on his left. The wall of the mesa itself seemed to have been smoothed once, long ago, to a height twice Karsa's own. Faint pictographic images were visible on it, pitted and made colourless by passing centuries. A procession of figures, each scaled to that of a lowlander, bareheaded and wearing naught but a loincloth. They held their hands high overhead, fingers stretched out as if clutching at empty air.
The road itself was latticed in cracks, battered by incessant rocks tumbling down from the mesa. Despite this, it seemed as if the road was made of a single piece of stone, though of course that was impossible. Heaved and rumpled, it wound along the curve of the mesa wall then shifted away onto a ramp of sorts, hazy in the distance, that presumably led down to the plain. The horizon directly ahead and to Karsa's right was cut short by towers of stone, though he knew that, beyond them, stretched the waters of the Longshan Sea.

Weariness forced the Teblor to slowly settle on the road, removing his pack and sitting against the mesa's rock wall. The journey had been long, but he knew his path ahead was still longer. And, it seemed, he would ever walk it alone. For these ghosts remain just that. Perhaps, in truth, no more than my mind's own conjuring. A displeasing thought.

He leaned his head back on the rough, sun-warmed stone.

His eyes blinked open – to darkness.

'Awake once more, Warleader? We were wondering if your sleep would prove eternal. There are sounds ahead – can you hear them? Oh, they've travelled far, but that is the way with this land, isn't it? Still . . . stones are being moved, I think. Tossed. Too slow, too regular to be a rockfall. The two strangers, one might conclude.'

Karsa slowly stood, stretching to ease his sore, chilled muscles. He could hear the steady clack of stones striking stone, but Bairoth Gild was right – they were distant. The warrior crouched down beside his pack and removed foodstuffs and a bladder of meltwater.

It was near dawn. Whoever it was working somewhere ahead had begun early.

Karsa took his time breaking his fast, and when he was finally done and ready to resume his journey, the sky was pink to the east. A final examination of the condition of his sword and the fittings on his armour, then he was on the move once again.

The steady clangour of the stones continued through half the morning. The road skirted the mesa for a distance that was longer than he had originally judged, revealing the ramp ahead to be massive, its sides sheer, the plain beneath a third of a league or more below. Just before the road departed the mesa, it opened out into a shelf-like expanse, and here, set into the mesa wall, was the face of a city. Rockslides had buried fully half of it, and the spreading ridges of secondary slides lay atop the main one.

Before one of these lesser slides sat a pair of tents.

Three hundred paces away from them, Karsa halted.

There was a figure at the secondary slide, clearing rocks with a steady, almost obsessive rhythm, tossing huge chunks of sandstone out behind him to bounce and roll on the flat concourse. Nearby, seated on a boulder, was another figure, and where the first one was tall – taller than a lowlander by far – this one was impressively wide at the shoulders, dark-skinned, heavy-maned. A large leather sack was beside him, and he was gnawing on a smoke-blackened hind leg – the rest of the small mountain goat was still spitted on a huge skewer over a stone-lined hearth near the tents.

Karsa studied the scene for a time, then, shrugging, made his way towards the two figures.

He was less than twenty paces away before the huge, barbaric man seated on the boulder swung his head around.

And gestured with the haunch in his hand. 'Help yourself. The thing damn near brained me, falling from the cliffside, so I feel obliged to eat it. Funny, that. You always see them, scampering and clambering way up there, and so you naturally believe they never make a misstep. Well, another delusion shattered.'

He was speaking a desert dialect, a lowlander tongue, yet he was no lowlander. Large, thick canines, hair on shoulders like a boar's bristles, a heavy-boned face wide and flat. Eyes the hue of the sandstone cliffs around them.
At his words, the stranger's companion ceased throwing rocks and straightened, and was now regarding Karsa curiously.

The Teblor was equally frank as he returned the stare. Almost as tall as he was, though leaner. Greyish, green-tinged skin. Lower canines large enough to be tusks. A longbow leaned nearby, along with a quiver, and a leather-strap harness to which a scabbarded sword was attached. The first weapons Karsa had yet seen – for the other one appeared to be entirely unarmed, barring the thick hunting knife at his belt.

The mutual examination continued for a moment longer, then the tusked warrior resumed his excavation, disappearing from sight as he strode into the cavity he had cleared in the rockfall.

Karsa glanced back at the other man.

Who gestured again with the goat leg.

The Teblor approached. He set down his pack near the hearth and drew a knife, then cut away a slab of meat and returned to where the other sat. 'You speak the language of the tribes,' Karsa said, 'yet I have never before seen your kind. Nor that of your companion.'

'And you are an equally rare sight, Thelomen Toblakai. I am named Mappo, of the people known as Trell, who hail from west of the Jhag Odhan. My single-minded companion is Icarium, a Jhag—'

'Icarium? Is that a common name, Mappo? There is a figure in my tribe's own legends who is so named.'

The Trell's ochre eyes narrowed momentarily. 'Common? Not in the way you ask. The name certainly appears in the tales and legends of countless people.'

Karsa frowned at the odd pedantry, if that was what it was. Then he crouched down opposite Mappo and tore off a mouthful of the tender meat.

'It occurs to me, of a sudden,' Mappo said, a hint of a grin flickering across his bestial features, 'that this chance encounter is unique ... in ways too numerous to list. A Trell, a Jhag, and a Thelomen Toblakai... and we each are likely the only one of our respective kinds in all of Seven Cities. Even more extraordinary, I believe I know of you – by reputation only, of course. Sha'ik has a bodyguard ... a Thelomen Toblakai, with an armoured vest made of petrified shells, and a wooden sword ...'

Karsa nodded, swallowing down the last of the meat in his mouth before replying, 'Aye, I am in the service of Sha'ik. Does this fact make you my enemy?'

'Not unless you choose to be,' Mappo answered, 'and I would advise against that.'

'So does everyone,' Karsa muttered, returning to his meal.

'Ah, so you are not as ignorant of us as you first said.'

'A score of wolves spoke to me,' Karsa explained. 'Little was said, barring the warning itself. I do not know what makes you two so dangerous, nor do I much care. Impede me in my journey and I will kill you. It is as simple as that.'

Mappo slowly nodded. 'And have we cause to impede you?'

'Not unless you choose to have,' Karsa responded.

The Trell smiled. 'Thus, it is best we learn nothing of each other, then.'

'Aye, that would be best.'

'Alas,' Mappo sighed, 'Icarium already knows all he needs to of you, and as to what he intends, while already decided, he alone knows.'

'If he believes he knows me,' Karsa growled, 'he deceives himself.'
'Well, let us consider the matter. On your shoulders is the fur of a Soletaken. One we both happen to know – you killed a formidable beast, there. Luckily, he was no friend of ours, but the measure of your martial prowess has been taken. Next, you are haunted by ghosts – not just the two kinsmen who even now hover behind you. But the ghosts of those you have slain in your short, but clearly terrible life. They are appallingly numerous, and their hatred for you is a palpable hunger. But who carries their dead in such a manner? Only one who has been cursed, I think. And I speak from long experience; curses are horrible things. Tell me, has Sha'ik ever spoken to you of convergence?'

'No.'

'When curses collide, you might say. Flaws and virtues, the many faces of fateful obsession, of singular purpose. Powers and wills are drawn together, as if one must by nature seek the annihilation of the other. Thus, you and Icarium are now here, and we are moments from a dreadful convergence, and it is my fate to witness. Helpless unto desperate madness. Fortunately for my own sake, I have known this feeling before.'

Karsa had been eating throughout Mappo's words. Now he examined the bone in his hands, then tossed it aside, wiped his palms on the white bear fur of his cloak, and straightened. 'What else have you and Icarium discovered about me, Mappo?'

'A few more things. Rylandaras gauged you, and concluded that he had no wish to add his skins to your collection. He is ever wise, is Rylandaras. A score of wolves, you said? His power has grown, then, a mystery both ominous and curious, given the chaos in his heart. What else? Well, the rest I choose not to reveal.'

Karsa grunted. He untied the bear cloak and let it fall to the ground, then unslung his sword and turned to face the rockslide.

A boulder sailed out from the cavity, of a size and weight that would strain even Bairoth Gild. The ground shook when it struck and bounced and rolled to a dusty halt.

'Will he now make me wait?' Karsa growled.

As if in answer Icarium emerged from the cave, slapping the dust from his long-fingered hands. 'You are not Fenn,' he said. 'Indeed, I believe you are Teblor, a son of the fallen tribes in Laederon. You have travelled far, warrior, to meet your end.'

'If you are so eager,' Karsa growled, 'cease your words.'

The Jhag's expression grew troubled. 'Eager? No. I am never eager. This is a moment of pathos, I believe. The first time I have felt such a thing, which is strange.' He turned to his companion. 'Have we known such moments as this one before, Mappo Runt?'

'Aye, my friend. We have.'

'Ah, well, then the burden of recollection is yours alone.'

'As it ever was, Icarium.'

'I grieve for you, friend.'

Mappo nodded. 'I know you do. Now, best unsheathe your sword, Icarium. This Teblor evinces frustration and impatience.'

The Jhag went to his weapon. 'What will come of this, Mappo?'

The Trell shook his head. 'I do not know, but I am filled with dread.'

'I shall endeavour to be efficient, then, so as to diminish the duration of your discomfort.'

'Clearly impossible,' Karsa muttered, 'given your love of words.' He readied his sword. 'Be on with it, then, I have a horse to find.'
Icarium's brows rose fractionally, then he drew out his sword. An unusual weapon, single-edged and looking ancient. He approached.

The Jhag's attack was a flicker of motion, faster than anything Karsa had seen before, yet his sword flashed to meet it.

Blades collided.

There was a peculiar snick and Karsa found himself holding nothing more than a handle.

Outrage exploded within him and he stepped forward, his huge fist hammering into Icarium's face. The Jhag was thrown backward, leaving his feet, his sword cartwheeling away to clatter on the slope of the rockfall. Icarium landed with a heavy thump, and did not move.

'Bastard broke my sword—' Karsa began, turning towards Mappo.

White light detonated in his skull.

And he knew no more.

Mappo stared down at the motionless Thelomen Toblakai, noting the slow rise and fall of the giant's chest. Hefting his mace, he glanced over to where Icarium lay, saw a hand slowly lift from the ground, twitch, then settle once more.

The Trell sighed. 'Better than I could have hoped for, I think.'

He walked back and returned his weapon to the large leather sack, then set out to strike the camp.

Pounding pain behind his eyes, a sound of roaring, as of a river raging through a narrow channel. Karsa groaned.

Some time passed before he finally pushed himself onto his hands and knees.

It was dawn ... again.

'Say nothing, Bairoth Gild,' he muttered. 'Nor you, Delum Thord. I can well guess what happened. That bastard Trell struck me from behind. Aye, he didn't kill me, but one day he will wish he had.'

A slow, cautious look around confirmed that he was alone. His broken sword had been positioned beside him, handle and blade side by side, with a small bound bundle of desert flowers lying atop them.

The blow to his head left him nauseous, and he found he was shaking once he'd managed to climb to his feet. He unstrapped his dented helm and tossed it aside. Dried blood matted his hair and covered the back of his neck.

'At least you are now well rested, Karsa Orlong.'

'You are less amused than you would have me think, Bairoth Gild. The one named Icarium. He is the one from our legends, isn't he?'

'And you alone among the living Teblor have crossed blades with him.'

'He broke my sword.'

There was no reply to that. Karsa set about preparing to resume his journey, once more donning the bear cloak, then shouldering the pack. He left the wooden sword pieces and their bouquet, and made to set off down the descending road. Then he paused, turning his attention instead to the cavity that Icarium had excavated into the rockslide.

The Jhag's efforts had partially uncovered a statue, broken here and there, with what remained fissured with
cracks, but recognizable none the less. A grotesque construct, as tall as Karsa, made of a black, grainy stone.

A seven-headed hound.

It had been completely buried by the fall, and so would have revealed no sign that it existed beneath the rubble. Yet Icarium had found it, though his reasons for uncovering the monstrosity were still unfathomable. 'He has lived too long, I think,' Karsa murmured.

He strode back out from the cavity, then swung onto the road.

Six days later, the city of Lato Revae far behind him, the Teblor lay prone in the shadows of a gulindha tree at the edge of a grove, watching a pair of drovers switching their herd of goats towards a dusty corral. A small village lay beyond, its low buildings roofed in palm fronds, the air above it hazy with dung smoke and dust.

The sun would be down soon, and he could resume his journey. He had waited out the day, unseen. These lands between Lato Revae and the Mersin River were relatively crowded, compared to all that he had seen thus far, reminding him that his travels, since his landing at Ehrlitan, had been mostly through unbroken wilderness. The Pan'potsun Odhan – the Holy Desert itself – was a world virtually abandoned by civilization.

But here, irrigation ditches ribboned the plain. Wells and groves and villages abounded, and there were more roads than he had ever seen before, even in the lands of the Nathii. Most were dusty, winding tracks at ground level, usually situated between ditches. Thus far, the only exceptions were the imperial tracks, raised and straight and substantial enough to permit two wagons to pass each other with room to spare. These Malazan roads had suffered in the last year – despite their obvious value, foundation boulders had been dug out, league-markers uprooted. But the ditches alongside them were deep and wide, and Karsa had used those ditches to remain hidden from sight as he made his way southwestward.

The village ahead crouched on a crossroads of Malazan tracks, and a squat, square tower rose above the low roofs near the centre. Its limestone walls were stained black, streaks flaring up from arrow-slits and windows. When the sun finally settled beyond the horizon, no lights showed from the tower.

Though it was likely that there were rebel soldiers of the Apocalypse stationed in the village, given its strategic placement on the crossroads, Karsa had no interest in initiating contact. His was a private journey, if for no reason but that he chose to have it so. In any case, it seemed the rebellion was not quite as fierce here; either that or the unbridled bloodthirst had long since abated. There had been no widespread destruction of farms and fields, no slaughter in the village and town streets. Karsa wondered if there had been as many Malazan traders and landowners this far west, or if the garrisons had all been recalled into the major cities, such as Kayhum, Sarpachiya and Ugarat – their fellow noncombatants accompanying them. If so, then it had not helped them.

He disliked being weaponless, barring the Malazan short-sword he used as a knife, sheathed at his hip. But there was no suitable wood in this region. There were said to be iron-wood trees in the Jhag Odhan, and he would wait until then.

The swift descent into night was done. The Teblor warrior stirred, collecting his pack, then set out along the edge of the gulindha grove. One of the imperial roads led off in the direction he sought, likely the main artery connecting Lato Revae with the Holy City Ugarat. If any bridges across the Mersin River had survived the uprising, it would be the Malazan-built one on that road.

He skirted the village on its north side, through knee-high grains, the soil soft from the previous night's irrigating. Karsa assumed the water came from the river somewhere ahead, though he could not imagine how the flow was regulated. The notion of a life spent tilling fields was repellent to the Teblor warrior. The rewards seemed to be exclusive to the highborn landowners, whilst the labourers themselves had only a minimal existence, prematurely aged and worn down by the ceaseless toil. And the distinction between high and low status was born from farming itself – or so it appeared to Karsa. Wealth was measured in control over other people, and the grip of that control could never be permitted to loosen. Odd, then, that this rebellion had had nothing to do with such inequities, that in truth it had been little more than a struggle between those who would be in charge.
Yet the majority of the suffering had descended upon the lowborn, upon the common folk. What matter the colour of the collar around a man's neck, if the chains linked to them were identical?

Better to struggle against helplessness, as far as he was concerned. This blood-soaked Apocalypse was pointless, a misdirected explosion of fury that, when it passed, left the world unchanged.

He bounded across a ditch, crossed through a narrow fringe of overgrown brush, and found himself at the edge of a shallow pit. Twenty paces across and at least thirty paces wide. The town's refuse was piled here, not entirely successful at covering the mass of lowlander bones.

Here, then, were the Malazans. As tamed and broken as the earth itself. The wealth of flesh, flung back into the ground. Karsa had no doubt that it was their rivals in status who were loudest in exhorting their deaths.

'And so, once again, Karsa Orlong, we are given the truths of the lowlanders.' Bairoth Gild's ghostly voice was palpably bitter. 'For every virtue they espouse, a thousand self-serving evils belie their piety. Know them, Warleader, for one day they will be your enemy.'

'I am no fool, Bairoth Gild. Nor am I blind.'

Delum Thord spoke. 'A place of haunting lies ahead, Karsa Orlong. As ancient as our own blood. Those who live here avoid it, and have always avoided it.'

'Not entirely,' Bairoth interjected. 'Fear has inspired them on occasion. The place is damaged. None the less, the Elder power lingers. The path beckons – will you walk it, Warleader?'

Karsa made his way around the pit. He could see something ahead, earthworks rising to break the flatness of the surrounding plain. Elongated barrows, the slabs of stone that formed them visible in places although they were mostly covered in thorny brush and tufts of yellow grasses. The mounds formed an irregular ring around a larger, circular hill that was flat-topped, though slightly canted as if one side had settled over time. Rising at angles from the summit were standing stones, a score or more.

Rocks from clearing the nearby fields had been discarded in this once-holy site, around the barrows, heaped against the slope of the central hill, along with other detritus: the withered wooden skeletons of ox ploughs, palm fronds from roofs, piles of potsherds and the bones of butchered livestock.

Karsa slipped between two barrows and made his way up the central slope. The nearest standing stone reached barely to his waist. Black symbols crowded it, the spit and charcoal paint relatively recent. The Teblor recognized various signs, such as had been employed as a secret, native language during the Malazan occupation. 'Hardly a place of fear,' he muttered. Fully half of the stones were either shattered or toppled, and from the latter Karsa noted that they were, in fact, taller than he was, so deeply had they been anchored in the artificial hill. The summit itself was pitted and uneven.

'Oh, these are the signs of fear, Karsa Orlong, do not doubt that. This desecration. Were this a place without power, the answer would have been indifference.'

Karsa grunted, stepping carefully on the treacherous ground as he approached the nominal centre of the stone ring. Four smaller slabs had been tilted together there, the wiry grasses stopping a pace away on all sides, leaving only bare earth flecked with bits of charcoal.

And fragments, Karsa noted as he crouched, of bone. He picked one up and studied it in the starlight. From a skull, lowlander in scale though somewhat more robust, the outer edge of an eye socket. Thick ... like that of my gods ... 'Bairoth Gild. Delum Thord. Do either of you sense the presence of a spirit or a god here?'

'No,' Delum Thord replied.

Bairoth spoke. 'A shaman was buried here, Warleader. His head was severed and left fixed in the apex of the four cardinal stones. Whoever shattered it did so long afterwards. Centuries. Perhaps millennia. So that it would no longer see. No longer watch.'

'Then why is this place of value to me?'
'For the way through it offers, Warleader.'

'The way through what, Bairoth Gild?'

'Passage westward, into the Jhag Odhan. A trail in the dreamworld. A journey of months will become one of mere days, should you choose to walk it. It lives still, for it was used not long ago. By an army.'

'And how can I walk this trail?'

Delum Thord replied, 'We can lead you, Karsa Orlong. For, like the one once buried here, we are neither dead nor alive. The lord Hood cannot find our spirits, for they are here with you. Our presence adds to the god of death's hatred of you, Warleader.'

'Hatred?'

'For what you have taken and would not give to him. Will not. Would you become your own Keeper of Souls? So he must now fear. When last did Hood know a rival?'

Karsa scowled and spat onto the ground. 'I have no interest in being his rival. I would break these chains. I would free even you and Bairoth Gild.'

'We would rather you did not, Warleader.'

'You and Bairoth Gild are perhaps alone in that sentiment, Delum Thord.'

'What of it?' Bairoth snapped.

Karsa said nothing, for he had begun to understand the choice that lay ahead, sometime in the future. To cast off my enemies ... I must also cast off my friends. And so Hood follows, and waits. For the day that must come.

'You hide your thoughts now, Karsa Orlong. This new talent does not please us.'

'I am warleader,' Karsa growled. 'It is not my task to please you. Do you now regret that you follow?'

'No, Karsa Orlong. Not yet.'

'Take me into this trail in the dreamworld, Delum Thord.'

The air grew suddenly colder, the smell reminding Karsa of the sloped clearings on high mountain sides when spring arrived, the smell of enlivened, softened lichen and moss. And before him, where there had been night-softened farmland a moment ago, there was now tundra, beneath a heavily overcast sky.

A broad path lay before him, stretching across the rolling land, where the lichen had been crushed, the mosses kicked aside and trampled. As Bairoth Gild had said, an army had passed this way, although by the signs it seemed their journey had been but a moment ago – he half expected to see the tail end of that solemn column on the distant horizon, but there was nothing. Simply an empty, treeless expanse, stretching out on all sides.

He moved forward, in the army's wake.

This world seemed timeless, the sky unchanging. On occasion, herds appeared, too distant to make out the kind of beasts, rolling across hillsides then slipping from view as they streamed down into valleys. Birds flew in arrowhead formation, a strange long-necked breed high overhead, all of them consistently flying back the way Karsa had come. Apart from the whine of the insects swarming about the Teblor, a strange, unreal silence emanated from the landscape.

A dream world, then, such as the elders of his tribe were wont to visit, seeking portents and omens. The scene not unlike what Karsa had glimpsed when, in delirium, he had found himself before his god, Urugal.

He continued on.
Eventually, the air grew colder, and frost glittered amidst the lichen and moss to either side of the wide trail. The smell of rotting ice filled Karsa's nose. Another thousand paces brought him to the first dirt-studded sweep of snow, filling a shallow valley on his right. Then shattered chunks of ice, half buried in the ground as if they had fallen from the sky, many of them larger than a lowlander wagon. The land itself was more broken here, the gentle roll giving way to sharp-walled drainage gullies and channels, to upthrust hillsides revealing banded sandstone beneath the frozen, thick skin of peat. Fissures in the stone gleamed with greenish ice.

Bairoth Gild spoke. 'We are now at the border of a new warren, Warleader. A warren inimical to the army that arrived here. And so, a war was waged.'

'How far have I travelled, Bairoth Gild? In my world, am I approaching Ugarat? Sarpachiya?'

The ghost's laughter was like a boulder rolled over gravel. "They are behind you now, Karsa Orlong. You approach the land known as the Jhag Odhan.'

It had seemed no more than a half-day's worth of travel in this dream world.

Signs of the army's passage grew less distinct, the ground underfoot frozen rock hard and now consisting mostly of rounded stones. Ahead, a plain studded with huge flat slabs of black rock.

Moments later, Karsa was moving among them.

There were bodies beneath the stones. Pinned down.

'Will you free these, Karsa Orlong?'

'No, Delum Thord, I shall not. I shall pass through this place, disturbing nothing.'

'Yet these are not Forkrul Assail. Many are dead, for they had not the power their kind once possessed. While others remain alive, and will not die for a long time. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Karsa Orlong, do you no longer believe in mercy?'

'My beliefs are my own, Delum Thord. I shall not undo what I do not understand, and that is all.'

He travelled on, and soon left the terrible plain behind.

Before him now stretched a field of ice, crack-riven, with pools of water reflecting the silver sky. Bones were scattered on it, from hundreds, perhaps thousands of figures. Bones of a type he had seen before. Some still sheathed in withered skin and muscle. Shards of stone weapons lay among them, along with fragments of fur, antlered helms and torn, rotting hides.

The fallen warriors formed a vast semicircle around a low, square-walled tower. Its battered stones were limned in runnelled ice, its doorway gaping, the interior dark.

Karsa picked his way across the field, his moccasins crunching through the ice and snow.

The tower's doorway was tall enough to permit the Teblor to stride through without ducking. A single room lay within. Broken furniture and the pieces of more fallen warriors cluttered the stone floor. A spiral staircase that seemed made entirely of iron rose from the centre.

From what he could determine from the wreckage, the furniture was of a scale to suit a Teblor, rather than a lowlander.

Karsa made his way up the ice-sheathed staircase.

There was a single level above, a high-ceilinged chamber that had once held wooden shelves on all four walls. Tom scrolls, bound books ripped apart, vials and clay jars containing various pungent mixes crushed underfoot, a large table split in half and pushed up against one wall, and on a cleared space on the floor ...

Karsa stepped off the landing and looked down.
'Thelomen Toblakai, welcome to my humble abode.'

Karsa scowled. 'I crossed blades with one much like you. He was named Icarium. Like you, yet less so.'

'Because he is a half-blood, of course. Whilst I am not. Jaghut, not Jhag.'

She lay spread-eagled within a ring of fist-sized stones. A larger stone rested on her chest, from which heat rose in waves. The air in the chamber was a swirling mix of steam and suspended frost.

'You are trapped within sorcery. The army was seeking you, yet they did not kill you.'

'Could not would be more accurate. Not immediately, in any case. But eventually, this Tellann Ritual will destroy this core of Omtose Phellack, which will in turn lead to the death of the Jhag Odhan – even now, the north forest creeps onto the plains, whilst from the south the desert claims ever more of the odhan that was my home.'

'Your refuge.'

She bared her tusks in something like a smile. 'Among the Jaghut, they are now one and the same, Thelomen Toblakai.'

Karsa looked around, studying the wreckage. He saw no weapons; nor was the woman wearing armour. 'When this core of Omtose Phellack dies, so will you, yes? Yet you spoke only of the Jhag Odhan. As if your own death was of less importance than that of this land.'

'It is less important. On the Jhag Odhan, the past lives still. Not just in my fallen kin, the Jhag – the few that managed to escape the Logros T'lan Imass. There are ancient beasts that walk the treeless lands beside the sheets of ice. Beasts that have died out everywhere else, mostly on the spears of the T'lan Imass. But there were no Imass in the Jhag Odhan. As you said, a refuge.'

'Beasts. Including Jhag horses?'

He watched her strange eyes narrow. The pupils were vertical, surrounded in pearlescent grey. 'The horses we once bred to ride. Yes, they have gone feral in the odhan. Though few remain, for the Trell come from the west to hunt them. Every year. They drive them off cliffs. As they do to many of the other beasts.'

'Why did you not seek to stop them?'

'Because, dear warrior, I was hiding.'

'A tactic that failed.'

'A scouting party of T'lan Imass discovered me. I destroyed most of them, but one escaped. From that moment, I knew their army would come, eventually. Granted, they took their time about it, but time is what they have aplenty.'

'A scouting party? How many did you destroy?'

'Seven.'

'And are their remains among those surrounding this tower?'

She smiled again. 'I would think not, Thelomen Toblakai. To the T'lan Imass, destruction is failure. Failure must be punished. Their methods are ... elaborate.'

'Yet what of the warriors lying below, and those around the tower?'

'Fallen, but not in failure. Here I lie, after all.'

'Enemies should be killed,' the Teblor growled, 'not imprisoned.'

'I would not argue that sentiment,' the Jaghut replied.
'I sense nothing evil from you.'

'It has been a long time since I heard that word. In the wars with the T'lan Imass, even, that word had no place.'

'I must answer injustice,' he rumbled.

'As you will.'

'The need overwhelms all caution. Delum Thord would smile.'

'Who is Delum Thord?'

Not answering, Karsa unslung his pack then threw off his bear cloak and stepped towards the ring of stones.

'Stay back, warrior!' the Jaghut hissed. 'This is High Tellann—'

'And I am Karsa Orlong, of the Teblor,' the warrior growled. He kicked at the nearest stones.

Searing flame swept up to engulf Karsa. He snarled and pushed his way through it, reaching down both hands to take the slab of stone, grunting as he lifted it from the woman's chest. The flames swarmed him, seeking to rend his flesh from his bones, but his growl simply deepened. Pivoting, flinging the huge slab to one side. Where it struck a wall, and shattered.

The flames died.

Karsa shook himself, then looked down once more.

The ring was now broken. The Jaghut's eyes were wide as she stared up at him, movement stirring her limbs.

'Never before,' she sighed, then shook her head as if in disbelief. 'Ignorance, honed into a weapon. Extraordinary, Thelomen Toblakai.'

Karsa crouched down beside his pack. 'Are you hungry? Thirsty?'

She was slow in sitting up. The T'lan Imass had stripped her, leaving her naked, but she seemed unaffected by the bitter cold air now filling the chamber. Though she appeared young, he suspected she was anything but. He felt her eyes watching him as he prepared the meal.

'You crossed swords with Icarium. There had ever been but a single conclusion to such an ill-fated thing, but that you are here is proof that you somehow managed to avoid it.'

Karsa shrugged. 'No doubt we will resume our disagreement the next time we meet.'

'How did you come to be here, Karsa Orlong?'

'I am seeking a horse, Jaghut. The journey was long, and I was led to understand that this dream world would make it shorter.'

'Ah, the ghost-warriors hovering behind you. Even so, you take a grave risk travelling the Tellann Warren. I owe you my life, Karsa Orlong.' She cautiously climbed to her feet. 'How can I repay you?'

He straightened to face her, and was surprised – and pleased – to see that she almost matched him in height. Her hair was long, murky brown, tied at the back. He studied her for a moment, then said, 'Find for me a horse.'

Her thin eyebrows rose fractionally. 'That is all, Karsa Orlong?'

'Perhaps one more thing – what is your name?'

'That is what you would ask?'

'No.'
'Aramala.'

He nodded and turned once more to readying the meal. 'I would know all you can tell me, Aramala, of the seven who first found you.'

'Very well. If I may ask something in turn. You passed through a place on your way here, where Jhag had been . . . imprisoned. I shall of course free those who have survived.'

'Of course.'

'They are half-bloods.'

'Aye, so I am told.'

'Do you not wonder at what the other half is?'

He glanced up, then slowly frowned.

She smiled. 'There is much, I think, that I must tell you.'

Some time later, Karsa Orlong strode from the tower. He moved on, resuming the trail of the army where it began once again beyond the frozen ground of Omtose Phellack.

When he finally emerged from the warren, into the heat of late afternoon on the world of his birth, he found himself on the edge of a ridge of battered hills. Pausing, he glanced behind him, and could make out, at the very rim of the horizon, a city – probably Sarpachiya – and the glimmer of a vast river.

The hills ahead formed a spine, a feature on the land that he suspected showed up only on local maps. There were no farms on the lowlands before it, no herds on its broken slopes.

The T'lan Imass had reappeared in this place before him, though their passage onwards, into those hills, left no sign, for decades had passed in this world since that time. He was on the edge of the Jhag Odhan.

Dusk had arrived by the time he reached the foothills and began making his way up the weathered slope. The exposed rock here had a diseased look, as if afflicted by some kind of unnatural decay. Pieces of it collapsed under his feet as he climbed.

The summit was little more than a ridge, less than three paces across, crusted with rotten stone and dead grasses. Beyond, the land fell away sharply, forming a broad valley marked by sunken, banded sandstone mesas rising from its base. The valley's opposite side, five thousand or more paces distant, was a sheer cliff of rust-coloured rock.

Karsa could not imagine the natural forces that could have created such a landscape. The mesas below were born of erosion, as if floods had run the length of the valley, or perhaps fierce winds roared down the channels – less dramatic and demanding much greater lengths of time. Or the entire valley could have once stood level with the surrounding hills, only to suffer some subterranean slump. The decayed outcroppings suggested some kind of leaching process afflicting the region.

He made his way down the steep slope.

And quickly discovered that it was honeycombed with caves and pits. Mines, if the scree of calcreted rubble fanning out from them was any indication. But not tin or copper. Flint. Vast veins of the glassy brown material lay exposed like raw wounds in the hillside.

Karsa's eyes narrowed on the mesas ahead. The bands in the sandstone were all sharply tilted, and not all at the same angle. Their caps displayed nothing of the flat plateau formation that one would expect; instead, they were jagged and broken. The valley floor itself – for as far as he could see amidst the squat mesas – seemed to be sharp-edged gravel. Shatter flakes from the mining.

*In this single valley, an entire army could have fashioned its weapons of stone ...*
And the flint in this place was far from exhausted.

Bairoth Gild's voice filled his head. 'Karsa Orlong, you circle the truths as a lone wolf circles a bull elk.'

Karsa grunted, his only reply. He could see, on the cliff on the other side, more caves, these ones carved into the sheer wall. Reaching the shadowed valley floor, he set out for them. The gravel underfoot was thick, shifting treacherously, the sharp edges slicing into the hide soles of his moccasins. The air smelled of limestone dust.

He approached a large cave mouth situated a third of the way up the cliff. A broad slope of scree led up to within reach of it, though it shifted ominously under the Teblor as he scrambled upward. He finally managed to clamber onto the uneven floor.

With the cliff wall facing northeast, and the sun already riding the horizon, there was no ambient light in the cave. The Teblor set down his pack and drew out a small lantern.

The walls were calcined limestone, blackened by generation upon generation of woodsmoke, the ceiling high and roughly domed. Ten paces further in, the passage swiftly diminished as ceiling, walls and floor converged. Crouching, Karsa slipped through the choke point.

Beyond was a vast cavern. Dimly seen on the wall opposite was a monolithic projection of solid, pure flint, reaching almost up to the ceiling. Deeply recessed niches had been bored into the flanking walls. A fissure above the centre of the hewn chamber bled grey light from the dusk outside. Directly beneath it was a heap of sand, and growing from that mound was a knotted, twisted tree – a guldindha, no higher than the Teblor's knee, its leaves a deeper hue of green than was usual.

That daylight could reach down two-thirds of this cliff was itself a miracle ... but this tree ...

Karsa walked over to one of the niches and extended the lantern into it. Another cavern lay beyond. And it was filled with flint weapons. Some were broken but most were whole. Swords, double-bladed axes with bone shafts, hundreds upon hundreds covering the floor. The next niche contained the same, as did the one after that. Twenty-two side-chambers in all. The weapons of the dead. The weapons of the failed. In every cave on this cliff, he knew, he would find the same.

But none of the others were important to him. He set the lantern down near the pillar of flint, then straightened. 'Urugal the Woven. Beroke Soft Voice, Kahlb the Silent Hunter, Thenik the Shattered, 'Siballe the Unfound, Halad the Giant, Imroth the Cruel. Faces in the Rock, gods of the Teblor. I, Karsa Orlong of the Uryd Tribe of the Teblor, have delivered you to this place. You were broken. Severed. Weaponless. I have done as you commanded me to do. I have brought you to this place.'

Urugal's broken rasp replied, 'You have found that which was taken from us, Karsa Orlong. You have freed your gods.'

The Teblor watched the ghost of Urugal slowly take shape before him. A squat, heavy-boned warrior, shorter than a lowlander but much broader. The bones of his limbs were split – where Karsa could see between the taut straps of leather and hide that bound them, that held him together. More straps crossed his chest.

'Karsa Orlong, you have found our weapons.'

The warrior shrugged. 'If indeed they are among the thousands in the chambers beyond.'

'They are. They did not fail us.'

'But the Ritual did.'

Urugal cocked his head. His six kin were taking shape around him. 'You understand, then.'

'I do.'

'Our physical forms approach, Karsa Orlong. They have journeyed far, bereft of spirit, held only by our wills
'And the one you now serve,' the Teblor growled.

'Yes. The one we now serve. We have guided you in turn, Warleader. And now shall come your reward, for what you have given us.'

'Siballe the Unfound now spoke. 'We have gathered an army, Karsa Orlong. All the children sacrificed before the Faces in the Rock. They are alive, Warleader. They have been prepared. For you. An army. Your people are assailed. The lowlanders must be driven back, their armies annihilated. You shall sweep down with your legions, down into their lands, and reap destruction upon the lowlanders.'

'I shall.'

'The Seven Gods of the Teblor,' Urugal said, 'must now become Eight.'

The one named Halad – the largest of the seven by far, hulking, bestial – stepped forward. 'You must now fashion a sword, Karsa Orlong. Of stone. The mines outside await you – we shall guide you in the knowledge —'

'There is no need,' Karsa said. 'I have learned the many hearts of stone. The knowledge is mine, and so too shall the sword be mine. Those you fashion are well enough for your own kind. But I am Teblor. I am Thelomen Toblakai.' With that he swung about and walked towards the monolithic pillar of flint.

'That spar will defeat you,' Halad said behind him. 'To draw a long enough blade for a sword, you must strike from above. Examine this vein carefully, and you will see that, pure as it is, the flow of the stone is unforgiving. None of our kind has ever managed to draw forth a flake longer than our own height. The spar before you can no longer be worked; thus its abandonment. Strike and it shall shatter. And that failure shall stain your next efforts, and so weaken the sorcery of the making.'

Karsa stood before the brown, almost black, flint pillar.

'You must fashion a fire at its base,' Halad said. 'Left to burn without cessation for a number of days and nights. There is little wood in the valley below, but in the Jhag Odhan beyond, the bhederin herds have travelled in their multitudes. Fire, Karsa Orlong, then cold water—'

'No. All control is lost with that method, T'lan Imass. Your kind are not unique in knowing the truths of stone. This task is mine and mine alone. Now, enough words.'

'The name you have given us,' Urugal rasped, 'how did you come by such knowledge?'

Karsa turned, face twisting into a sneer. 'Foolish Teblor. Or so you believed. So you would have us. Fallen Thelomen Toblakai, but he who has fallen can rise once again, Urugal. Thus, you were once T'lan Imass. But now, you are the Unbound.' The sneer became a snarl. 'From wandering to hold. From hold to house.'

The warrior climbed the spar of flint. Perched on its top, he drew out his Malazan short-sword. A moment's examination of the stone's surface, then he leaned over to study the almost vertical sweep of flawless flint reaching down to the cave's floor. Reversing the sword, Karsa began scraping the top of the pillar, a hand's width in from the sharp edge. He could see the tracks of old blows – the T'lan Imass had tried, despite Halad's words, but had failed.

Karsa continued roughing the surface where he would strike. In his mind, he spoke. Bairoth Gild. Delum Thord. Hear me, when none other can. One day, I shall break my chains, I shall free the souls that now hound me. You would not be among them, or so you said. Nor would I wish Hood's embrace upon you. I have considered your desires in this. And have fashioned an alternative . . .

'Warleader, Delum Thord and I understand your intent. Your genius never fails to astonish me, Karsa Orlong. Only with our consent will you succeed. And so you give us words and lo, we find our path forced. Hood's embrace . . . or what you seek.'
Karsa shook his head. *Not just me, Bairoth Gild. But you yourself. Do you deny it?*

'No, Warleader. We do not. Thus, we accept what you offer.'

Karsa knew that he alone could see the ghosts of his friends at this moment, as they seemed to dissolve, reduced to pure will, that then flowed down into the flint. Flowed, to find a shape, a form of cohesion ...

Awaiting ... He swept dust and grit from the roughened surface, then closed both hands about the shortsword's stubby grip. He lifted the weapon high, fixing his gaze upon the battered striking platform, then drove the pommel down.

A strange snapping sound—

Then Karsa was leaping forward, short-sword flung aside, down through the air, spinning as he dropped. His knees flexed to absorb the impact, even as he raised his hands to intersect the toppling spear of flint.

A spear almost as tall as the Teblor himself.

It fell away from the pillar, a flattened shard, and settled into his hands. A warm lick on his palms, and suddenly blood was running down his forearms. Karsa quickly backed up, lowering the blade to the floor. When he drew his hands away he saw that they had been cut down to the bone. *Clever Bairoth, to drink my blood to seal the bargain.*

'You ... surpass us,' Halad whispered.

Karsa went to his pack and drew out a bundle of field dressings and a sewing kit. There would be no infection, of course, and he would heal swiftly. Still, he would need to close the cuts before he could hope to begin work on the huge blade's edges, and hack out a grip of sorts.

'We shall invest the weapon,' Urugal announced behind him. 'So that it cannot be broken.'

Karsa nodded.

'We shall make you the Eighth God of the Teblor.'

'No,' he replied as he began working on his left hand. 'I am not as you, Urugal. I am not Unbound. You yourself closed the chains about me. By your own hands, you saw to it that the souls of those I have slain will pursue me eternally. You have shaped my haunting, Urugal. Beneath such a curse, I can never be *unbound.*'

'There is place for you none the less,' Urugal said, 'in the House of Chains.'

'Aye. Knight of Chains, champion of the Crippled God.'

'You have learned much, Karsa Orlong.'

He stared down at his bloodied hands. 'I have, T'lan Imass. As you shall witness.'
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

How many times, dear traveller, will you walk the same path?

Kayessan

To the north, the dust of the imperial army obscured the forest-mantled hills of Vathar. It was late afternoon, the hottest part of the day, when the wind died and the rocks radiated like flatstones on a hearth. Sergeant Strings remained motionless beneath his ochre rain cloak, lying flat as he studied the lands to the southwest. Sweat streamed down his face to prickle in his iron-shot red beard.

After a long moment studying the mass of horse warriors that had emerged out of the dusty odhan in their wake, Strings lifted a gloved hand and gestured.

The others of his squad rose from their places of concealment and edged back from the crest. The sergeant watched them until they reached cover once more, then slid around and followed.

Endless skirmishes with raiders these last weeks, beginning just outside Dojal, with more heated clashes with Kherahn Dhobi tribes at Tathamon and Sanimon ... but nothing like the army now trailing them. Three thousand warriors, at the very least, of a tribe they’d not seen before. Countless barbaric standards rose above the host, tall spears topped with ragged streamers, antlers, horns and skulls. The glitter of bronze scale armour was visible beneath the black telabas and furs, as well as – more prolific – a strange greyish armour that was too supple to be anything but hide. The helms, from what Strings could make out with the distance, looked to be elaborate, many of them crow-winged, of leather and bronze.

Strings slid down to where his squad waited. They’d yet to engage in hand-to-hand combat, their sum experience of fighting little more than firing crossbows and occasionally holding a line. So far ... so good. The sergeant faced Smiles. ‘All right, it’s settled – climb on that miserable horse down below, lass, and ride to the lieutenant. Looks like we’ve got a fight coming.’

Sweat had tracked runnels through the dust sheathing her face. She nodded, then scrambled off.

‘Bottle, go to Gesler’s position, and have him pass word to Borduke. I want a meeting. Quick, before their scouts get here.’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

After a moment, Strings drew out his waterskin and passed it to Corporal Tarr, then he tapped Cuttle on the shoulder and the two of them made their way back to the ridge.

They settled down side by side to resume studying the army below.

‘These ones could maul us,’ the sergeant muttered. ‘Then again, they’re riding so tight it makes me wonder ...’

Cuttle grunted, eyes thinned to slits. ‘Something’s gnawing my knuckles here, Fid. They know we’re close, but they ain’t arrayed for battle. They should’ve held back until night, then hit all along our line. And where are their scouts, anyway?’

‘Well, those outriders—’

‘Way too close. Local tribes here know better—’

A sudden scattering of stones and Strings and Cuttle twisted round – to see riders cresting the ridge on either side of them, and others cantering into view on the back-slope, closing on his squad.

‘Hood take us! Where did—’
Yipping warcries sounded, weapons waving in the air, yet the horse warriors then drew rein, rising in their stirrups as they surrounded the squad.

Frowning, Strings clambered to his feet. A glance back at the army below showed a vanguard climbing the slope at a canter. The sergeant met Cuttle’s eyes and shrugged.

The sapper grimaced in reply.

Escorted by the riders on the ridge, the two soldiers made their way down to where Tarr and Koryk stood. Both had their crossbows loaded, though no longer trained on the tribesmen wheeling their mounts in a prancing circle around them. Further down the ridge Strings saw Gesler and his squad appear, along with Bottle; and their own company of horse warriors.

‘Cuttle,’ the sergeant muttered, ‘did you clash with these anywhere north of the River Vathar?’

‘No. But I think I know who they are.’

None of these scouts wore bronze armour. The grey hide beneath their desert-coloured cloaks and furs looked strangely reptilian. Crow wings had been affixed to their forearms, like swept-back fins. Their faces were pale by local standards, unusual in being bearded and long-moustached. Tattoos of black tears ran down the lengths of their weathered cheeks.

Apart from lances, fur-covered wooden scabbards were slung across their backs, holding heavy-bladed tulwars. All had crow-feet earrings dangling from under their helms.

The tribe’s vanguard reached the crest above them and drew to a halt, as, on the opposite side, there appeared a company of Wickans, Seti and Malazan officers.

Beru fend, the Adjunct herself’s with them. Also Fist Gamet, Nil, Nether and Temul, as well as Captain Keneb and Lieutenant Ranal.

The two mounted forces faced one another on either side of the shallow gully, and Strings could see Temul visibly start, then lean over to speak to the Adjunct. A moment later, Tavore, Gamet and Temul rode forward.

From the tribe’s vanguard a single rider began the descent on the back-slope. A chieftain, Strings surmised. The man was huge; two tulwars were strapped to a harness crossing his chest, one of them broken just above the hilt. The black tears tattooed down his broad cheeks looked to have been gouged into the flesh. He rode down fairly close to where Strings and Cuttle stood and paused beside them.

He nodded towards the approaching group and asked in rough Malazan, ‘This is the Plain Woman who leads you?’

Strings winced, then nodded. ‘Adjunct Tavore, aye.’

‘We have met the Kherahn Dhobri,’ the chieftain said, then smiled. ‘They will harass you no more, Malazan.’

Tavore and her officers arrived, halting five paces away. The Adjunct spoke. ‘I welcome you, Warchief of the Khundryl. I am Adjunct Tavore Paran, commander of the Fourteenth Army of the Malazan Empire.’

‘I am Gall, and we are the Burned Tears of the Khundryl.’

‘The Burned Tears?’

The man made a gesture of grief. ‘Blackwing, leader of the Wickans. I spoke with him. My warriors sought to challenge, to see who were the greatest warriors of all. We fought hard, but we were humbled. Blackwing is dead, his clan destroyed, and Korbolo Dom’s Dogslayers dance on his name. That must be answered, and so we have come. Three thousand – all that fought for Blackwing the first time. We are changed, Adjunct. We are other than we once were. We grieve the loss of ourselves, and so we shall remain lost, for all time.’

‘Your words sadden me, Gall,’ Tavore replied, her voice shaky.
Careful now, lass...

'We would join you,' the Khundryl warchief rasped, 'for we have nowhere else to go. The walls of our yurts look strange to our eyes. The faces of our wives, husbands, children – all those we once loved and who once loved us – strangers, now. Like Blackwing himself, we are as ghosts in this world, in this land that was once our home.'

'You would join us – to fight under my command, Gall?'

'We would.'

'Seeking vengeance against Korbolo Dom.'

He shook his head. 'That will come, yes. But we seek to make amends.'

She frowned beneath her helm. 'Amends? By Temul's account you fought bravely, and well. Without your intercession, the Chain of Dogs would have fallen at Sanimon. The refugees would have been slaughtered—'

'Yet we then rode away – back to our lands, Adjunct. We thought only to lick our wounds. While the Chain marched on. To more battles. To its final battle.' He was weeping in truth now, and an eerie keening sound rose from the other horse warriors present. 'We should have been there. That is all.'

The Adjunct said nothing for a long moment.

Strings removed his helm and wiped the sweat from his brow. He glanced back up the slope, and saw a solid line of Khundryl on the ridge. Silent. Waiting.

Tavore cleared her throat. 'Gall, Warchief of the Burned Tears . . . the Fourteenth Army welcomes you.'

The answering roar shook the ground underfoot. Strings turned and met Cuttle's eyes. Three thousand veterans of this Hood-damned desert. Queen of Dreams, we have a chance. Finally, it looks like we have a chance. He did not need to speak aloud to know that Cuttle understood, for the man slowly nodded.

But Gall was not finished. Whether he realized the full measure of his next gesture – no, Strings would conclude eventually, he could not have – even so ... The Warchief gathered his reins and rode forward, past the Adjunct. He halted his horse before Temul, then dismounted.

Three strides forward. Under the eyes of over three hundred Wickans, and five hundred Seti, the burly Khundryl – his grey eyes fixed on Temul – halted. Then he unslung his broken tulwar and held it out to the Wickan youth.

Temul was pale as he reached down to accept it.

Gall stepped back and slowly lowered himself to one knee. 'We are not Wickans,' the warchief grated, 'but this I swear – we shall strive to be.' He lowered his head.

Temul sat unmoving, visibly struggling beneath a siege of emotions, and Strings suddenly realized that the lad did not know how to answer, did not know what to do.

The sergeant took a step, then swung his helm upward, as if to put it back on. Temul caught the flash of movement, even as he looked about to dismount, and he froze as he met Strings's eyes.

A slight shake of the head. Stay in that saddle, Temul! The sergeant reached up and touched his own mouth. Talk. Answer with words, lad!

The commander slowly settled back into his saddle, then straightened. 'Gall of the Burned Tears,' he said, barely a tremble to his voice, 'Blackwing sees through the eyes of every Wickan here. Sees, and answers. Rise. In Blackwing's name, I, Temul of the Crow Clan, accept you ... the Burned Tears ... of the Crow Clan, of the Wickans.' He then took the loop of leather to which the broken tulwar was tied, and lowered it over his shoulder.
With the sound of a wave rolling up a league-long strand of beach, weapons were unsheathed along the ridge, a salute voiced by iron alone.

A shiver rippled through Strings.

'Hood's breath,' Cuttle muttered under his breath. 'That is a lot more frightening than their warcries were.'

Aye, as ominous as Hood's smile. He looked back to Temul and saw the Wickan watching him. The sergeant lowered the helm onto his head once more, then grinned and nodded. *Perfect, lad. Couldn't have done better myself.*

And now, Temul wasn't alone any more, surrounded by sniping arthritic wolves who still wouldn't accept his command. Now, the lad had Gall and three thousand blooded warriors to back his word. *And that's the last of that. Gall, if I was a religious man, I'd bum a crow-wing in your name tonight. Hood take me, I might do it anyway.*

'Gall of the Burned Tears,' the Adjunct announced. 'Please join us at our command quarters. We can discuss the disposition of your forces over a meal – a modest meal, alas—'

The Khundryl finally straightened. He faced the Adjunct. 'Modest? No. We have brought our own food, and this night there shall be a feast – not a single soldier shall go without at least a mouthful of bhederin or boar!' He swung about and scanned his retinue until he spied the one he sought. 'Imrahl! Drag your carcass back to the wagons and bring them forward! And find the two hundred cooks and see if they've sobered up yet! And if they haven't, I will have their heads!'

The warrior named Imrahl, an ancient, scrawny figure who seemed to be swimming beneath archaic bronze armour, answered with a broad, ghastly smile, then spun his horse round and kicked it into a canter back up the slope.

Gall swung about and raised both hands skyward, the crow-wings attached to the forearms seeming to snap open beneath them. 'Let the Dogslayers cower!' he roared. 'The Burned Tears have begun the hunt!'

Cuttle leaned close to Strings. 'That's one problem solved – the Wickan lad's finally on solid ground. One wound sewn shut, only to see another pried open.'

'Another?' Oh. Yes, true enough. *That Wickan Fist's ghost keeps rearing up, again and again. Poor lass.*

'As if Coltaine's legacy wasn't already dogging her heels ... if you'll excuse the pun,' the sapper went on. 'Still, she's putting a brave face on it...'

*No choice.* Strings faced his squad. 'Collect your gear, soldiers. We've got pickets to raise ... before we eat.' At their groans he scowled. 'And consider yourselves lucky – missing those scouts don't bode well for our capabilities, now, does it?'

He watched them assemble their gear. Gesler and Borduke were approaching with their own squads. Cuttle grunted at the sergeant's side. 'In case it's slipped your mind, Fid,' he said, low, 'we didn't see the bastards, either.'

'You're right,' Strings replied, 'it's slipped my mind completely. Huh, there it goes again. Gone.'

Cuttle scratched the bristle on his heavy jaw. 'Strange, what were we talking about?'

'Bhederin and boar, I think. Fresh meat.'

'Right. My mouth's watering at the thought.'

Gamet paused outside the command tent. The revelry continued unabated, as the Khundryl roved through the camp, roaring their barbaric songs. Jugs of fermented milk had been broached and the Fist was grimly certain that more than one bellyful of half-charred, half-raw meat had returned to the earth prematurely out beyond the
fires, or would in the short time that remained before dawn.

Next day's march had been halved, by the Adjunct's command, although even five bells' walking was likely to make most of the soldiers regret this night's excesses.

Or maybe not.

He watched a marine from his own legion stumble past, a Khundryl woman riding him, legs wrapped around his waist, arms around his neck. She was naked, the marine nearly so. Weaving, the pair vanished into the gloom.

Gamet sighed, drawing his cloak tighter about himself, then turned and approached the two Wickans standing guard outside the Adjunct's tent.

They were from the Crow, grey-haired and looking miserable. Recognizing the Fist they stepped to either side of the entrance. He passed between them, ducking to slip between the flaps.

All of the other officers had left, leaving only the Adjunct and Gall, the latter sprawled on a massive, ancient-looking wooden chair that had come on the Khundryl wagons. The warchief had removed his helm, revealing a mass of curly hair, long and black and shimmering with grease. The midnight hue was dye, Gamet suspected, for the man had seen at least fifty summers. The tips of his moustache rested on his chest and he looked half asleep, a jug gripped by the clay handle in one huge hand. The Adjunct stood nearby, eyes lowered onto a brazier, as if lost in thought.

Were I an artist, I would paint this scene. This precise moment, and leave the viewer to wonder. He strode over to the map table, where another jug of wine waited. 'Our army is drunk, Adjunct,' he murmured as he poured a cup full.

'Like us,' Gall rumbled. 'Your army is lost.'

Gamet glanced over at Tavore, but there was no reaction for him to gauge. He drew a breath, then faced the Khundryl. 'We are yet to fight a major battle, Warchief. Thus, we do not yet know ourselves. That is all. We are not lost—'

'Just not yet found,' Gall finished, baring his teeth. He took a long swallow from his jug.

'Do you regret your decision to join us, then?' Gamet asked.

'Not at all, Fist. My shamans have read the sands. They have learned much of your future. The Fourteenth Army shall know a long life, but it shall be a restless life. You are doomed to search, destined to ever hunt... for what even you do not know, nor, perhaps, shall you ever know. Like the sands themselves, wandering for eternity.'

Gamet was scowling. 'I do not wish to offend, Warchief, but I hold little faith in divination. No mortal – no god – can say we are doomed, or destined. The future remains unknown, the one thing we cannot force a pattern upon.'

The Khundryl grunted. 'Patterns, the lifeblood of the shamans. But not them alone, yes? The Deck of Dragons – are they not used for divination?'

Gamet shrugged. 'There are some who hold much store in the Deck, but I am not one of them.'

'Do you not see patterns in history, Fist? Are you blind to the cycles we all suffer through? Look upon this desert, this wasteland you cross. Yours is not the first empire that would claim it. And what of the tribes? Before the Khundryl, before the Kherahn Dhobri and the Tregyn, there were the Sanid, and the Oruth, and before them there were others whose names have vanished. Look upon the ruined cities, the old roads. The past is all patterns, and those patterns remain beneath our feet, even as the stars above reveal their own patterns – for the stars we gaze upon each night are naught but an illusion from the past.' He raised the jug again and studied it for a moment. 'Thus, the past lies beneath and above the present, Fist. This is the truth my shamans embrace, the bones upon which the future clings like muscle.'
The Adjunct slowly turned to study the warchief. 'We shall reach Vathar Crossing tomorrow, Gall. What will we find?'

The Khundryl's eyes glittered. 'That is for you to decide, Tavore Paran. It is a place of death, and it shall speak its words to you – words the rest of us will not hear.'

'Have you been there?' she asked.

He nodded, but added nothing more.

Gamet drank down a mouthful of wine. There was a strangeness to this night, to this moment here in the Adjunct's tent, that left his skin crawling. He felt out of place, like a simpleton who'd just stumbled into the company of scholars. The revelry in the camp beyond was dying down, and come the dawn, he knew, there would be silence. Drunken oblivion was, each time, a small, temporary death. Hood walked where the self once stood, and the wake of the god's passage sickened mortal flesh afterwards.

He set his cup down on the map table. 'If you'll forgive me,' he muttered, 'the air in here is too ... close.'

Neither replied as he walked back to the flap.

Outside, in the street beyond the two motionless Wickan guards, Gamet paused and looked up. Ancient light, is it? If so, then the patterns I see . . . may have died long ago. No, that does not bear thinking about. It is one of those truths that have no value, for it offers nothing but dislocation.

And he needed no fuel for that cold fire. He was too old for this war. Hood knows, I didn't enjoy it much the first time round. Vengeance belonged to the young, after all. The time when emotions burned hottest, when life was sharp enough to cut, fierce enough to sear the soul.

He was startled by the passing of a large cattle dog. Head low, muscles rippling beneath a mottled hide literally seamed with countless scars, the silent beast padded down the aisle between the tent rows. A moment later and it disappeared into the gloom.

'I've taken to following it,' a voice said behind him.

Gamet turned. 'Captain Keneb. I am surprised to find you still awake.'

The soldier shrugged. 'That boar's not sitting too well in my gut, sir.'

'More likely that fermented milk the Khundryl brought – what is it called again?'

'Urtathan. But no, I have experienced that brew before, and so chose to avoid it. Come the morning, I suspect three-quarters of the army will realize a similar wisdom.'

'And the remaining quarter?'

'Dead.' He smiled at Gamet's expression. 'Sorry, sir, I wasn't entirely serious.'

The Fist gestured for the captain to accompany him, and they began walking. 'Why do you follow that dog, Keneb?'

'Because I know its tale, sir. It survived the Chain of Dogs. From Hissar to the Fall outside Aren. I watched it fall almost at Coltaine's feet. Impaled by spears. It should not have survived that.'

'Then how did it?'

'Gesler.'

Gamet frowned. 'The sergeant in our legion's marines?'

'Aye, sir. He found it, as well as another dog. What happened then I have no idea. But both beasts recovered from what should have been mortal wounds.'
'Perhaps a healer ...'

Keneb nodded. 'Perhaps, but none among Blistig's guard – I made enquiries. No, there's a mystery yet to be solved. Not just the dogs, but Gesler himself, and his corporal, Stormy, and a third soldier – have you not noted their strangely hued skin? They're Falari, yet Falari are pale-skinned, and a desert tan doesn't look like that at all. Curious, too, it was Gesler who delivered the Silanda.'

'Do you believe they have made a pact with a god, Captain? Such cults are forbidden in the imperial army.'

'I cannot answer that, sir. Nor have I evidence sufficient to make such a charge against them. Thus far, I have kept Gesler's squad, and a few others, as the column's rearguard.'

The Fist grunted. 'This news is disturbing, Captain. You do not trust your own soldiers. And this is the first time you've told me of any of this. Have you considered confronting the sergeant directly?'

They had reached the edge of the camp. Before them stretched a broken line of hills; to their right, the dark forest of Vathar.

To Gamet's questions, Keneb sighed and nodded. 'They in turn do not trust me, Fist. There is a rumour in my company ... that I abandoned my last soldiers, at the time of the uprising.'

*And did you, Keneb?* Gamet said nothing.

But it seemed that the captain heard the silent question none the less. 'I didn't, although I will not deny that some of the decisions I made back then could give cause to question my loyalty to the empire.'

'You had better explain that,' Gamet said quietly.

'I had family with me. I sought to save them, and for a time nothing else mattered. Sir, whole companies went over to the rebels. You did not know who to trust. And as it turned out, my commander—'

'Say no more of that, Captain. I've changed my mind. I don't want to know. Your family? Did you manage to save them?'

'Aye, sir. With some timely help from an outlawed Bridgeburner—'

'A what? Who, in Hood's name?'

'Corporal Kalam, sir.'

'He's here? In Seven Cities?'

'He was. On his way, I think, to the Empress. From what I gathered, he had some issues he wanted to, uh, raise with her. In person.'

'Who else knows all this?'

'No-one, sir. I've heard the tale, that the Bridgeburners were wiped out. But I can tell you, Kalam was not among them. He was here, sir. And as to where he is now, perhaps the Empress alone knows.'

There was a smudge of motion in the grasses, about twenty paces distant. *That dog. Hood knows what it's up to.* 'All right, Captain. Keep Gesler in the rearguard for now. But at some point, before the battle, we'll have to test him – I need to know if he's reliable.'

'Aye, sir.'

'Your beast is wandering out there.'

'I know. Every night. As if looking for something. I think it might be ... Coltaine. Looking for Coltaine. And it breaks my heart, sir.'

'Well, if it's true, Captain, that the dog's looking for Coltaine, I admit to being surprised.'
'What do you mean, sir?'

'Because the bastard's here. You'd have to be blind, dumb and deaf to miss him, Captain. Goodnight to you.' He turned and strode off, feeling the need to spit, but he knew the bitter taste in his mouth would not so easily leave him.

The fire was long dead. Wrapped in his cloak, Strings sat before it, looking at but not seeing the layered bricks of ash that were all that remained of the pieces of dung. Beside him lay the scrawny Hengese lapdog that Truth said was named Roach. The bone the creature gnawed on was bigger than it, and had that bone teeth and appetite it would be the one doing the eating right now.

Contented company, then, to mock this miserable night. The blanketed forms of his squad lay motionless on all sides. They'd been too exhausted to get drunk, after raising the pickets then sitting first watch, and full bellies had quickly dragged them into sleep. Well enough, he mused, they'd be among the few spared the ravages of hangover in a few bells' time. Even Cuttle had yet to awaken, as was his custom – or perhaps his eyes were open where he lay with his back to the hearth.

It did not matter. The loneliness Strings suffered could not be alleviated by company, not such as he might find here, in any case. Nor were his thoughts the kind he would willingly share.

They'd been spitting dust almost since the march began. Not the place for marines, unless a massive pursuit threatened the rear of the column, which was not the case. No. Keneb was punishing them, and Strings had no idea why. Even the lieutenant, who had somehow managed to avoid actually being present to command the squads, was uncertain as to the captain's motivations. Though not displeased, of course. Then again, how can Ranal hope to acquire his stellar reputation with his soldiers coughing the entire Fourteenth's dust?

And do I even give a damn, any more?

The night air stank of bile, as if Poliel herself stalked the camp. The sudden acquisition of three thousand veterans had done much to lift the Fourteenth's spirits – Strings hoped there was no omen in the aftermath.

All right then, let's consider the matter at hand. This army has its chance, now. It doesn't need bastards like me. Why would I want to go back to Raraku anyway? I hated it the first time. I'm not that young, mouthy fool – not what I once was. Did I really think I could recapture something in that holy desert? What, exactly? Lost years? That charging momentum that belongs to the young? To soldiers like Smiles and Koryk and Bottle and Tarr. I joined for revenge, but it's not filling my belly like it used to – Hood knows, nothing does any more. Not revenge. Not loyalty. Not even friendship. Damn you, Kalam, you should've talked me out of it. Right there in Malaz City. You should've called me a fool to my face.

Gesler's cattle dog padded into view.

Roach growled, and the bigger beast paused, nose testing the air, then settled down a few paces away. The lapdog returned to its gnawing.

'Come ahead, then, Gesler,' Strings muttered.

The sergeant appeared, a jug in one hand. He sat down opposite, studied the jug for a moment, then made a disgusted sound and tossed it away. 'Can't get drunk any more,' he said. 'Not me, not Stormy or Truth. We're cursed.'

'I can think of worse curses,' Strings muttered.

'Well, so can I, but still. What's really bad is I can't sleep. None of us can. We was at Vathar Crossing – that's where we drew the Silanda in to wait for the Chain of Dogs. Where I got punched good and hard, too. Damn, but that surprised me. Anyway, I'm not looking forward to seeing it again. Not after what happened there.'

'So long as the bridge hasn't been swept away,' Strings replied.

Gesler grunted.
Neither spoke for a time, then: 'You're thinking of running, aren't you, Fid?'

He scowled.

Gesler slowly nodded. 'It's bad when you lose 'em. Friends, I mean. Makes you wonder why you're still here, why the damned sack of blood and muscle and bones keeps on going. So you run. Then what? Nothing. You're not here, but wherever you are, you're still there.'

Strings grimaced. 'I'm supposed to make sense of that? Listen, it's not just what happened to the Bridgeburners. It's about being a soldier. About doing this all over again. I've realized that I didn't even like it much the first time round. There's got to come a point, Gesler, when it's no longer the right place to be, or the right thing to do.'

'Maybe, but I ain't seen it yet. It comes down to what you're good at. Nothing else, Fid. You don't want to be a soldier no more. Fine, but what are you going to do instead?'

'I was apprenticed as a mason, once—'

'And apprentices are ten years old, Fiddler. They ain't crabby creakbones like you. Look, there's only one thing for a soldier to do, and that's soldiering. You want it to end? Well, there's a battle coming. Should give you plenty of opportunity. Throw yourself on a sword and you're done.' Gesler paused and jabbed a finger at Strings. 'But that's not the problem, is it? It's because now you've got a squad, and you're responsible for 'em. That's what you don't like, and that's what's got you thinking of running.'

'Strings rose. 'Go pet your dog, Gesler.' He walked off into the darkness.

The grass was wet underfoot as he made his way through the pickets. Muted challenges sounded, to which he replied, and then he was out beyond the camp. Overhead, the stars had begun to withdraw as the sky lightened. Capemoths were winging in swirling clouds towards the forested hills of Vathar, the occasional rhizan diving through them, upon which they exploded outward, only to reform once the danger was past.

On the ridge three hundred paces ahead of the sergeant stood a half-dozen desert wolves. They'd done their howling for the night, and now lingered out of curiosity, or perhaps simply awaiting the army's departure, so they could descend into the basin and pick at the leavings.

Strings paused at a faint singing, low and mournful and jarring, that seemed to emanate from a depression just this side of the ridge. He'd heard it other nights, always beyond the encampment, but had not been inclined to investigate. There was nothing inviting to that thin, atonal music.

But now it called to him. With familiar voices. Heart suddenly aching, he walked closer.

The depression was thick with yellowed grasses, but a circle had been flattened in the centre. The two Wickan children, Nil and Nether, were seated there, facing one another, with the space between them occupied by a broad, bronze bowl.

Whatever filled it was drawing butterflies, a score at present, but more were gathering.

Strings hesitated, then made to leave.

'Come closer,' Nil called out in his reedy voice. 'Quickly, the sun rises!' Frowning, the sergeant approached. As he reached the edge of the depression, he halted in sudden alarm. Butterflies swarmed around him, a pale yellow frenzy filling his eyes – brushing air against his skin like a thousand breaths. He spun in place, but could see nothing beyond the mass of fluttering wings.

'Closer! He wants you here!' Nether's high, piping voice.

But Strings could not take another step. He was enveloped, and within that yellow shroud, there was a ... presence. And it spoke. 'Bridgeburner. Raraku waits for you. Do not turn back now.'
'Who are you?' Strings demanded. 'Who speaks?'

'I am of this land, now. What I was before does not matter. I am awakened. We are awakened. Go to join your kin. In Raraku – where he will find you. Together, you must slay the goddess. You must free Raraku of the stain that lies upon it.'

'My kin? Who will I find there?'

'The song wanders, Bridgeburner. It seeks a home. Do not turn back.'

All at once the presence vanished. The butterflies rose skyward, spinning and swirling into the sunlight. Higher, ever higher ...

Small hands clutched at him, and he looked down. Nether stared up at him, her face filled with panic. Two paces behind her stood Nil, his arms wrapped about himself, his eyes filling with tears.

Nether was screaming. 'Why you? We have called and called! Why you!?'

Shaking his head, Strings pushed her away. 'I – I don't know!'

'What did he say? Tell us! He had a message for us, yes? What did he say?'

'For you? Nothing, lass – why, who in Hood's name do you think that was?'

'Sormo E'nath!'

'The warlock? But he—' Strings staggered another step back. 'Stop that damned singing!'

The Wickans stared.

And Strings realized that neither was singing – neither could have been – for it continued, filling his head.

Nether asked, 'What singing, soldier?'

He shook his head again, then turned and made his way back towards camp. Sormo had no words for them. Nor did he. Nor did he want to see their faces – their helpless desperation, their yearning for a ghost that was gone – gone for ever. That was not Sormo E'nath. That was something else – Hood knows what. 'We are awakened.' What does that mean? And who's waiting for me in Raraku? My kin – I've none, barring the Bridgeburners – gods below! Quick Ben? Kalam? One, or both? He wanted to scream, if only to silence the song that whispered through his head, the dreadful, painfully incomplete music that gnawed at his sanity.

Raraku, it seemed, was not yet done with him. Strings silently railed. Damn all of this!

To the north, through the smoky wreaths of the encampment, the mantled hills of Vathar seemed to unfurl the sun's golden light. On the ridge behind him, the wolves began howling.

Gamet settled back in the saddle as his horse began the descent towards the river. It had not been long enough for the land to entirely swallow the victims of the slaughter that had occurred here. Bleached bones gleamed in the sandy mud of the shoreline. Fragments of cloth, pieces of leather and iron. And the ford itself was barely recognizable. Remnants of a floating bridge were heaped on it on the upstream side, and on this barrier more detritus had piled. Sunken, waterlogged wagons, trees, grasses and reeds, now anchored by silts, a hulking, bowed mass that had formed a kind of bridge. To the Fist's eye, it seemed the whole thing was moments from breaking loose.

Scouts had crossed it on foot. Gamet could see a score of mud-smeared Seti on the opposite side, making their way up the steep slope.

The forests on both sides of the river were a mass of colour, their branches festooned with strips of cloth, with braids and painted human bones that twisted in the wind.
Mesh'arn tho'ledann. The Day of Pure Blood. Upstream, on either bank for as far as he could see, long poles had been thrust into the mud at angles so that they hung over the swirling water. The carcasses of sheep and goats hung from them. From some the blood still drained, whilst others were well along in their rot, seething with flies, capemoths and carrion birds. Small white flecks rained down from the sacrificed animals, to which fish swarmed, and it was a moment before Gamet realized what those flecks were – maggots, falling into the river.

Captain Keneb drew his horse alongside Gamet's own as they approached the bank. 'That's not mud binding that flotsam, is it? Oh, a little silt and sand, but mostly—'

'Blood, aye,' Gamet muttered.

They were trailing the Adjunct, who was flanked by Nil and Nether. The three reached the water's edge and halted their mounts. Behind Gamet and Keneb, the front companies of the 10th Legion were on the slope, within sight of the river and its ragged bridge.

'Those sacrifices, do you think they were done to welcome us, Fist? I can't imagine such slaughter to be ongoing – the herds would be wiped out in no time.'

'Some have been here a while,' Gamet observed. 'But you must be right, Captain.'

'So we would cross a river of blood. If these damned tribes consider that gesture an honourable one, then the Queen has stolen their sanity. This notion of seeing the world metaphorically has ever driven me to distraction. The Seven Cities native sees everything differently. To them, the landscape is animate – not just the old notion of spirits, but in some other, far more complicated way.'

Gamet glanced at the man. 'Is it worth making a study of it, Captain?'

Keneb started, then half smiled, adding a strangely despondent shrug. 'That particular dialogue spoke of the rebellion and only the rebellion – for months and months before it finally happened. Had we bothered to read those signs, Fist, we could have been better prepared.'

They had drawn up behind the Adjunct and the two Wickans. At Keneb's words, Tavore turned her horse round and faced the captain. 'Sometimes,' she said, 'knowledge is not enough.'

'Your pardon, Adjunct,' Keneb said.

Tavore fixed her flat gaze on Gamet. 'Bring forward the marines, Fist. We will require sappers and munitions. We shall cross a ford, not a bridge of detritus held in place by blood.'

'Aye, Adjunct. Captain, if you will join me ...'

They pulled their horses round and made their way back up the slope. Glancing over at Keneb, Gamet saw that the man was grinning. 'What amuses you, Captain?'

'Munitions, sir. The sappers will weep.'

'So long as they don't destroy the ford itself, I will be glad to give them comforting hugs.'

'I wouldn't let them hear a promise like that, sir.'

'No, I suppose you're right.'

They reached the front ranks of the 10th Legion and Gamet waved a messenger over. As the rider approached, Fist Tene Baralta joined the woman and the two arrived together.

'Sappers?' the Red Blade asked.

Gamet nodded. 'Aye.'

Tene Baralta nodded and said to the messenger, 'Take word to the marine lieutenants. The Adjunct requires
some demolition. Immediately.

'Aye, sir,' she replied, wheeling her horse round.

They watched her canter back along the line, then the Red Blade faced Gamet. 'They will see it as an insult. This bridge of blood is intended as a blessing.'

'She knows that, Tene Baralta,' Gamet replied. 'But the footing is far too treacherous. That should be obvious, even to our hidden observers.'

The large man shrugged, armour clanking with the motion. 'Perhaps a quiet word to Gall of the Khundryl, a rider sent out to find those observers, to ensure that no misunderstanding occurs.'

'A good suggestion,' Gamet replied.

'I shall see to it, then.'

The Red Blade rode off.

'Forgive me if I am too forward, Fist,' Keneb murmured, 'but what just occurred strikes me as the very thing that the Adjunct would dislike most.'

'Do you believe she dislikes initiative among her officers, Captain?'

'I wouldn't presume—' You just did.'

'Ah, well, I see your point. My apologies, Fist.'

'Never apologize when you're right, Keneb. Wait here for the squads.' He set off down to where the Adjunct still sat astride her horse at the shoreline.

Nil and Nether had dismounted and were now kneeling, heads bowed, in the muddy water.

Gamet could see, upon arriving, Tavore's tightly bridled anger. Aye, they cling still to the chains, and it seems letting go is the last thing they would do . . . given the choice. Well, I was the one who mentioned initiative. 'I see the children are playing in the mud, Adjunct.'

Her head snapped round and her eyes narrowed.

Gamet went on, 'I advise we assign a minder for them, lest they injure themselves in their exuberance. After all, Adjunct, I doubt the Empress intended you to mother them, did she?'

'Well, no,' she drawled after a moment. 'They were to be my mages.'

'Aye, so I wonder, have you instructed them to commune with the ghosts? Do they seek to appease the river spirits?'

'No, again, Fist. In truth, I have no idea what they're doing.'

'I am of the opinion that you are proving far too permissive a mother, Adjunct.'

'Indeed. Then I give you leave to act in my stead, Fist.'

There was no way Nil and Nether were uncognizant of the conversation behind them, but neither altered their position. With a loud sigh, Gamet dismounted and walked to the muddy waterline.

Then reached down and closed a hand on their hide shirts, just behind their necks, and yanked the two Wickans upright.

Loud squeals, then hissing fury as the Fist shook them both for a moment, then turned them round until they
faced the Adjunct. 'This is what a Wickan grandmother would have done. I know, somewhat harsher than is the Malazan style of parenting. Then again, these two children are not Malazan, are they?' He set them down.

'Perhaps it's too late, Fist,' Tavore said, 'but I would remind you that these two children are also warlocks.'

'I've seen no sign of it yet, Adjunct. But if they want to curse me, then so be it.'

For the moment, however, neither seemed inclined to do so. Rage had given way to something very much resembling a sulk.

Tavore cleared her throat. 'Nil, Nether, I believe there will be need for representatives of our army to seek out the local tribes in this forest, to assure them we are aware of the meaning behind their gesture. None the less, we must ensure safe passage across this ford.'

'Adjunct, Fist Tene Baralta has suggested something similar, but using the Khundryl.'

'Perhaps representatives from both, then.' To the Wickans: 'Report to Fist Tene Baralta.'

Gamet watched the siblings exchange a glance, then Nil said to the Adjunct, 'As you wish.'

Nether cast a parting look of venom at Gamet as they headed off.

'Pray you won't have to pay for that,' Tavore said when they were out of earshot.

Gamet shrugged.

'And next time, have Tene Baralta bring his suggestions to me personally.'

'Aye, Adjunct.'

Cuttle and Strings scrambled back from the shoreline. Soaked and sheathed in blood-crusted mud, they none the less could not keep grins from their faces. A doubling of pleasure in that the munitions had come from the Fourteenth's stores, not their own. Twelve crackers that would drive the explosions horizontally, three cussers placed shallow in the detritus to loosen the wreckage.

And a bare handful of heartbeats before it all went up.

The rest of the army had pulled back to the top of the slope on this side; the Seti scouts on the opposite side were nowhere to be seen. Leaving only the two sappers—

—running like madmen.

A thundering whump sent both men flying. Sand, mud, water, followed by a rain of debris.

Hands over their heads, they lay motionless for a long moment, with the only sound to reach them the rush of water sweeping over the cleared ford. Then Strings looked across at Cuttle, to find him looking back.

Maybe two cussers would have done.

They exchanged nods, then clambered to their feet.

The ford was indeed clear. The water beyond seethed with flotsam, now making its way down to the Dojal Hading Sea.

Strings wiped mud from his face. 'Think we made any holes, Cuttle?'

'Nothing that'll drown anyone, I'd wager. Good thing you didn't run,' Cuttle added in a murmur, as riders made their way down the slope behind them.

Strings shot the man a glance. 'What don't you hear?'
'Not a question I can answer, is it, Fid?'

The first rider arrived – their fellow sapper, Maybe, from the 6th squad. 'Flat and clean,' he said, 'but you left it too close – what's the point of making a big explosion when you've got your face in the dirt when it goes off?'

'Any other bright comments to make, Maybe?' Cuttle growled, brushing himself down – a gesture that clearly had no chance of any kind of measurable success. 'If not, then kindly ride out there and check for holes.'

'Slowly,' Strings added. 'Let your horse find its own pace.'

Maybe's brows rose. 'Really?' Then he nudged his mount forward.

Strings stared after the soldier. 'I hate satirical bastards like him.'

'The Wickans will skin him alive if he breaks that horse's legs.'

'That has the sound of a feud in the making.'

Cuttle paused in his fruitless efforts to clean himself, then frowned. 'What?'

'Never mind.'

Ranal and Keneb rode up. 'Nicely done,' the captain said. 'I think.'

'Should be all right,' Strings replied. 'So long as nobody starts firing arrows at us.'

'Taken care of, Sergeant. Well, to your squad, the privilege of first crossing.'

'Aye, sir.'

There should have been pleasure, in a task well done, but Strings felt nothing beyond the initial rush that had immediately followed the detonation. The broken song whispered on in his mind, a dirge lying beneath his every thought.

'The way ahead seems clear,' Cuttle muttered.

_Aye. Doesn't mean I have to like it._

The land rose steeply on the north side of the Vathar River, with a treeless butte towering over the trail to the west. The army's crossing continued as the Adjunct and Gamet climbed the goat trail towards the butte's summit. The sun was low in the sky – their second full day at the ford – and the river was made molten by the lurid streams of light off to their left, although this side of the rock prominence was in deep shadow.

The mud covering Gamet's leather-clad legs was drying to a stiff, crack-latticed skin that shed dust as he clambered in Tavore's wake. He was breathing hard, his undergarments soaked with sweat.

They reached the summit, emerging once more into sunlight. A brisk, hot wind swept the barren, flat rock. A ring of stones on a lower shelf, on what passed for the lee side, marked where a hearth or watch-fire had once been constructed, possibly at the time of the Chain of Dogs.

The Adjunct wiped dust from her gloves, then strode to the north edge. After a moment, Gamet followed.

The city of Ubaryd was visible, dun-coloured and sheathed in smoke, to the northeast. Beyond it glittered the Dojal Hading Sea. The city's harbour was crowded with ships.

'Admiral Nok,' the Adjunct said.

'He's retaken Ubaryd, then.'

'Where we will resupply, yes.' Then she pointed northward. 'There, Gamet. Do you see it?'
He squinted, wondering what he was supposed to look at across the vast wasteland that was the Ubaryd Odhan. Then the breath hissed between his teeth.

A fiery wall of red on the horizon, as if a second sun was setting.

'The Whirlwind,' Tavore said.

Suddenly, the wind was much colder, pushing hard against Gamet where he stood.

'Beyond it,' the Adjunct continued, 'waits our enemy. Tell me, do you think Sha'ik will contest our approach?'

'She would be a fool not to,' he replied.

'Are you certain of that? Would she rather not face unblooded recruits?'

'It is a huge gamble, Adjunct. The march alone will have hardened the Fourteenth. Were I her, I would prefer to face a battle-weary, bruised enemy. An enemy burdened with wounded, with a shortage of arrows, horses and whatnot. And by that time of final meeting, I would also have learned something of you, Adjunct. Your tactics. As it is, Sha'ik has no way to take your measure.'

'Yes. Curious, isn't it? Either she is indifferent to me, or she feels she has already taken my measure – which of course is impossible. Even assuming she has spies in our army, thus far I have done little more than ensure that we march in an organized fashion.'

Spies? Gods below, I hadn't even considered that!

Neither spoke for a time, each lost in their own thoughts as they stared northward.

The sun was vanishing on their left.

But the Whirlwind held its own fire.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Power has voice, and that voice is the Song of the Tanno Spiritwalker.

Kimloc

He awoke to a faint, damp nuzzling against his side. Eyes slowly opened, head tilted downward, to see a bhok'aral pup, patchy with some sort of skin infection, curled against his stomach.

Kalam sat up, suppressing the urge to grab the creature by the neck and fling it against a wall. Compassion was not the consideration, of course. Rather, it was the fact that this subterranean temple was home to hundreds, perhaps even thousands of bhok'arala, and the creatures possessed a complex social structure – harm this pup and Kalam might find himself beneath a swarm of bull males. And small as the beasts were, they had canines to rival a bear's. Even so, he fought to contain his revulsion as he gently pushed the mottled pup away.

It mewed pathetically and looked up at him with huge, liquid eyes.

'Don't even try,' the assassin muttered, slipping free of the furs and rising. Flecks of mouldy skin covered his midriff, and the thin woollen shirt was sodden from the pup's runny nose. Kalam removed the shirt and flung it into a corner of the small chamber.

He'd not seen Iskaral Pust in over a week. Apart from occasional tingling sensations at the tips of his fingers and toes, he was more or less recovered from the enkar'al demon's attack. Kalam had delivered the diamonds and was now chafing to leave.

Faint singing echoed from the hallway. The assassin shook his head.

Maybe one day Mogora will get it right, but in the meantime... gods below, it grates! He strode to his tattered backpack and rummaged inside until he found a spare shirt.

Sudden thumping sounded outside his door, and he turned in time to see it flung open. Mogora stood framed in the doorway, a wooden bucket in one hand, a mop in the other. 'Was he here? Just now? Was he here? Tell me!'

'I haven't seen him in days,' Kalam replied.

'He has to clean the kitchen!'

'Is this all you do, Mogora? Chase after Iskaral Pust's shadow?'

'All!' The word was a shriek. She stormed up to him, mop thrust forward like a weapon. 'Am I the only one using the kitchen! No!'

Kalam stepped back, wiping spittle from his face, but the Dal Honese woman advanced.

'And you). Do you think your suppers arrive all by themselves? Do you think the shadow gods simply conjure them out of thin air? Did I invite you here? Are you my guest? Am I your serving wench?'

'Gods forbid—'

'Be quiet! I'm talking, not you!' She thrust the mop and bucket into Kalam's hands, then, spying the bhok'aral pup curled up on the cot, dropped into a predatory crouch and edged closer, fingers hooked. 'There you are,' she murmured. 'Leave your skin everywhere, will you? Not for much longer!'

Kalam stepped into her path. 'Enough, Mogora. Get out of here.'

'Not without my pet.'
'Pet? You're intending to wring its neck, Mogora!'

'So?'

He set the mop and bucket down. *I can't believe this. I'm defending a mangy bhok'aral. . . from a D'ivers witch.*

There was movement in the doorway. Kalam gestured. 'Look behind you, Mogora. Harm this pup and you'll have to face them.'

She spun, then hissed. 'Scum! Iskaral's beget – always spying! That's how he hides – using them!'

With a ululating scream she charged into the doorway. The bhok'arala massed there shrieked in answer and scattered, although Kalam saw one dart between her legs and leap onto the cot. It scooped the pup up under one arm then bolted for the corridor.

Mogora's wailing cries dwindled as she continued her pursuit.

'Hee hee.'

Kalam turned.

Iskaral Pust emerged from the shadows in the far corner. He was covered in dust, a sack draped over one bony shoulder.

The assassin scowled. 'I've waited long enough in this madhouse, Priest.'

'Indeed you have.' He cocked his head, tugging at one of the few wisps of hair that remained on his pate. 'I'm done and he can go, yes? I should be kindly, open, scattering gold dust to mark his path out into the waiting world. He'll suspect nothing. He'll believe he leaves of his own free will. Precisely as it should be.' Iskaral Pust suddenly smiled, then held out the sack. 'Here, a few diamonds for you. Spend them here and there, spend them everywhere! But remember, you must breach the Whirlwind – into the heart of Raraku, yes?'

'That is my intent,' Kalam growled, accepting the sack and stuffing it into his own backpack. 'We do not proceed at cross-purposes, Priest, although I realize you'd rather we did, given your perverse mind. Even so ... breach the Whirlwind ... without being detected. How will I manage that?'

'With the help of Shadowthrone's chosen mortal. Iskaral Pust, High Priest and Master of Rashan and Meanas and Thy! The Whirlwind is a goddess, and her eyes cannot be everywhere. Now, quickly collect your belongings. We must leave! She's coming back, and I've made another mess in the kitchen! Hurry!'

They emerged from the warren of shadow beneath a large outcropping, in daylight, less than a hundred paces from the raging wall of the Whirlwind. After three strides forward Kalam reached out and grabbed the priest by the arm and spun him round.

'That singing? Where in Hood's name is that singing coming from, Iskaral? I'd heard it in the monastery and thought it was Mogora—'

'Mogora can't sing, you fool! I hear nothing, nothing but the wild winds and the hiss of sands! You are mad! Is he mad? Yes, possibly. No, likely. The sun broiled his brain in that thick skull. A gradual dissolution – but of course not, of course not. It's the Tanno song, that's what it is. Even so, he's probably still mad. Two entirely separate issues. The song. And his madness. Distinct, unrelated, both equally confounding of all that my masters plan. Or potentially so. Potentially. There is no certainty, not in this damned land, especially not here. Restless Raraku. Restless!'

With a snarl, Kalam pushed the man away, began walking towards the wall of the Whirlwind. After a moment, Iskaral Pust followed.

'Tell me how we're going to manage this, Priest.'
'It's simple, really. She'll know the breach. Like a knife stab. That cannot be avoided. Thus, misdirection! And there is none better at misdirection than Iskaral Pust!'

They arrived to within twenty paces of the seething wall of sand. Swirling clouds of dust engulfed them. Iskaral Pust moved close, revealing a grin filled with grit. 'Hold tight, Kalam Mekhar!' Then he vanished.

A massive shape loomed over the assassin, and he was suddenly gathered up in a swarm of arms.

The azalan.

Running, now, flowing faster than any horse along the edge of the Whirlwind Wall. The demon tucked Kalam close under its torso – then plunged through.

A thundering roar filled the assassin's ears, sand flailing against his skin. He squeezed shut his eyes.

Multiple thuds, and the azalan was racing across packed sand. Ahead lay the ruins of a city.

Fire flared beneath the demon, a path of flames raging in its wake.

The raised tel of the dead city rose before them. The azalan did not even slow, swarming up the ragged wall. A fissure loomed, not large enough for the demon – but sufficient for Kalam.

He was flung into the crack as the azalan flowed over it. Landing heavily amidst rubble and potsherds. Deep in the fissure's shadow.

Sudden thunder overhead, shaking the rock. Then again and again, seeming to stitch a path back towards the wall of sand. The detonations then ceased, and only the roar of the Whirlwind remained.

*I think he made it back out. Fast bastard.*

The assassin remained motionless for a time, wondering if the ruse had succeeded. Either way, he would wait for night before venturing out.

He could no longer hear the song. *Something to be grateful for.*

The walls of the fissure revealed layer upon layer of potsherds on one side, a sunken and heaved section of cobblestone street on another, and the flank of a building's interior wall – the plaster chipped and scarred – on the last. The rubble beneath him was loose and felt deep.

Checking his weapons, Kalam settled down to wait.

Apsalar in his arms, Cutter emerged from the gateway. The woman's weight sent waves of pain through his bruised shoulder, and he did not think he would be able to carry her for long.

Thirty paces ahead, at the edge of the clearing where the two trails converged, lay scores of corpses. And in their midst stood Cotillion.

Cutter walked over to the shadow god. The Tiste Edur lay heaped in a ring around a clear spot off to the left, but Cotillion's attention seemed to be on one body in particular, lying at his feet. As the Daru approached, the god slowly settled down into a crouch, reaching out to brush hair back from the corpse's face.

It was the old witch, Cutter saw, the one who had been burned. *The one I thought was the source of power in the Malazan party. But it wasn't her. It was Traveller.* He halted a few paces away, brought up short by Cotillion's expression, the ravaged look that made him suddenly appear twenty years older. The gloved hand that had swept the hair back now caressed the dead woman's scorched face.

'You knew her?' Cutter asked.

'Hawl,' he replied after a moment. 'I'd thought Surly had taken them all out. None of the Talon's command left. I thought she was dead.'
'She is.' Then he snapped his mouth shut. A damned miserable thing to say—

'I made them good at hiding,' Cotillion went on, eyes still on the woman lying in the bloody, trampled grass. 'Good enough to hide even from me, it seems.'

'What do you think she was doing here?'

Cotillion flinched slightly. 'The wrong question, Cutter. Rather, why was she with Traveller? What is the Talon up to? And Traveller ... gods, did he know who she was? Of course he did – oh, she's aged and not well, but even so ...'

'You could just ask him,' Cutter murmured, grunting as he shifted Apsalar's weight in his arms. 'He's in the courtyard behind us, after all.'

Cotillion reached down to the woman's neck and lifted into view something strung on a thong. A yellow-stained talon of some sort. He pulled it loose, studied it for a moment, then twisted round and flung it towards Cutter.

It struck his chest, then fell to lie in Apsalar's lap.

The Daru stared down at it for a moment, then looked up and met the god's eyes.

'Go to the Edur ship, Cutter. I am sending you two to another ... agent of ours.'

'To do what?'

'To wait. In case you are needed.'

'For what?'

'To assist others in taking down the Master of the Talon.'

'Do you know where he or she is?'

He lifted Hawl into his arms and straightened. 'I have a suspicion. Now, finally, a suspicion about all of this.' He turned, the frail figure held lightly in his arms, and studied Cutter for a moment. A momentary, wan smile. 'Look at the two of us,' he said, then he swung away and began walking towards the forest trail.

Cutter stared after him.

Then shouted: 'It's not the same! It's not! We're not—'

The forest shadows swallowed the god.

Cutter hissed a curse, then he turned to the trail that led down to the shoreline.

The god Cotillion walked on until he reached a small glade off to one side of the path. He carried his burden into its centre, and gently set her down.

A host of shadows spun into being opposite, until the vague, insubstantial form of Shadowthrone slowly resolved itself. For a change, the god said nothing for a long time.

Cotillion knelt beside Hawl's body. 'Traveller is here, Ammanas. In the Edur ruins.'

Ammanas grunted softly, then shrugged. 'He'll have no interest in answering our questions. He never did. Stubborn as any Dal Honese.'

'You're Dal Honese,' Cotillion observed.

'Precisely.' Ammanas slipped noiselessly forward until he was on the other side of the corpse. 'It's her, isn't it.'
'It is.'

'How many times do our followers have to die, Cotillion?' the god asked, then sighed. 'Then again, she clearly ceased being a follower some time ago.'

'She thought we were gone, Ammanas. The Emperor and Dancer. Gone. Dead.'

'And in a way, she was right.'

'In a way, aye. But not in the most important way.'

'Which is?'

Cotillion glanced up, then grimaced. 'She was a friend.'

'Ah, that most important way.' Ammanas was silent for a moment, then he asked, 'Will you pursue this?'

'I see little choice. The Talon is up to something. We need to stop them—''

'No, friend. We need to ensure that they fail. Have you found a ... trail?'

'More than that. I've realized who is masterminding the whole thing.'

Shadowthrone's hooded head cocked slightly. 'And that is where Cutter and Apsalar are going now?'

'Yes.'

'Are they sufficient?'

Cotillion shook his head. 'I have other agents available. But I would Apsalar be relatively close, in case something goes wrong.'

Ammanas nodded. 'So, where?'

'Raraku.'

Though he could not see it, Cotillion knew that his companion's face was splitting into a broad grin. 'Ah, dear Rope, time's come, I think, that I should tell you more of my own endeavours ...'

'The diamonds I gave Kalam? I'd wondered about those.'

Ammanas gestured at Hawl's corpse. 'Let us take her home – our home, that is. And then we must speak ... at length.'

Cotillion nodded.

'Besides,' Shadowthrone added as he straightened, 'Traveller being so close by makes me nervous.'

A moment later, the glade was empty, barring a few sourceless shadows that swiftly dwindled into nothing.

Cutter reached the sandstone shoreline. Four runners had been pulled up on the flat, grainy shelf of rock. Anchored in the bay beyond were two large dromons, both badly damaged.

Around the runners gear lay scattered, and two huge trees had been felled and dragged close – probably intended to replace the snapped masts. Barrels containing salted fish had been broached, while other casks stood in a row nearby, refilled with fresh water.

Cutter set Apsalar down, then approached one of the runners. They were about fifteen paces from bow to stern, broad of beam with an unstepped mast and side-mounted steering oar. There were two oarlocks to a side. The gunnels were crowded with riotous carvings.
A sudden coughing fit from Apsalar swung him round.

She bolted upright, spat to clear her throat, then wrapped her arms about herself as shivering racked through her.

Cutter quickly returned to her side.

'D-Darist?'

'Dead. But so are all the Edur. There was one among the Malazans...'

'The one of power. I felt him. Such ... anger!'

Cutter went over to the nearest water cask, found a ladle. He dipped it full and walked back. 'He called himself Traveller.'

'I know him,' she whispered, then shuddered. 'Not my memories. Dancer's. Dancer knew him. Knew him well. They were... three. It was never just the two of them — did you know that? Never just Dancer and Kellanved. No, he was there. Almost from the very beginning. Before Tayschrenn, before Dujek, before even Surly.'

'Well, it makes no difference now, Apsalar,' Cutter said. 'We need to leave this damned island – Traveller can have it, as far as I'm concerned. Are you recovered enough to help me get one of these runners into the water? We've a bounty in supplies, too—'

'Where are we going?'

He hesitated.

Her dark eyes flattened. 'Cotillion.'

'Another task for us, aye.'

'Do not walk this path, Crokus.'

He scowled. 'I thought you'd appreciate the company.' He offered her the ladle.

She studied him for a long moment, then slowly accepted it.

'Pan'potsun Hills.'

'I know,' Lostara drawled.

Pearl smiled. 'Of course you would. And now, at last, you discover the reason I asked you along—'

'Wait a minute. You couldn't have known where this trail would lead—'

'Well, true, but I have faith in blind nature's penchant for cycles. In any case, is there a buried city nearby?'

'Nearby? You mean, apart from the one we're standing on?' She was pleased to see his jaw drop. 'What did you think all these flat-topped hills were, Claw?'

He loosened his cloak. 'Then again, this place will suit just fine.'

'For what?'

He cast her a sardonic glance. 'Well, dear, a ritual. We need to find a trail, a sorcerous one, and it's old. Did you imagine we would just wander directionless through this wasteland in the hopes of finding something?'

'Odd, I thought that was what we've been doing for days.'
'Just getting some distance between us and that damned Imass head,' he replied, walking over to a flat stretch of stone, where he began kicking it clear of rubble. 'I could feel its unhuman eyes on us all the way across that valley.'

'Him and the vultures, aye.' She tilted her head back and studied the cloudless sky. 'Still with us, in fact. Those damned birds. Not surprising. We're almost out of water, with even less food. In a day or two we'll be in serious trouble.'

'I will leave such mundane worries with you, Lostara.'

'Meaning, if all else fails, you can always kill and eat me, right? But what if I decide to kill you first? Obsessed as I am with mundane worries.'

The Claw settled down into a crosslegged position. 'It's become much cooler here, don't you think? A localized phenomenon, I suspect. Although I would imagine that some measure of success in the ritual I am about to enact should warm things up somewhat.'

'If only the excitement of disbelief,' Lostara muttered, walking over to the edge of the tel and looking south-westward to where the red wall of the Whirlwind cut a curving slash across the desert. Behind her, she heard muted words, spoken in some language unknown to her. Probably gibberish. I've seen enough mages at work to know they don't need words ... not unless they're performing. Pearl was probably doing just that. He was one for poses, even while affecting indifference to his audience of one. A man seeking his name in tomes of history. Some crucial role upon which the fate of the empire pivots.

She turned as he slapped dust from hands, and saw him rising, a troubled frown on his all-too-handsome face.

'That didn't take long,' she said.

'No.' Even he sounded surprised. 'I was fortunate indeed. A local earth spirit was killed ... close by. By a confluence of dire fates, an incidental casualty. Its ghost lingers, like a child seeking lost parents, and so would speak to any and every stranger who happens by, provided that stranger is prepared to listen.'

Lostara grunted. 'All right, and what did it have to say?'

'A terrible incident – well, the terrible incident, the one that killed the spirit – the details of which lead me to conclude there is some connec—'

'Good,' she interrupted. 'Lead on, we're wasting time.'

He fell silent, giving her a wounded look that might well have been sincere. I asked the question, I should at least let him answer it.

A gesture, and he was making his way down the tel's steep, stepped side.

She shouldered her pack and followed.

Reaching the base, the Claw led her around its flank and directly southward across a stony flat. The sunlight bounced from its bleached surface with a fierce, blinding glare. Barring a few ants scurrying underfoot, there was no sign of life on this withered stretch of ground. Small stones lay in elongated clusters here and there, as if describing the shorelines of a dying lake, a lake that had dwindled into a scatter of pools, leaving nothing but crusted salt.

They walked on through the afternoon, until a ridge of hills became visible to the southwest, with another massive mesa rising to its left. The flat began to form a discernible basin that seemed to continue on between the two formations. With dusk only moments away, they reached the even base of that descent, the mesa looming on their left, the broken hill ahead and to their right.

Towards the centre of this flat lay the wreckage of a trader's wagon, surrounded by scorched ground where white ashes spun in small vortices that seemed incapable of going anywhere.
Pearl leading, they strode into the strange burned circle. The ashes were filled with tiny bones, burned white and grey by some intense heat, crunching underfoot. Bemused, Lostara crouched down to study them. 'Birds?' she wondered aloud.

Pearl's gaze was on the wagon or, perhaps, something just beyond it. At her question he shook his head. 'No, lass. Rats.'

She saw a tiny skull lying at her feet, confirming his words. 'There are rats of a sort, in the rocky areas—'

He glanced over at her. 'These are – were – D'ivers. A particularly unpleasant individual named Gryllen.'

'He was slain here?'

'I don't think so. Badly hurt, perhaps.' Pearl walked over to a larger heap of ash, and squatted to sweep it away.

Lostara approached.

He was uncovering a corpse, nothing but bones – and those bones were all terribly gnawed.

'Poor bastard.'

Pearl said nothing. He reached down into the collapsed skeleton and lifted into view a small chunk of metal. 'Melted,' he muttered after a moment, 'but I'd say it's a Malazan sigil. Mage cadre.'

There were four additional heaps similar to that which had hidden the chewed bones. Lostara walked to the nearest one and began kicking the ash away.

'This one's whole!' she hissed, seeing fire-blackened flesh.

Pearl came over. Together, they brushed the corpse clear from the hips upward. Its clothing had been mostly burned off, and fire had raced across the skin but had seemed incapable of doing much more than scorch the surface.

As the Claw swept the last of the ash from the corpse's face, its eyes opened.

Cursing, Lostara leapt back, one hand sweeping her sword free of its scabbard.

'It's all right,' Pearl said, 'this thing isn't going anywhere, lass.'

Behind the corpse's wrinkled, collapsed lids, there were only gaping pits. Its lips had peeled back with desiccation, leaving it with a ghastly, blackened grin.

'What remains?' Pearl asked it. 'Can you still speak?'

Faint sounds rasped from it, forcing Pearl to lean closer.

'What did it say?' Lostara demanded.

The Claw glanced back at her. 'He said, "I am named Clam, and I died a terrible death."'

'No argument there—'

'And then he became an undead porter.'

'For Gryllen?'

'Aye.'

She sheathed her tulwar. 'That seems a singularly unpleasant profession following death.'

Pearl's brows rose, then he smiled. 'Alas, we won't get much more from dear old Clam. Nor the others. The
sorcery holding them animate fades. Meaning Gryllen is either dead or a long way away. In any case, recall the
warren of fire – it was unleashed here, in a strange manner. And it left us a trail.'

'It's too dark, Pearl. We should camp.'

'Here?'

She reconsidered, then scowled in the gloom. 'Perhaps not, but none the less I am weary, and if we're looking
for signs, we'll need daylight in any case.'

Pearl strode from the circle of ash. A gesture and a sphere of light slowly formed in the air above him. 'The
trail does not lead far, I believe. One last task, Lostara. Then we can find somewhere to camp.'

'Oh, very well. Lead on, Pearl.'

Whatever signs he followed, they were not visible to Lostara. Even stranger, it seemed to be a weaving,
wandering one, a detail that had the Claw frowning, his steps hesitant, cautious. Before too long, he was barely
moving at all, edging forward by the smallest increments. And she saw that his face was beaded with sweat.

She bit back on her questions, but slowly drew her sword once more.

Then, finally, they came to another corpse.

The breath whooshed from Pearl, and he sank down to his knees in front of the large, burned body.
She waited until his breathing slowed, then cleared her throat and said, 'What just happened, Pearl?'

'Hood was here,' he whispered.

'Aye, I can well see that—'

'No, you don't understand.' He reached out to the corpse, his hand closing into a fist above its broad chest,
then punched down.

The body was simply a shell. It collapsed with a dusty crunch beneath the blow.

He glared back at her. 'Hood was here. The god himself, Lostara. Came to take this man – not just his soul,
but also the flesh – all that had been infected by the warren of fire – the warren of light, to be more precise.
Gods, what I would do for a Deck of Dragons right now. There's been a change in Hood's ... household.'

'And what is the significance of all this?' she asked. 'I thought we were looking for Felisin.'

'You're not thinking, lass. Remember Stormy's tale. And Truth's. Felisin, Heboric, Kulp and Baudin. We
found what was left of Kulp back at Gryllen's wagon. And this' – his gesture was fierce – 'is Baudin. The
damned Talon – though the proof's not around his neck, alas. Remember their strange skin? Gesler, Stormy,
Truth? The same thing happened to Baudin, here.'

'You called it an infection.'

'Well, I don't know what it is. That warren changed them. There's no telling in what way.'

'So, we're left with Felisin and Heboric Light Touch.'

He nodded.

'Then I feel I should tell you something,' Lostara continued. 'It may not be relevant...'

'Go on, lass.'

She turned to face the hills to the southwest. 'When we trailed that agent of Sha'ik's... into those hills—'

'Kalam Mekhar.'
'Aye. And we ambushed Sha’ik up at the old temple at the summit – on the trail leading into Raraku—’

'As you have described.'

She ignored his impatience. 'We would have seen all this. Thus, the events we've just stumbled upon here occurred after our ambush.'

'Well, yes.'

She sighed and crossed her arms. 'Felisin and Heboric are with the army of the Apocalypse, Pearl. In Raraku.'

'What makes you so certain?'

She shrugged. 'Where else would they be? Think, man. Felisin's hatred of the Malazan Empire must be all-consuming. Nor would Heboric hold much love for the empire that imprisoned and condemned him. They were desperate, after Gryllen's attack. After Baudin and Kulp died. Desperate, and probably hurting.'

He slowly nodded, straightened from his crouch beside the corpse. 'One thing you've never explained to me, Lostara. Why did your ambush fail?'

'It didn't. We killed Sha’ik – I would swear to it. A quarrel in the forehead. We could not recover the body because of her guards, who proved too much for our company. We killed her, Pearl.'

'Then who in Hood's name is commanding the Apocalypse?'

'I don't know.'

'Can you show me this place of ambush?'

'In the morning, aye. I can take you right there.'

He simply stared at her, even as the sphere of light above them began to waver, then finally vanished with a faint sigh.

His memories had awakened. What had lain within the T’lan Imass, layered, indurated by the countless centuries, was a landscape Onrack could read once more. And so, what he saw before him now ... gone were the mesas on the horizon, the wind-sculpted towers of sandstone, the sweeps of windblown sand and white ribbons of ground coral. Gone the gorges, arroyos and dead riverbeds, the planted fields and irrigation ditches. Even the city to the north, on the horizon's very edge, clinging like a tumour to the vast winding river, became insubstantial, ephemeral to his mind's eye.

And all that he now saw was as it had been ... so very long ago.

The inland sea's cloudy waves, rolling like the promise of eternity, along a shoreline of gravel that stretched north, unbroken all the way to the mountains that would one day be called the Thalas, and south, down to encompass the remnant now known as the Clatar Sea. Coral reefs revealed their sharkskin spines a sixth of a league beyond the beach, over which wheeled seagulls and long-beaked birds long since extinct.

There were figures walking along the strand. Renig Obar's clan, come to trade whale ivory and dhenrabi oil from their tundra homelands, and it seemed they had brought the chill winds with them ... or perhaps the unseemly weather that had come to these warm climes hinted of something darker. A Jaghut, hidden in some fasthold, stirring the cauldron of Omtose Phellack. Much more of this and the reefs would die, and with them all the creatures that depended on them.

A breath of unease fluttered through the Onrack who was flesh and blood. But he had stepped aside. No longer a bonecaster for his clan – Absin Tholai was far superior in the hidden arts, after all, and more inclined to the hungry ambition necessary among those who followed the Path of Tellann. All too often, Onrack had found his mind drawn to other things.
To raw beauty, such as he saw before him now. He was not one for fighting, for rituals of destruction. He was always reluctant to dance in the deeper recesses of the caves, where the drums pounded and the echoes rolled through flesh and bone as if one was lying in the path of a stampeding herd of ranag – a herd such as the one Onrack had blown onto the cave walls around them. His mouth bitter with spit, charcoal and ochre, the backs of his hands stained where they had blocked the spray from his lips, defining the shapes on the stone. Art was done in solitude, images fashioned without light, on unseen walls, when the rest of the clan slept in the outer caverns. And it was a simple truth, that Onrack had grown skilled in the sorcery of paint out of that desire to be apart, to be alone.

Among a people where solitude was as close to a crime as possible. Where to separate was to weaken. Where the very breaking of vision into its components – from seeing to observing, from resurrecting memory and reshaping it beyond the eye's reach, onto walls of stone – demanded a fine-edged, potentially deadly propensity.

A poor bonecaster. Onrack, you were never what you were meant to be. And when you broke the unwritten covenant and painted a truthful image of a mortal Imass, when you trapped that lovely, dark woman in time, there in the cavern no-one was meant to find . . . ah, then you fell to the wrath of kin. Of Logros himself, and the First Sword.

But he remembered the expression on the young face of Onos T'oolan, when he had first looked upon the painting of his sister. Wonder and awe, and a resurgence of an abiding love – Onrack was certain that he had seen such in the First Sword's face, was certain that others had, as well, though of course none spoke of it. The law had been broken, and would be answered with severity.

He never knew if Kilava had herself gone to see the painting; had never known if she had been angered, or had seen sufficient to understand the blood of his own heart that had gone into that image.

But that is the last memory I now come to.

'Your silences,' Trull Sengar muttered, 'always send shivers through me, T'lan Imass.'

'The night before the Ritual,' Onrack replied. 'Not far from this place where we now stand. I was to have been banished from my tribe. I had committed a crime to which there was no other answer. Instead, events eclipsed the clans. Four Jaghut tyrants had risen and had formed a compact. They sought to destroy this land – as indeed they have.'

The Tiste Edur said nothing, perhaps wondering what, precisely, had been destroyed. Along the river there were irrigation ditches, and strips of rich green crops awaiting the season's turn. Roads and farmsteads, the occasional temple, and only to the southwest, along that horizon, did the broken ridge of treeless bluffs mar the scene.

'I was in the cavern – in the place of my crime,' Onrack continued after a moment. 'In darkness, of course. My last night, I'd thought, among my own kind. Though in truth I was already alone, driven from the camp to this final place of solitude. And then someone came. A touch. A body, warm. Soft beyond belief – no, not my wife, she had been among the first to shun me, for what I had done, for the betrayal it had meant. No, a woman unknown to me in the darkness ...'

Was it her? I will never know. She was gone in the morning, gone from all of us, even as the Ritual was proclaimed and the clans gathered. She defied the call – no, more horrible yet, she had killed her own kin, all but Onos himself. He had managed to drive her off – the truest measure of his extraordinary martial prowess.

Was it her? Was there blood unseen on her hands? That dried, crumbled powder I found on my own skin – which I'd thought had come from the overturned bowl of paint. Fled from Onos ... to me, in my shameful cave.

And who did I hear in the passage beyond? In the midst of our lovemaking, did someone come upon us and see what I myself could not?

'You need say no more, Onrack,' Trull said softly.

True. And were I mortal flesh, you would see me weep, and thus say what you have just said. Thus, my grief
is not lost to your eyes, Trull Sengar. And yet still you ask why I proclaimed my vow . . .

'The trail of the renegades is ... fresh,' Onrack said after a moment.

Trull half smiled. And you enjoy killing.'

'Artistry finds new forms, Edur. It defies being silenced.' The T'lan Imass slowly turned to face him. 'Of course, changes have come to us. I am no longer free to pursue this hunt... unless you wish the same.'

Trull grimaced, scanned the lands to the southwest. 'Well, it's not as inviting a prospect as it once was, I'll grant you. But, Onrack, these renegades are agents in the betrayal of my people, and I mean to discover as much as I can of their role. Thus, we must find them.'

'And speak with them.'

'Speak with them first, aye, and then you can kill them.'

'I no longer believe I am capable of that, Trull Sengar. I am too badly damaged. Even so, Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan are pursuing us. They will suffice.'

The Tiste Edur's head had turned at this. 'Just the two of them? You are certain?'

'My powers are diminished, but yes, I believe so.'

'How close?'

'It does not matter. They withhold their desire for vengeance against me ... so that I might lead them to those they have hunted from the very beginning.'

'They suspect you will join the renegades, don't they?'

'Broken kin. Aye, they do.'

'And will you?'

Onrack studied the Tiste Edur for a moment. 'Only if you do, Trull Sengar.'

They were at the very edge of cultivated land, and so it was relatively easy to avoid contact with any of the local residents. The lone road they crossed was empty of life in both directions for as far as they could see. Beyond the irrigated fields, the rugged natural landscape reasserted itself. Tufts of grasses, sprawls of water-smoothed gravel tracking down dry gulches and ravines, the occasional gulindha tree.

The hills ahead were saw-toothed, the facing side clawed into near cliffs.

Those hills were where the T'lan Imass had broken the ice sheets, the first place of defiance. To protect the holy sites, the hidden caves, the flint quarries. Where, now, the weapons of the fallen were placed.

*Weapons these renegades would reclaim.* There was no provenance to the sorcery investing those stone blades, at least with respect to Tellann. They would feed the ones who held them, provided they were kin to the makers – or indeed made by those very hands long ago. Imass, then, since the art among the mortal peoples was long lost. Also, finding those weapons would give the renegades their final freedom, severing the power of Tellann from their bodies.

'You spoke of betraying your clan,' Trull Sengar said as they approached the hills. 'These seem to be old memories, Onrack.'

'Perhaps we are destined to repeat our crimes, Trull Sengar. Memories have returned to me – all that I had thought lost. I do not know why.'

'The severing of the Ritual?'
'Possibly.'

'What was your crime?'

'I trapped a woman in time. Or so it seemed. I painted her likeness in a sacred cave. It is now my belief that, in so doing, I was responsible for the terrible murders that followed, for her leaving the clan. She could not join in the Ritual that made us immortal, for by my hand she had already become so. Did she know this? Was this the reason for her defying Logros and the First Sword? There are no answers to that. What madness stole her mind, so that she would kill her closest kin, so that, indeed, she would seek to kill the First Sword himself, her own brother?'

'A woman not your mate, then.'

'No. She was a bonecaster. A Soletaken.'

'Yet you loved her.'

A lopsided shrug. 'Obsession is its own poison, Trull Sengar.'

A narrow goat trail led up into the range, steep and winding in its ascent. They began climbing.

'I would object,' the Tiste Edur said, 'to this notion of being doomed to repeat our mistakes, Onrack. Are no lessons learned? Does not experience lead to wisdom?'

'Trull Sengar. I have just betrayed Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan. I have betrayed the T'lan Imass, for I chose not to accept my fate. Thus, the same crime as the one I committed long ago. I have always hungered for solitude from my kind. In the realm of the Nascent, I was content. As I was in the sacred caves that lie ahead.'

'Content? And now, at this moment?'

Onrack was silent for a time. 'When memories have returned, Trull Sengar, solitude is an illusion, for every silence is filled by a clamorous search for meaning.'

'You're sounding more ... mortal with every day that passes, friend.'

'Flawed, you mean.'

The Tiste Edur grunted. 'Even so. Yet look at what you are doing right now, Onrack.'

'What do you mean?'

Trull Sengar paused on the trail and looked at the T'lan Imass. His smile was sad. 'You're returning home.'

A short distance away were camped the Tiste Liosan. Battered, but alive. Which was, Malachar reflected, at least something.

Strange stars gleamed overhead, their light wavering, as if brimming with tears. The landscape stretching out beneath them seemed a lifeless wasteland of weathered rock and sand.

The fire they had built in the lee of a humped mesa had drawn strange moths the size of small birds, as well as a host of other flying creatures, including winged lizards. A swarm of flies had descended on them earlier, biting viciously before vanishing as quickly as they had come. And now, those bites seemed to crawl, as if the insects had left something behind.

There was, to Malachar's mind, an air of... unwelcome to this realm. He scratched at one of the lumps on his arm, hissed as he felt something squirm beneath the hot skin. Turning back to the fire, he studied his seneschal.

Jorrude knelt beside the hearth, head lowered – a position that had not changed in some time – and Malachar's disquiet deepened. Enias squatted close by the seneschal, ready to move if yet another fit of anguish overwhelmed his master, but those disturbing sessions were arriving ever less frequently. Orenas remained
guarding the horses, and Malachar knew he stood with sword drawn in the darkness beyond the fire's light.

There would be an accounting one day, he knew, with the T'lan Imass. The Tiste Liosan had proceeded with the ritual in good faith. They had been too open. *Never trust a corpse.* Malachar did not know if such a warning was found in the sacred text of Osric's Visions. If not, he would see that it was added to the collected wisdom of the Tiste Liosan. *When we return. If we return.*

Jorrude slowly straightened. His face was ravaged with grief. 'The Guardian is dead,' he announced. 'Our realm is assailed, but our brothers and sisters have been warned and even now ride out to the gates. The Tiste Liosan will hold. Until Osric's return, we shall hold.' He slowly swung to face each of them in turn, including Orenas who silently appeared out of the gloom. 'For us, another task. The one we were assigned to complete. On this realm, somewhere, we will find the trespassers. The thieves of the Fire. I have quested, and they have never been closer to my senses. They are in this world, and we shall find them.'

Malachar waited, for he knew there was more.

Jorrude then smiled. 'My brothers. We know nothing of this place. But that is a disadvantage that will prove temporary, for I have also sensed the presence of an old friend to the Tiste Liosan. Not far away. We shall seek him out – our first task – and ask him to acquaint us with the rigours of this land.'

'Who is this old friend, Seneschal?' Enias asked.

'The Maker of Time, Brother Enias.'


'Orenas,' Jorrude said, 'prepare our horses.'
Karsa orlong was no stranger to stone. Raw copper gouged from outcroppings, tin and their mating that was bronze, such materials had their place. But wood and stone were the words of the hands, the sacred shaping of will.

Parallel flakes, long and thin, translucent slivers punched away from the blade, leaving ripples reaching across, from edge to wavy spine. Smaller flakes removed from the twin edges, first one side, then flipping the blade over between blows, back and forth, all the way up the length.

To fight with such a weapon would demand changes to the style with which Karsa was most familiar. Wood flexed, slid with ease over shield rims, skipped effortlessly along out-thrust sword-blades. This flint sword's serrated edges would behave differently, and he would have to adjust, especially given its massive weight and length.

The handle proved the most challenging. Flint did not welcome roundness, and the less angular the handle became, the less stable the striking platforms. For the pommel he worked the stone into a step-fractured, oversized diamond shape – the nearly right-angled step-fractures would normally be viewed as dangerous flaws, inviting a focus for shattering energies, but the gods had promised to make the weapon unbreakable, so Karsa dismissed his instinctive worry. He would wait until he found suitable materials for a cross-hilt.

He had no idea how much time passed during his making of the sword. All other considerations vanished for him — he felt no hunger, no thirst, and did not notice as the walls of the cavern grew slick with condensation, as the temperature ever rose, until both he and the stone were sheathed in sweat. He was also unmindful of the fire in the boulder-lined hearth that burned ceaselessly, unfuelled, the flames flickering with strange colours.

The sword commanded all. The feel of his companion ghosts resonated from the blade into his fingertips, then along every bone and muscle in his body. Bairoth Gild, whose cutting irony seemed to have somehow infused the weapon, as had Delum Thord's fierce loyalty – these were unexpected gifts, a mysterious contortion of themes, of aspects, that imbued a personality to the sword.

Among the legends there were songs celebrating cherished weapons and the Teblor heroes who wielded them. Karsa had always held that the notion of weapons possessing wills of their own was little more than a poet's conceit. And those heroes who had betrayed their blades and so suffered tragic ends, well, in each tale, Karsa had no difficulty in citing other, more obvious flaws in their actions, sufficient to explain the hero's demise.

The Teblor never passed down weapons to heirs – all possessions accompanied the one who had died, for what worth a ghost bereft of all it had acquired in its mortal life?

The flint sword that found shape in Karsa's hands was therefore unlike anything he had known – or heard of – before. It rested on the ground before him, strangely naked despite the leather he had wrapped around the grip. No hilt, no scabbard. Massive and brutal, yet beautiful in its symmetry, despite the streaks of blood left by
his lacerated hands.

He became aware of the searing heat in the cavern, and slowly looked up.

The seven gods stood facing him in a flattened crescent, the hearth's flames flickering across their battered, broken bodies. They held weapons to match the one now lying before him, though scaled down to suit their squat forms.

'You have come in truth,' Karsa observed.

The one he knew as Urugal replied, 'We have. We are now free of the Ritual's bindings. The chains, Karsa Orlong, are broken.'

Another spoke in a low, rasping voice. 'The Warren of Tellann has found your sword, Karsa Orlong.' The god's neck was mangled, broken, the head fallen onto a shoulder and barely held in place by muscle and tendons. 'It shall never shatter.'

Karsa grunted. 'There are broken weapons in the caverns beyond.'

'Elder sorcery,' Urugal answered. 'Inimical warrens. Our people have fought many wars.'

'You T'lan Imass have indeed,' the Teblor warrior said. 'I walked upon stairs made of your kin. I have seen your kind, fallen in such numbers as to defy comprehension.' He scanned the seven creatures standing before him. 'What battle took you?'

Urugal shrugged. 'It is of no significance, Karsa Orlong. A struggle of long ago, an enemy now dust, a failure best forgotten. We have known wars beyond counting, and what have they achieved? The Jaghut were doomed to extinction – we but hastened the inevitable. Other enemies announced themselves and stood in our path. We were indifferent to their causes, none of which was sufficient to turn us aside. And so we slaughtered them. Again and again. Wars without meaning, wars that changed virtually nothing. To live is to suffer. To exist – even as we do – is to resist.'

'This is all that was learned, Karsa Orlong,' said the T'lan Imass woman known as 'Siballe. 'In its totality. Stone, sea, forest, city – and every creature that ever lived – all share the same struggle. Being resists unbeing. Order wars against the chaos of dissolution, of disorder. Karsa Orlong, this is the only worthy truth, the greatest of all truths. What do the gods themselves worship, but perfection? The unattainable victory over nature, over nature's uncertainty. There are many words for this struggle. Order against chaos, structure against dissolution, light against dark, life against death. But they all mean the same thing.'

The broken-necked T'lan Imass spoke in a whisper, his words a droning chant. 'The ranag has fallen lame. Is distanced from the herd. Yet walks on in its wake. Seeking the herd's protection. Time will heal. Or weaken. Two possibilities. But the lame ranag knows naught but stubborn hope. For that is its nature. The ay have seen it and now close. The prey is still strong. But alone. The ay know weakness. Like a scent on the cold wind. They run with the stumbling ranag. And drive it away from the herd. Still, it is stubborn hope. It makes its stand. Head lowered, horns ready to crush ribs, send the enemy flying. But the ay are clever. Circle and attack, then spring away. Again and again. Hunger wars with stubborn hope. Until the ranag is exhausted. Bleeding. Staggering. Then the ay all attack at once. Nape of neck. Legs. Throat. Until the ranag is dragged down. And stubborn hope gives way, Karsa Orlong. It gives way, as it always must, to mute inevitability.'

The Teblor bared his teeth. 'Yet your new master would harbour that lame beast. Would offer it a haven.'

'You cross the bridge before we have built it, Karsa Orlong,' Urugal said. 'It seems Bairoth Gild taught you how to think, before he himself failed and so died. You are indeed worthy of the name Warleader.'

'Perfection is an illusion,' 'Siballe said. 'Thus, mortal and immortal alike are striving for what cannot be achieved. Our new master seeks to alter the paradigm, Karsa Orlong. A third force, to change for ever the eternal war between order and dissolution.'

'A master demanding the worship of imperfection,' the Teblor growled.
'Siballe's head creaked in a nod. 'Yes.'

Karsa realized he was thirsty and walked over to his pack, retrieving a waterskin. He drank deep, then returned to his sword. He closed both hands about the grip and lifted it before him, studying its rippled length.

'An extraordinary creation,' Urugal said. 'If Imass weapons could have a god ...'

Karsa smiled at the T'lan Imass he had once knelt before, in a distant glade, in a time of youth – when the world he saw was both simple and ... perfect. 'You are not gods.'

'We are,' Urugal replied. 'To be a god is to possess worshippers.'

'To guide them,' 'Siballe added.

'You are wrong, both of you,' Karsa said. 'To be a god is to know the burden of believers. Did you protect? You did not. Did you offer comfort, solace? Were you possessed of compassion? Even pity? To the Teblor, T'lan Imass, you were slavemasters, eager and hungry, making harsh demands, and expecting cruel sacrifices – all to feed your own desires. You were the Teblor's unseen chains.' His eyes settled on 'Siballe. 'And you, woman, 'Siballe the Unfound, you were the taker of children.'

'Imperfect children, Karsa Orlong, who would otherwise have died. And they do not regret my gifts.'

'No, I would imagine not. The regret remains with the mothers and fathers who surrendered them. No matter how brief a child's life, the love of the parents is a power that should not be denied. And know this, 'Siballe, it is immune to imperfection.' His voice was harsh to his own ears, grating out from a constricted throat. 'Worship imperfection,' you said. A metaphor you made real by demanding that those children be sacrificed. Yet you were – and remain – unmindful of the most crucial gift that comes from worship. You have no understanding of what it is to ease the burdens of those who would worship you. But even that is not your worst crime. No. You then gave us your own burdens.' He shifted his gaze. 'Tell me, Urugal, what have the Teblor done to deserve that?'

'Your own people have forgotten—'

'Tell me.'

Urugal shrugged. 'You failed.'

Karsa stared at the battered god, unable to speak. The sword trembled in his hands. He had held it up for all this time, and now, finally, its weight threatened to drag his arms down. He fixed his eyes on the weapon, then slowly lowered the tip to rest on the stone floor.

'We too failed, once, long ago,' 'Siballe said. 'Such things cannot be undone. Thus, you may surrender to it, and so suffer beneath its eternal torment. Or you can choose to free yourself of the burden. Karsa Orlong, our answer to you is simple: to fail is to reveal a flaw. Face that revelation, do not turn your back on it, do not make empty vows to never repeat your mistakes. It is done. Celebrate it! That is our answer, and indeed is the answer shown us by the Crippled God.'

The tension drained from Karsa's shoulders. He drew a deep breath, released it slowly. 'Very well. To you, and to the Crippled God, I now give my answer.'

Rippled stone made no silent passage through the air. Instead, it roared, like pine needles exploding into flame. Up, over Karsa's head, wheeling in a sliding circle that then swept down and across.

The edge taking 'Siballe between left shoulder and neck. Bones snapping as the massive blade ploughed through, diagonally, across the chest, severing the spine, down and through the ribcage, sweeping clear just above her right hip.

She had lifted her own sword to intercept at some point, and it had shattered, flinging shards and slivers into the air – Karsa had not even felt the impact.
He whipped the huge blade in a curving arc in his follow-through, lifting it to poise, suddenly motionless, over his head.

The ruined form that was 'Siballe collapsed in clattering pieces onto the stone floor. The T'lan Imass had been cut in half.

The remaining six had raised their own weapons, but none moved to attack.

Karsa snarled. 'Come ahead, then.'

'Will you now destroy the rest of us?' Urugal asked.

'Her army of foundlings will follow me,' the Teblor growled, sneering down at 'Siballe. Then he glared up once more. 'You will leave my people – leave the glade. You are done with us, T'lan Imass. I have delivered you here. I have freed you. If you ever appear before me again, I will destroy you. Walk the dreams of the tribal elders, and I will come hunting you. And I shall not relent. I, Karsa Orlong, of the Uryd, of the Teblor Thelomen Toblakai, so avow.' He took a step closer, and the six T'lan Imass flinched. 'You used us. You used me. And, for my reward, what did you just offer?'

'We sought—'

'You offered a new set of chains. Now, leave this place. You have all you desired. Get out.'

The six T'lan Imass walked towards the cave mouth. A momentary occluding of the sunlight spilling into the front cavern, then they were gone.

Karsa lowered his sword. He looked down at 'Siballe.

'Unexpected,' she said.

The warrior grunted. 'I'd heard you T'lan Imass were hard to kill.'

'Impossible, Karsa Orlong. We ... persist. Will you leave me here?'

'There is to be no oblivion for you?'

'Once, long ago, a sea surrounded these hills. Such a sea would free me to the oblivion you speak of. You return me to a fate – and a punishment – that I have spent millennia seeking to escape. I suppose that is apt enough.'

'What of your new master, this Crippled God?'

'He has abandoned me. It would appear that there are acceptable levels of imperfection – and unacceptable levels of imperfection. I have lost my usefulness.'

'Another god that understands nothing of what it is to be a god,' Karsa rumbled, walking over to his pack.

'What will you do now, Karsa Orlong?'

'I go in search of a horse.'

'Ah, a Jhag horse. Yes, they can be found to the southwest of here, on the odhan. Rare. You may be searching for a long time.'

The Teblor shrugged. He loosened the strings that closed the mouth of the pack and walked over to the shambles that was 'Siballe. He lifted the part of her containing the head and right shoulder and arm.

'What are you doing?'

'Do you need the rest?'

'No. What—'
Karsa pushed her head, shoulder and arm into his pack, then drew the strings once more. He would need a harness and a scabbard for the sword, but that would have to wait. He shrugged into the pack's straps, then straightened and leaned the sword over his right shoulder.

A final glance around.

The hearth still raged with a sorcerous fire, though it had begun flickering more rapidly now, as if using up the last of its unseen fuel. He thought about kicking gravel over it to douse it, then shrugged and turned to the cave mouth.

As he came to the entrance, two figures suddenly rose before him, blocking the light.

Karsa's sword whipped across his path, the flat of the blade thundering against both figures, sending them flying off the ledge.

'Get out of my way,' the warrior growled, stepping out into the sunlight.

He spared neither intruder another glance as he set off along the trail, where it angled southwest.

Trull Sengar groaned, then opened his eyes. He lifted his head, wincing at the countless sharp pains pressing into his back. That flint sword had thrown him down a scree of stone chips ... although it had been hapless Onrack who had taken the brunt of the blow. Even so, his chest ached, and he feared his ribs were bruised, if not cracked.

The T'lan Imass was awkwardly regaining its feet a dozen paces away.

Trull spat and said, 'Had I known the door was barred, I would have knocked first. That was a damned Thelomen Toblakai.'

The Tiste Edur saw Onrack's head snap round to stare back up at the cave.

'What is it?' Trull demanded. 'He's coming down to finish us?'

'No,' the T'lan Imass replied. 'In that cave ... the Warren of Tellann lingers ...'

'What of it?'

Onrack began climbing the rock slide toward the cavern's mouth.

Hissing his frustration, Trull clambered upward and followed, slowly, pausing every few steps until he was able to find his breath once more.

When he entered the cave he gave a shout of alarm. Onrack was standing inside a fire, the rainbow-coloured flames engulfing him. And the T'lan Imass held, in its right hand, the shattered remains of another of its kind.

Trull stepped forward, then his feet skidded out from under him and he fell hard onto a bed of sharp flint chips. Pain thundered from his ribs, and it was some time before he could breathe once more. Cursing, he rolled onto his side – gingerly – then carefully climbed upright. The air was hot as a forge.

Then the cavern was suddenly dark – the strange fire had gone out.

A pair of hands closed on Trull's shoulders.

'The renegades have fled,' said Onrack. 'But they are close. Come.'

'Right, lead on, friend.'

A moment before they emerged into the sunlight, sudden shock raced through Trull Sengar.

A pair of hands.
Karsa skirted the valley side, making his way along what passed for a trail. Countless rockslides had buried it every ten paces or so, forcing him to scramble across uncertain, shifting gravel, raising clouds of dust in his wake.

On second consideration, he realized that one of the two strangers who had blocked his exit from the cave had been a T’lan Imass. Not surprising, since the entire valley, with all its quarries, mines and tombs, was a site holy to them ... assuming anything could be holy to creatures that were undead. And the other – not human at all. But familiar none the less. Ah, like the ones on the ship. The grey-skinned ones I killed.

Perhaps he should retrace his route. His sword had yet to drink real blood, after all. Barring his own, of course.

Ahead, the trail cut sharply upward, out of the valley. Thoughts of having to repeat this dust-fouled, treacherous route decided him. He would save the bleeding of his sword for more worthy enemies. He made his way upward.

It was clear the six T’lan Imass had not taken this route. Fortunate for them. He had lost his patience with their endless words, especially when the deeds they had done shouted louder, loud enough to overwhelm their pathetic justifications. He reached the crest and pulled himself onto level ground. The vista stretching to the southwest was as untamed as any place Karsa had yet to see in Seven Cities. No signs of civilization were apparent – no evidence at all that this land had ever been broken. Tall prairie grasses waved in the hot wind, cloaking low, rolling hills that continued on to the horizon. Clumps of low, bushy trees filled the basins, flickering dusty green and grey as the wind shook their leaves.

*The Jhag Odhan.* He knew, suddenly, that this land would capture his heart with its primal siren call. Its scale ... matched his own, in ways he could not define. *Thelomen Toblakai have known this place, have walked it before me.* A truth, though he was unable to explain how he knew it to be so.

He lifted his sword. ‘Bairoth Delum – so I name you. Witness. The Jhag Odhan. So unlike our mountain fastnesses. To this wind I give your name – see how it races out to brush the grasses, to roll against the hill and through the trees. I give this land your name, Bairoth Delum.’

That warm wind sang against the sword’s rippled blade with moaning cadence.

A flash of movement in the grasses, a thousand paces distant. Wolves, fur the colour of honey, long-limbed, taller than any he had ever before seen. Karsa smiled.

He set forth.

The grasses reached to just beneath his chest, the ground underfoot hardpacked between the knotted roots. Small creatures rustled continually from his path, and he startled the occasional deer – a small breed, reaching no higher than his knees, that hissed like an arrow between the stalks as it fled.

One proved not quite fast enough to avoid his scything blade, and Karsa would eat well this night. Thus, his sword’s virgin thirst was born of necessity, not the rage of battle. He wondered if the ghosts had known displeasure at such an ignoble beginning. They had surrendered their ability to communicate with him upon entering the stone, though Karsa’s imagination had no difficulty in finding Bairoth’s sarcastic commentary, should he seek it. Delum’s measured wisdom was more difficult, yet valued all the more for that.

The sun swept its even arc across the cloudless sky as he marched on. Towards dusk he saw bhederin herds to the west, and, two thousand paces ahead, a herd of striped antelope crested a hilltop to watch him for a time, before wheeling as one and vanishing from sight.

The western horizon was a fiery conflagration when he reached the place where they had stood.

Where a figure awaited him.

The grasses had been flattened in a modest circle. A three-legged brazier squatted in its centre, filled with orange-glowing pieces of bhederin dung that cast forth no smoke. Seated behind it was a Jaghut. Bent and gaunt to the point of emaciation, wearing ragged skins and hides, long grey hair hanging in strands over a
blotched, wrinkled brow, eyes the colour of the surrounding grass.

The Jaghut glanced up as Karsa approached, offering the Teblor something between a grimace and a smile, his yellowed tusks gleaming. 'You have made a mess of that deer skin, Toblakai. I will take it none the less, in exchange for this cookfire.'

'Agreed,' Karsa replied, dropping the carcass beside the brazier.

'Aramala contacted me, and so I have come to meet you. You have done her a noble service, Toblakai.'

Karsa set down his pack and squatted before the brazier. 'I hold no loyalty to the T'lan Imass.'

The Jaghut reached across and collected the deer. A small knife flashed in his hand and he began cutting just above the animal's small hoofs. 'An expression of their gratitude, after she fought alongside them against the Tyrants. As did I, although I was fortunate enough to escape with little more than a broken spine. Tomorrow, I will lead you to one far less fortunate than either Aramala or myself.'

Karsa grunted. 'I seek a Jhag horse, not an introduction to your friends.'

The ancient Jaghut cackled. 'Blunt words. Thelomen Toblakai indeed. I had forgotten, and so lost my appreciation. The one I will take you to shall call out to the wild horses – and they will come.'

'A singular skill.'

'Aye, and hers alone, for it was, by and large, by her hand and her will that the horses came into being.'

'A breeder, then.'

'Of sorts,' the Jaghut nodded amicably. He began peeling the hide from the deer. 'The few of my fallen kin still alive will greatly appreciate this skin, despite the damage wrought by your ghastly stone sword. The aras deer are fleet, and clever. They never use the same trail – ha, they do not even make trails! And so one cannot lie in wait. Nor are snares of any use. And when pursued, where do they go? Why, into the bhederin herds, under the very beasts themselves. Clever, I said. Very clever.'

'I am Karsa Orlong, of the Uryd—'

'Yes, yes, I know. From distant Genabackis. Little different from my fallen kin, the Jhag. Ignorant of your great and noble history—'

'Less ignorant than I once was.'

'Good. I am named Cynnigig, and now you are even less ignorant.'

Karsa shrugged. 'The name means nothing to me.'

'Of course not, it's mine. Was I infamous? No, though once I aspired to be. Well, for a moment or two. But then I changed my mind. You, Karsa Orlong, you are destined for infamy. Perhaps indeed you have already achieved it, back in your homeland.'

'I think not. No doubt I am believed dead, and nothing of what I did is known to my family or my tribe.'

Cynnigig cut off a haunch and threw it on the flames. A cloud of smoke rose from the hissing, spitting fire. 'So you might think, but I would hazard otherwise. Word travels, no matter what the barriers. The day you return, you will see.'

'I care not for fame,' Karsa said. 'I did once ...'

'And then?'

'I changed my mind.'

Cynnigig laughed once again, louder this time. 'I have brought wine, my young friend. In yonder chest, yes,
Karsa straightened and walked over. The chest was massive, iron-bounded and thick-planked, robust enough to challenge even Karsa, should he choose to lift it. 'This should have wheels and a train of oxen,' the Teblor muttered as he crouched before it. 'How did you bring it with you?'

'I didn't. It brought me.'

Games with words. Scowling, Karsa lifted the lid.

A single carafe of crystal stood in its centre, flanked by a pair of chipped clay beakers. The wine's deep red colour gleamed through the transparent crystal, bathing the otherwise empty interior of the chest with a warm, sunset hue. Karsa stared down into it for a moment, then grunted. 'Aye, I can see that it would fit you, provided you curled up. You and the wine and the brazier—'

'The brazier! That would be a hot journey!'

The Teblor's scowl deepened. 'Unlit, of course.'

'Ah, yes, of course. Cease your gawking, then, and pour us some wine. I'm about to turn the meat here.'

Karsa reached down, then snatched his hand back. 'It's cold in there!'

'I prefer my wine chilled, even the red. I prefer everything chilled, in fact.'

Grimacing, the Teblor picked up the carafe and the two beakers. 'Then someone must have carried you here.'

'Only if you believe all that I tell you. And all that you see, Karsa Orlong. A T'lan Imass army marched by here, not so long ago. Did they find me? No. Why? I was hidden in my chest, of course. Did they find the chest? No, because it was a rock. Did they note the rock? Perhaps. But then, it was only a rock. Now, I know what you're thinking, and you would be precisely correct. The sorcery I speak of is not Omtose Phellack. But why would I seek to employ Omtose Phellack, when that is the very scent the T'lan Imass hunted? Oh no. Is there some cosmic law that Jaghut can only use Omtose Phellack? I've read a hundred thousand night skies and have yet to see it written there— oh, plenty of other laws, but nothing approaching that one, neither in detail nor intent. Thus saving us the bloody recourse of finding a Forkrul Assail to adjudicate, and believe me, such adjudication is invariably bloody. Rarely indeed is anyone satisfied. Rarer still that anyone is left alive. Is there justice in such a thing, I ask you? Oh yes, perhaps the purest justice of all. On any given day, the aggrieved and the aggriever could stand in each other's clothes. Never a question of right and wrong, in truth, simply one of deciding who is least wrong. Do you grasp—'

'What I grasp,' Karsa cut in, 'is the smell of burning meat.'

'Ah, yes. Rare are my moments of discourse—'

'I had no idea.'

'—which cannot be said for this meat. Of course you wouldn't, since we have just met. But I assure you, I have little opportunity to talk—'

'There in your chest.'

Cynnigig grinned. 'Precisely. You have the gist of it. Precisely. Thelomen Toblakai indeed.'

Karsa handed the Jaghut a beaker filled with wine. 'Alas, my hand has warmed it some.'

'I'll suffer the degradation, thank you. Here, help yourself to the deer. Charcoal is good for you, did you know that? Cleanses the digestive tract, confounds the worms, turns your excrement black. Black as a forest bear's. Recommended if you are being pursued, for it will fool most, barring those who have made a study of excrement, of course.'

'And do such people exist?'
'I have no idea. I rarely get out. What preening empires have risen only to then fall beyond the Jhag Odhan? Pomposity choking on dust, these are cycles unending among short-lived creatures. I do not grieve for my own ignorance. Why should I? Not knowing what I have missed means I do not miss what I do not know. How could I? Do you see? Aramala was ever questing for such pointless knowledge, and look where it got her. Same for Phyrlis, whom you will meet tomorrow. She can never see beyond the leaves in front of her face, though she ceaselessly strives to do so, as if the vast panorama offers something other than time's insectile crawl. Empires, thrones, tyrants and liberators, a hundred thousand tomes filled with versions of the same questions, asked over and over again. Will answers deliver their promised solace? I think not. Here, cook some more, Karsa Orlong, and drink more wine – you see the carafe never empties. Clever, isn't it? Now, where was I?'

'You rarely get out.'

'Indeed. What preening empires have risen only to then fall beyond the Jhag Odhan? Pomposity choking ...' Karsa's eyes narrowed on the Jhag Odhan, then he reached for the wine.

A lone tree stood on ground that was the summit of a hill that in turn abutted a larger hill. Sheltered from the prevailing winds, it had grown vast, its bark thin and peeling as if it was skin unable to contain the muscular breadth underneath. Branches as thick around as Karsa's thigh reached out from the massive, knotted trunk. Its top third was thickly leaved, forming broad, flattened canopies of dusty green.

'Looks old, doesn't it?' Cynnigig said as they climbed towards it, the Jaghut walking with a hooked, sideways gait. 'You have no idea how old, my young friend. No idea. I dare not reveal to you the truth of its antiquity. Have you seen its like before? I think not. Perhaps reminiscent of the guldindha, such as can be found here and there across the odhan. Reminiscent, as a ranag is reminiscent of a goat. More than simply a question of stature. No, it is in truth a question of antiquity. An Elder species, this tree. A sapling when an inland sea hissed salty sighs over this land. Tens of thousands of years, you wonder? No. Hundreds of thousands. Once, Karsa Orlong, these were the dominant trees across most of the world. All things know their time, and when that time is past, they vanish—'

'But this one hasn't.'

'No sharper an observance could be made. And why, you ask?'

'I do not bother, for I know you will tell me in any case.'

'Of course I shall, for I am of a helpful sort, a natural proclivity. The reason, my young friend, shall soon be made evident.'

They clambered over the last of the rise and came to the flat ground, eternally shadowed beneath the canopy and so free of grasses. The tree and all its branches, Karsa now saw, were wrapped in spiders' webs that somehow remained entirely translucent no matter how thickly woven, revealed only by a faint flickering reflection. And beneath that glittering shroud, the face of a Jaghut stared back at him.

'Phyrlis,' Cynnigig said, 'this is the one Aramala spoke of, the one seeking a worthy horse.'

The Jaghut woman's body remained visible here and there, revealing that the tree had indeed grown around her. Yet a single shaft of wood emerged from just behind her right collarbone, rejoining the main trunk along the side of her head.

'Shall I tell him your story, Phyrlis? Of course, I must, if only for its remarkability.'

Her voice did not come from her mouth, but sounded, fluid and soft, inside Karsa's head. 'Of course you must, Cynnigig. It is your nature to leave no word unsaid.'

Karsa smiled, for there was too much affection in the tone to lend the words any edge.

'My Thelomen Toblakai friend, a most extraordinary tale, for which true explanations remain beyond us all,' Cynnigig began, settling down cross-legged on the stony ground. 'Dear Phyrlis was a child – no, a babe, still
suckling from her mother's breast – when a band of T'lan Imass ran them down. The usual fate ensued. The mother was slain, and Phyrlis was dealt with also in the usual fashion – spitted on a spear, the spear anchored into the earth. None could have predicted what then followed, neither Jaghut nor T'lan Imass, for it was unprecedented. That spear, wrought of native wood, took what it could of Phyrlis's lifespirit and so was reborn. Roots reached down to grip the bedrock, branches and leaves sprang anew, and in return the wood's own lifespirit rewarded the child. Together, then, they grew, escaping their relative fates. Phyrlis renews the tree, the tree renews Phyrlis.'

Karsa set his sword's point down and leaned on it. 'Yet she was the maker of the Jhag horses.'

'A small role, Karsa Orlong. From my blood came their longevity. The Jhag horses breed infrequently, insufficient to increase, or even maintain, their numbers, were they not so long-lived.'

'I know, for the Teblor – my own people, who dwell in the mountains of north Genabackis – maintain herds of what must be Jhag horses.'

'If so, then I am pleased. They are being hunted to extinction here on the Jhag Odhan.'

'Hunted? By whom?'

'By distant kin of yours, Thelomen Toblakai. Trell.'

Karsa was silent for a moment, then he scowled. 'Such as the one known as Mappo?'

'Yes indeed. Mappo Runt, who travels with Icarium. Icarium, who carries arrows made from my branches. Who, each time he visits me, remembers naught of the previous encounter. Who asks, again and again, for my heartwood, so that he may fashion from it a mechanism to measure time, for my heartwood alone can outlive all other constructs.'

'And do you oblige him?' Karsa asked.

'No, for it would kill me. Instead, I bargain. A strong shaft for a bow. Branches for arrows.'

'Have you no means to defend yourself, then?'

'Against Icarium, no-one has, Karsa Orlong.'

The Teblor warrior grunted. 'I had an argument with Icarium, which neither of us won.' He tapped his stone sword. 'My weapon was of wood, but now I wield this one. The next time we meet, even Mappo Trell's treachery shall not save Icarium.'

Both Jaghut were silent for a long moment, and Karsa realized that Phyrlis was speaking to Cynnigig, for he saw his expression twist with alarm. Ochre eyes flicked momentarily up to the Teblor, then away again.

Finally, Cynnigig loosed a long sigh and said, 'Karsa Orlong, she now calls upon the nearest herd – the lone herd she knows has come close to this area in answer to her first summons. She had hoped for more – evidence, perhaps, of how few Jhag horses remain.'

'How many head in this herd?'

'I cannot say, Karsa Orlong. They usually number no more than a dozen. Those that now approach are perhaps the last left in the Jhag Odhan.'

Karsa lifted his gaze suddenly as the noise of hoofs sounded, rumbling through the ground underfoot. 'More than a dozen, I think,' he murmured.

Cynnigig clambered upright, wincing with the effort.

Movement in the valley below. Karsa swung around.

The ground was shaking, the roar of thunder on all sides now. The tree behind him shook as if struck by a
sudden gale. In his mind, the Teblor heard Phyrlis cry out.

The horses came in their hundreds. Grey as iron, larger even than those Karsa's tribe had bred. Streaming, tossing manes of black. Stallions, flinging their heads back and bucking to clear a space around them. Broad-backed mares, foals racing at their flanks.

Hundreds into thousands.

The air filled with dust, lifting on the wind and corkscrewing skyward as if to challenge the Whirlwind itself.

More of the wild horses topped the hill above them, and the thunder suddenly fell away as every beast halted, forming a vast iron ring facing inward. Silence, the dust cloud rolling, tumbling away on the wind.

Karsa faced the tree once more. 'It seems you need not worry that they near extinction, Phyrlis. I have never seen so many foals and yearlings in a herd. Nor have I ever before seen a herd of this size. There must ten, fifteen thousand head – and we cannot even see all of them.'

Phyrlis seemed incapable of replying. The tree's branches still shook, the branches rattling in the hot air.

'You speak true, Karsa Orlong,' Cynnigig rasped, his gaze eerily intent on the Thelomen Toblakai. 'The herds have come together – and some have come far indeed in answer to the summons. But not that of Phyrlis. No, not in answer to her call. But in answer to yours, Karsa Orlong. And to this, we have no answer. But now, you must choose.'

Nodding, he turned to study the horses.

'Karsa Orlong, you spoke earlier of a wooden weapon. What kind of wood?'

'Ironwood, the only choice remaining to me. In my homeland, we use bloodwood.'

'And blood-oil?'

'Yes.'

'Rubbed into the wood. Blood-oil, staining your hands. They can smell it, Karsa Orlong—'

'But I have none.'

'Not on you. In you. It courses in your veins, Karsa Orlong. Bloodwood has not existed in the Jhag Odhan for tens of thousands of years. Yet these horses remember. Now, you must choose.'

'Bloodwood and blood-oil,' Cynnigig said. 'This is an insufficient explanation, Phyrlis.'

'Yes, it is. But it is all I have.'

Karsa left them to their argument and, leaving his sword thrust upright in the ground, walked down to the waiting horses. Stallions tossed their heads at his approach and the Teblor smiled – careful not to show his teeth, knowing that they saw him as predator, and themselves as his prey. Though they could easily kill me. Among such numbers I would have no chance. He saw one stallion that was clearly dominant among all others, given the wide space around it and its stamping, challenging demeanour, and walked past it, murmuring, 'Not you, proud one. The herd needs you more than I do.' He spied another stallion, this one just entering adulthood, and made his way towards it. Slowly, approaching at an angle so that the horse could see him.

A mane and tail of white, not black. Long-limbed, muscles rippling beneath its sleek hide. Grey eyes.

Karsa halted a single pace away. He slowly reached out his right hand, until his fingertips settled on the beast's trembling bridge. He began applying pressure. The stallion resisted, backing up a step. He pushed the head further down, testing the flexibility of the neck. Still further, the neck bowing, until the horse's chin almost rested in the space between its breast bones.

Then he withdrew the pressure, maintaining contact as the stallion slowly straightened its neck.
'I name you Havok,' he whispered.

He moved his hand down until his fingertips rested, palm upward, beneath its chin, then slowly walked backward, leading the stallion out from the herd.

The dominant stallion screamed then, and the herd exploded into motion once more. Outward, dispersing into smaller groups, thundering through the high grasses. Wheeling around the twin hills, west and south, out once more into the heartland of the Jhag Odhan.

Havok's trembling had vanished. The beast walked at Karsa's pace as he backed up the hillside.

As he neared the summit, Cynnigig spoke behind him. 'Not even a Jaghut could so calm a Jhag horse, Karsa Orlong, as you have done. Thelomen Toblakai, yes, you Teblor are that indeed, yet you are also unique among your kind. Thelomen Toblakai horse warriors. I had not thought such a thing possible. Karsa Orlong, why have the Teblor not conquered all of Genabackis?'

Karsa glanced back at the Jaghut. 'One day, Cynnigig, we shall.'

'And are you the one who will lead them?'

'I am.'

'We have witnessed, then, the birth of infamy.'

Karsa moved alongside Havok, his hand running the length of its taut neck. Witness? Yes, you are witness. Even so, what I, Karsa Orlong, shall shape, you cannot imagine.

No-one can.

Cynnigig sat in the shade of the tree that contained Phyrlis, humming softly. It was approaching dusk. The Thelomen Toblakai was gone, with his chosen horse. He had vaulted onto its back and ridden off without need for saddle or even reins. The herds had vanished, leaving the vista as empty as it had been before.

The bent-backed Jaghut removed a wrapped piece of the aras deer cooked the night before and began cutting it into small slices. 'A gift for you, dear sister.'

'I see,' she replied. 'Slain by the stone sword?'

'Aye.'

'A bounty, then, to feed my spirit.'

Cynnigig nodded. He paused to gesture carelessly with the knife. 'You've done well, disguising the remains.'

'The foundations survive, of course. The House's walls. The anchor-stones in the yard's corners – all beneath my cloak of soil.'

'Foolish, unmindful T'lan Imass, to drive a spear into the grounds of an Azath House.'

'What did they know of houses, Cynnigig? Creatures of caves and hide tents. Besides, it was already dying and had been for years. Fatally wounded. Oh, Icarium was on his knees by the time he finally delivered the mortal blow, raving with madness. And had not his Toblakai companion taken that opportunity to strike him unconscious . . .'

'He would have freed his father.' Cynnigig nodded around a mouthful of meat. He rose and walked to the tree. 'Here, sister,' he said, offering her a slice.

'It's burnt.'

'I doubt you could have managed better.'
'True. Go on, push it down — I won't bite.'

'You can't bite, my dear. I do appreciate the irony, by the way – Icarium's father had no desire to be saved. And so the House died, weakening the fabric …'

'Sufficiently for the warren to be torn apart. More, please – you're eating more of it than I am.'

'Greedy bitch. So, Karsa Orlong … surprised us.'

'I doubt we are the first victims of misapprehension regarding that young warrior, brother.'

'Granted. Nor, I suspect, will we be the last to suffer such shock.'

'Did you sense the six T’lan Imass spirits, Cynnigig? Hovering there, beyond the hidden walls of the yard?'

'Oh yes. Servants of the Crippled God, now, the poor things. They would tell him something, I think—'

'Tell who? The Crippled God?'

'No. Karsa Orlong. They possess knowledge, with which they seek to guide the Thelomen Toblakai – but they dared not approach. The presence of the House, I suspect, had them fearful.'

'No, it is dead – all that survived of its lifespirit moved into the spear. Not the House, brother, but Karsa Orlong himself – that was who they feared.'

'Ah.' Cynnigig smiled as he slipped another sliver of meat into Phyrlis's wooden mouth, where it slid from view, falling down into the hollow cavity within. There to rot, to gift the tree with its nutrients. 'Then those Imass are not so foolish after all.'
BOOK FOUR

HOUSE OF CHAINS
You have barred the doors
caged the windows
every portal sealed
to the outside world,
and now you find
what you feared most –
there are killers,
and they are in the House.

House
Talanbal
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The rage of the Whirlwind Goddess was an inferno, beaten on the forge of Holy Raraku.

The legions that marched in the dust of blood burned by the eye of the sun were cold iron.

There, on the dry harbour of the dead city where the armies joined to battle Hood walked the fated ground where he walked many times before.

The Divided Heart
Fisher

She had wormed her way alongside the carefully stacked cut stones, to the edge of the trench – knowing her mother would be furious at seeing how she had ruined her new clothes – and finally came within sight of her sister.

Tavore had claimed her brother's bone and antler toy soldiers, and in the rubble of the torn-up estate wall, where repairs had been undertaken by the grounds workers, she had arranged a miniature battle.

Only later would Felisin learn that her nine-year-old sister had been, in fact, recreating a set battle, culled from historical accounts of a century-old clash between a Royal Untan army and the rebelling House of K'azz D'Avore. A battle that had seen the annihilation of the renegade noble family's forces and the subjugation of the D'Avore household. And that, taking on the role of Duke Kenussen D'Avore, she was working through every possible sequence of tactics towards achieving a victory. Trapped by a series of unfortunate circumstances in a steep-sided valley, and hopelessly outnumbered, the unanimous consensus among military scholars was that such victory was impossible.

Felisin never learned if her sister had succeeded where Kenussen D'Avore – reputedly a military genius — had failed. Her spying had become a habit, her fascination with the hard, remote Tavore an obsession. It seemed, to Felisin, that her sister had never been a child, had never known a playful moment. She had stepped into their brother's shadow and sought only to remain there, and when Ganoes had been sent off for schooling, Tavore underwent a subtle transformation. No longer in Ganoes's shadow, it was as if she had become his shadow, severed and haunting.

None of these thoughts were present in Felisin's mind all those years ago. The obsession with Tavore existed, but its sources were formless, as only a child's could be.

The stigma of meaning ever comes later, like a brushing away of dust to reveal shapes in stone.

At the very edge of the ruined city on its south side, the land fell away quickly in what had once been clastic slumps of silty clay, fanning out onto the old bed of the harbour. Centuries of blistering sun had hardened these sweeps, transforming them into broad, solid ramps.

Sha'ik stood at the head of the largest of these ancient fans born of a dying sea millennia past, trying to see the flat basin before her as a place of battle. Four thousand paces away, opposite, rose the saw-toothed remnants of coral islands, over which roared the Whirlwind. That sorcerous storm had stripped from those islands the formidable mantle of sand that had once covered them. What remained offered little in the way of a secure ridge on which to assemble and prepare legions. Footing would be treacherous, formations impossible. The islands swept in a vast arc across the south approach. To the east was an escarpment, a fault-line that saw the land falling sharply away eighty or more arm-lengths onto a salt flat – what had once been the inland sea's deepest bed. The fault was a slash that widened in its south westward reach, just the other side of the reef islands, forming the seemingly endless basin that was Raraku's southlands. To the west lay dunes, the sand deep and soft, wind-sculpted and rife with sink-pits.
She would assemble her forces on this very edge, positioned to hold the seven major ramps. Mathok's horse archers on the wings, Korbolo Dom's new heavy infantry—the elite core of his Dogslayers—at the head of each of the ramps. Mounted lancers and horse warriors held back as screens for when the Malazans reeled back from the steep approaches and the order was given to advance.

Or so Korbolo Dom had explained—she was not entirely sure of the sequence. But it seemed that the Napan sought an initial defensive stance, despite their superior numbers. He was eager to prove his heavy infantry and shock troops against the Malazan equivalent. Since Tavore was marching to meet them, it was expedient to extend the invitation to its bitter close on these ramps. The advantage was entirely with the Army of the Apocalypse.

Tavore was, once again, Duke Kenussen D'Avore in Ibilar Gorge.

Sha'ik drew her sheep-hide cloak about her, suddenly chilled despite the heat. She glanced over to where Mathok and the dozen bodyguards waited, discreetly distanced yet close enough to reach her side within two or three heartbeats. She had no idea why the taciturn warchief so feared that she might be assassinated, but there was no danger in humouring the warrior. With Toblakai gone and Leoman somewhere to the south, Mathok had assumed the role of protector of her person. Well enough, although she did not think it likely that Tavore would attempt to send killers—the Whirlwind Goddess could not be breached undetected. Even a Hand of the Claw could not pass unnoticed through her multi-layered barriers, no matter what warren they sought to employ.

Because the barrier itself defines a warren. The warren that lies like an unseen skin over the Holy Desert. This usurped fragment is a fragment no longer, but whole unto itself. And its power grows. Until one day, soon, it will demand its own place in the Deck of Dragons. As with the House of Chains. A new House, of the Whirlwind.

Fed by the spilled blood of a slain army.

And when she kneels before me... what then? Dear sister, broken and bowed, smeared in dust and far darker streaks, her legions a ruin behind her, feast for the capemoths and vultures—shall I then remove my warhelm? Reveal to her, at that moment, my face?

We have taken this war. Away from the rebels, away from the Empress and the Malazan Empire. Away, even, from the Whirlwind Goddess herself. We have supplanted, you and I, Tavore, Dryjhna and the Book of the Apocalypse—for our own, private apocalypse. The family's own blood, and nothing more. And the world, then, Tavore—when I show myself to you and see the recognition in your eyes—the world, your world, will shift beneath you.

And at that moment, dear sister, you will understand. What has happened. What I have done. And why I have done it.

And then? She did not know. A simple execution was too easy, indeed, a cheat. Punishment belonged to the living, after all. The sentence was to survive, staggering beneath the chains of knowledge. A sentence not just of living, but of living with; that was the only answer to...everything.

She heard boots crunching on potsherds behind her and turned. No welcoming smile for this one—not this time. 'L'oric. I am delighted you deigned to acknowledge my request—you seemed to have grown out of the habit of late.' Oh, how he hides from me, the secrets now stalking him, see how he will not meet my gaze—I sense struggles within him. Things he would tell me. Yet he will say nothing. With all the goddess's powers at my behest, and still I cannot trap this elusive man, cannot force from him his truths. This alone warns me—he is not as he seems. Not simply a mortal man...

'I have been unwell, Chosen One. Even this short journey from the camp has left me exhausted.'

'I grieve for your sacrifice, L'oric. And so I shall come to my point without further delay. Heboric has barred his place of residence—he has neither emerged nor will he permit visitors, and it has been weeks.'

There was nothing false in his wince. 'Barred to us all, mistress.'
She cocked her head. 'Yet, you were the last to speak with him. At length, the two of you in his tent.'

'I was? That was the last time?'

Not the reaction she had anticipated. *Very well, then whatever secret he possesses has nothing to do with Ghost Hands.* 'It was. Was he distressed during your conversation?'

'Mistress, Heboric has long been distressed.'

'Why?'

His eyes flicked momentarily to hers, wider than usual, then away again. 'He ... grieves for your sacrifice, Chosen One.'

She blinked. 'L'oric, I had no idea my sarcasm could so wound you.'

'Unlike you,' he replied gravely, 'I was not being facetious, mistress. Heboric grieves—'

'For my sacrifices. Well, that is odd indeed, since he did not think much of me before my ... rebirth. Which particular loss does he mark?'

'I could not say – you will have to ask him that, I'm afraid.'

'Your friendship had not progressed to the point of an exchange of confessions, then.'

He said nothing to that. *Well, no, he couldn't. For that would acknowledge he has something to confess.*

She swung her gaze from him and turned once more to regard the potential field of battle. *I can envision the armies arrayed, yes. But then what? How are they moved? What is possible and what is impossible? Goddess, you have no answer to such questions. They are beneath you. Your power is your will, and that alone. But, dear Goddess, sometimes will is not enough.* 'Korbolo Dom is pleased with this pending ... arena.'

'I am not surprised, mistress.'

She glanced back at him. 'Why?'

He shrugged, and she watched him search for an alternative to what he had been about to say. 'Korbolo Dom would have Tavore do precisely what he wants her to do. To array her forces here, or there, and nowhere else. To make this particular approach. To contest where he would have her contest. He expects the Malazan army to march up to be slaughtered, as if by will alone he can make Tavore foolish, or stupid.' L'oric nodded towards the vast basin. 'He wants her to fight there. Expects her to. But, why would she?'

She shivered beneath the cloak as her chill deepened. Yes, why would she? *Korbolo's certainty ... is it naught but bluster? Does he too demand something to be simply because that is how he must have it? But then, were any of the others any different? Kamist Reloe and his tail-sniffing pups, Fayelle and Henaras? And Febryl and Bidithal? Leoman . . . who sat with that irritating half-smile, through all of Korbolo's descriptions of the battle to come. As if he knew something . . . as if he alone is indeed different. But then, that half-smile . . . the fool is sunk in the pit of durhang, after all. I should expect nothing of him, especially not military genius. Besides, Korbolo Dom has something to prove ...*

'There is danger,' L'oric murmured, 'in trusting to a commander who wars with the aim of slaughter.'

'Rather than what?'

His brows rose fractionally. 'Why, victory.'

'Does not slaughter of the enemy achieve victory, L'oric?'

'But therein lies the flaw in Korbolo's thinking, Chosen One. As Leoman once pointed out, months ago, the flaw is one of sequence. Mistress, victory *precedes* slaughter. Not the other way round.'
She stared at him. 'Why, then, have neither you nor Leoman voiced this criticism when we discussed Korbolo Dom's tactics?'

'Discussed?' L'oric smiled. 'There was no discussion, Chosen One. Korbolo Dom is not a man who welcomes discussions.'

'Nor is Tavore,' she snapped.

'That is not relevant,' L'oric replied.

'What do you mean?'

'Malazan military doctrine – something Coltaine well understood, but also something that High Fist Pormqual had clearly lost sight of. Tactics are consensual. Dassem Ultor's original doctrine, when he was finally made First Sword of the Malazan Empire. "Strategy belongs to the commander, but tactics are the first field of battle, and it is fought in the command tent." Dassem's own words. Of course, such a system relied heavily upon capable officers. Incompetent officers – such as those that subsequently infiltrated the chain of—'

'noble-born officers, you mean.'

'Bluntly, yes. The purchasing of commissions – Dassem would never have permitted that, and from what I gather, nor does the Empress. Not any more, in any case. There was a cull—'

'Yes, I know, L'oric. By your argument, then, Tavore's personality has no relevance—'

'Not entirely, mistress. It has, for tactics are the child of strategy. And the truth of Tavore's nature will shape that strategy. Veteran soldiers speak of hot iron and cold iron. Coltaine was cold iron. Dujek Onearm is cold iron, too, although not always – he's a rare one in being able to shift as necessity demands. But Tavore? Unknown.'

'Explain this "cold iron", L'oric.'

'Mistress, this subject is not my expertise—'

'You have certainly fooled me. Explain. Now.'

'Very well, such as I understand it—'

'Cease equivocating.'

He cleared his throat, then turned and called out, 'Mathok. Would you join us, please.'

Sha'ik scowled at the presumption behind that invitation, but then inwardly relented. This is important, after all. I feel it. The heart of all that will follow. 'Join us, Mathok,' she said.

He dismounted and strode over.

L'oric addressed him. 'I have been asked to explain "cold iron", Warchief, and for this I need help.'


'You reach,' L'oric nodded. 'Yes, that's it. You reach. And are stuck fast.'

'Cold iron,' Mathok growled. 'The warchief's soul – it either rages with the fire of life, or is cold with death. Chosen One, Korbolo Dom is hot iron, as am I. As are you. We are as the sun's fires, as the desert's heat, as the breath of the Whirlwind Goddess herself.'

'The Army of the Apocalypse is hot iron.'

'Aye, Chosen One. And thus, we must pray that the forge of Tavore's heart blazes with vengeance.'
'That she too is hot iron? Why?'

'For then, we shall not lose.'

Sha'ik's knees suddenly weakened and she almost staggered. L'oric moved close to support her, alarm on his face.

'Mistress?'

'I am... I am all right. A moment...' She fixed her gaze on Mathok once more, saw the brief gauging regard in his eyes that then quickly slipped once again behind his impassive mien. 'Warchief, what if Tavore is cold iron?'

'The deadliest clash of all, Chosen One. Which shall shatter first?'

L'oric said, 'Military histories reveal, mistress, that cold iron defeats hot iron more often than not. By a count of three or four to one.'

'Yet Coltaine! Did he not fall to Korbolo Dom?'

She noted L'oric's eyes meet Mathok's momentarily.

'Well?' she demanded.

'Chosen One,' Mathok rumbled, 'Korbolo Dom and Coltaine fought nine major engagements – nine battles – on the Chain of Dogs. Of these, Korbolo was clear victor in one, and one only. At the Fall. Outside the walls of Aren. And for that he needed Kamist Reloe, and the power of Mael, as channelled through the jhista priest, Mallick Rel.'

Her head was spinning, panic ripping through her, and she knew L'oric could feel her trembling.

'Sha'ik,' he whispered, close by her ear, 'you know Tavore, don't you? You know her, and she is cold iron, isn't she?'

Mute, she nodded. She did not know how she knew, for neither Mathok nor L'oric seemed able to give a concrete definition, suggesting to her that the notion derived from a gut level, a place of primal instinct. And so, she knew.

L'oric had lifted his head. 'Mathok.'

'High Mage?'

'Who, among us, is cold iron? Is there anyone?'

'There are two, High Mage. And one of these is capable of both: Toblakai.'

'And the other?'

'Leoman of the Flails.'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas lay beneath a sheath of sand. The sweat had soaked through his telaba beneath him, packing down his body's moulded imprint, and had cooled, so that he now shivered unceasingly. The sixth son of a deposed chief among the Pardu, he had been a wanderer of the wastelands for most of his adult life. A wanderer, trader, and worse. When Leoman had found him, three Gral warriors had been dragging him behind their horses for most of a morning.

The purchase price had been pathetically small, since his skin had been flayed away by the burning sands, leaving only a bloodied mass of raw flesh. But Leoman had taken him to a healer, an old woman from some tribe he'd never heard of before, or since, and she in turn had taken him to a rockspring pool, where he'd lain immersed, raving with fever, for an unknown time, whilst she'd worked a ritual of mending and called upon the
water’s ancient spirits. And so he had recovered.

Corabb had never learned the reason behind Leoman's mercy, and, now that he knew him well – as well as any who'd sworn fealty to the man – he knew better than to ask. It was one with his contrary nature, his unknowable qualities that could be unveiled but once in an entire lifetime. But Corabb knew one thing: for Leoman of the Flails, he would give his life.

They had lain side by side, silent and motionless, through the course of the day, and now, late in the afternoon, they saw the first of the outriders appear in the distance, cautiously ranging out as they ventured onto the pan of cracked salts and clay.

Corabb finally stirred. 'Wickans,' he hissed.

'And Seti,' Leoman rumbled in reply.

'Those grey-armoured ones look ... different.'

The man beside him grunted, then swore. 'Khundryl, from south of the Vathar River. I had hoped ... Still, that arcane armour looks heavy. The Seven know what ancestral tombs they looted for those. The Khundryl came late to the horse, and it's no wonder with that armour, is it?'

Corabb squinted at the vast dust cloud behind the outriders. 'The vanguard rides close to the scouts.'

'Aye. We'll have to do something about that.'

Without another word the two warriors edged back from the crest, beyond the sight of the outriders, pausing briefly to reach back and brush sand over where their bodies had lain, then made their way back to the gully where they'd left their horses.

'Tonight,' Leoman said, collecting his mount's reins and swinging up into the saddle.

Corabb did the same and then nodded. Sha'ik would know, of course, that she had been defied. For the Whirlwind Goddess had her eyes on all her children. But this was their land, wasn’t it? The invaders could not be left to walk it uncontested. No, the sands would drink their blood, giving voice on this night to the Shrouded Reaper's dark promise.

L'oric stood near the trail that led to Toblakai’s glade. A casual look around, then the faintest of gestures from one hand marked a careful unveiling of sorcery – that vanished almost as soon as it arrived. Satisfied, he set off down the trail.

She might be distracted, but her goddess was not. Increasingly, he sensed questing attention directed towards him, sorcerous tendrils reaching out in an effort to find him, or track his movements. And it was becoming more difficult to elude such probes, particularly since they were coming from more than a single source.

Febryl was growing more nervous, as was Kamist Reloe. Whilst Bidithal’s paranoia needed no fuel – and nor should it. Sufficient, then, all these signs of increased restlessness, to convince L’oric that whatever plans existed were soon to seek resolution. One way or another.

He had not expected to discover Sha’ik so ... unprepared. True, she had conveyed a none too subtle hint that she was preternaturally aware of all that went on in the camp, including an alarming ability to defeat his own disguising wards intended to mask his travels. Even so, there was knowledge that, had she possessed it – or even suspected – would have long since triggered a deadly response. Some places must remain closed to her. I had expected her to ask far more dangerous questions of me today. Where is Felisin? Then again, maybe she didn't ask that because she already knew. A chilling thought, not just for evincing the breadth of her awareness, but for what it suggested about Sha’ik herself. That she knows what Bidithal did to Felisin . . . and she does not care.

Dusk ever seemed eager to arrive in the forest of stone trees. The tracks he left in the dusty path revealed, to his relief, that he was still alone in walking the trail these days.
Not that the goddess needed trails. But there was a strangeness to Toblakai's glade, hinting at some kind of investment, as if the clearing had undergone a sanctification of some sort. And if that had indeed occurred, then it might exist as a blind spot in the eye of the Whirlwind Goddess.

But none of this explained why Sha'ik did not ask about Felisin. Ah, L'oric, you are the blind one. Sha'ik's obsession is Tavore. With each day that leaves us, bringing the two armies ever closer, her obsession grows. As does her doubt and, perhaps, her fear. She is Malazan, after all — I was right in that. And within that waits another secret, this one buried deepest of all. She knows Tavore.

And that knowledge had guided her every action since the Rebirth. Her recalling the Army of the Apocalypse when virtually within sight of the Holy City's walls. Retreating into the heart of Raraku ... gods, was all that a flight of terror?

A notion that did not bear thinking about.

The glade appeared before him, the ring of trees with their cold, unhuman eyes gazing down upon the small, bedraggled tent — and the young woman huddled before the stone-lined hearth a few paces from it.

She did not look up as he came near. 'L'oric, I was wondering, how can one tell Bidithal's cult of murderers from Korbolo Dom's? It's a crowded camp these days — I am glad I am hiding here, and in turn I find myself pitying you. Did you finally speak with her today?'

Sighing, he settled down opposite her, removing his shoulder pack and drawing food from it. 'I did.'

'And?'

'Her concerns for the impending clash are ... overwhelming her—'

'My mother did not ask after me,' Felisin cut in, with a slight smile.

L'oric looked away. 'No,' he conceded in a whisper.

'She knows, then. And has judged as I have — Bidithal is close to exposing the plotters. They need him, after all, either to join the conspiracy, or stand aside. This is a truth that has not changed. And the night is drawing nearer, the night of betrayal. And so, Mother needs him to play out his role.'

'I am not sure of that, Felisin,' L'oric began, then shut up.

But she had understood, and her terrible smile broadened. 'Then the Whirlwind Goddess has stolen the love from her soul. Ah, well, she has been under siege for a long time, after all. In any case, she was not my mother in truth — that was a title she assumed because it amused her to do so—'

'Not true, Felisin. Sha'ik saw your plight—'

'I was the first one to see her, when she returned, reborn. A chance occurrence, that I should be out gathering hen'bara on that day. Before that day, Sha'ik had never noticed me — why would she? I was one among a thousand orphans, after all. But then she was ... reborn.'

'Returned to the living as well, perhaps—'

Felisin laughed. 'Oh, L'oric, you ever strive, don't you? I knew then, as you must know by now — Sha'ik Reborn is not the same woman as Sha'ik Elder.'

'That hardly matters, lass. The Whirlwind Goddess chose her—'

'Because Sha'ik Elder died, or was killed. You did not see the truth as I did, in the faces of Leoman and Toblakai. I saw their uncertainty — they did not know if their ruse would succeed. And that it did, more or less, was as much to me as to any of them. The Whirlwind Goddess chose her out of necessity, L'oric.'

'As I said, Felisin, it does not matter.'
'Not to you, perhaps. No, you don't understand. I saw Sha'ik Elder up close, once. Her glance swept past me, and that glance saw no-one, and at that moment, child though I was, I knew the truth of her. Of her, and of her goddess.'

L'oric unstoppered the jug that had followed the food and raised it to wet a mouth that had suddenly gone dry. 'And what truth was that?' he whispered, unable to meet her eyes. Instead, he drank down a deep draught of the unwatered wine.

'Oh, that we are, one and all, nothing but slaves. We are the tools she will use to achieve her desires. Beyond that, our lives mean nothing to the goddess. But with Sha'ik Reborn, I thought I saw ... something different.'

His peripheral vision caught her shrug.

'But,' she continued, 'the goddess is too strong. Her will too absolute. The poison that is indifference ... and I well know that taste, L'oric. Ask any orphan, no matter how old they are now, and they will tell you the same. We all sucked at that same bitter tit.'

He knew his tears had broken from his eyes, were running down his cheeks, yet could do nothing to stem them.

'And now, L'oric,' she went on after a moment, 'we are all revealed. Every one of us here. We are all orphans. Think on it. Bidithal, who lost his temple, his entire cult. The same for Heboric. Korbolo Dom, who once stood as an equal in rank with great soldiers, like Whiskeyjack, and Coltaine. Febryl – did you know he murdered his own father and mother? Toblakai, who has lost his own people. And all the rest of us here, L'oric – we were children of the Malazan Empire, once. And what have we done? We cast off the Empress, in exchange for an insane goddess who dreams only of destruction, who seeks to feed on a sea of blood...'

'And,' he asked softly, 'am I too an orphan?'

She had no need to answer, for they both heard the truth in his own pained words.

Osric...

'Leaving only ... Leoman of the Flails.' Felisin took the wine from his hands. 'Ah, Leoman. Our flawed diamond. I wonder, can he save us all? Will he get the chance? Among us, only he remains ... unchained. No doubt the goddess claims him, but it is an empty claim – you do see that, don't you?'

He nodded, wiping at his eyes. 'And I believe I have led Sha'ik to that realization, as well.'

'She knows, then, that Leoman is our last hope?'

His sigh was ragged. 'I think so ...'

They were silent for a time. Night had arrived, and the fire had died down to ashes, leaving only starlight to illuminate the glade.

It seemed, then, that eyes of stone had slowly assumed life, a crescent row fixed now upon the two of them. A regard avid, gleaming with hunger. L'oric's head snapped up. He stared out at the ghostly faces, then at the two Toblakai figures, then settled once more, shivering.

Felisin laughed softly. 'Yes, they do haunt one, don't they?'

L'oric grunted. 'A mystery here, in Toblakai's creations. Those faces – they are T'lan Imass. Yet...'

'He thought them his gods, yes. So Leoman told me, once, beneath the fumes of durhang. Then he warned me to say nothing to Toblakai.' She laughed again, louder this time. 'As if I would. A fool indeed, to step between Toblakai and his gods.'

'There is nothing simple about that simple warrior,' L'oric murmured.

'Just as you are not simply a High Mage,' she said. 'You must act soon, you know. You have choices to make.
Hesitate too long and they will be made for you, to your regret.'

'I could well say the same to you in return.'

'Well then, it seems we still have more to discuss this night. But first, let us eat – before the wine makes us drunk.'

Sha'ik recoiled, staggered back a step. The breath hissed from her in a gust of alarm – and pain. A host of wards swirled around Heboric's abode, still flickering with the agitation her collision had triggered.

She bit down on her outrage, pitched her voice low as she said, 'You know who it is who has come, Heboric. Let me pass. Defy me, and I will bring the wrath of the goddess down, here and now.'

A moment's silence, then, 'Enter.'

She stepped forward. There was a moment's pressure, then she stumbled through, brought up short against the crumbled foundation wall. A sudden . . . absence. Terrifying, bursting like the clearest light where all had been, but a moment earlier, impenetrable gloom. Bereft... yet free. Gods, free — the light — 'Ghost Hands!' she gasped. 'What have you done?'

'The goddess within you, Sha'ik,' came Heboric's words, 'is not welcome in my temple.'

Temple? Roaring chaos was building within her, the vast places in her mind where the Whirlwind Goddess had been now suddenly vacant, filling with the dark, rushing return of ... of all that I was. Bitter fury grew like a wildfire as memories rose with demonic ferocity to assail her. Beneath. You bastard. You closed your hands around a child, but what you shaped was anything but a woman. A plaything. A slave to you and your twisted, brutal world.

I used to watch that knife in your hands, the flickering games that were your idle habits. And that's what you taught me, isn't it? Cutting for fun and blood. And oh, how I cut. Baudin. Kulp. Heboric—

A physical presence beside her now, the solid feel of hands – jade green, black-barred – a figure, squat and wide and seemingly beneath the shadow of fronds – no, tattoos. Heboric...

'Inside, lass. I have made you ... bereft. An unanticipated consequence of forcing the goddess from your soul. Come.'

And then he was guiding her into the tent's confines. The air chill and damp, a single small oil lamp struggling against the gloom – a flame that suddenly moved as he lifted the lamp and brought it over to a brazier, where he used its burning oil to light the bricks of dung. And, as he worked, he spoke. 'Not much need for light... the passage of time ... before tasked with sanctioning a makeshift temple ... what do I know of Treach, anyway?'

She was sitting on cushions, her trembling hands held before the brazier's growing flames, furs wrapped about her. At the name 'Treach' she started, looked up.

To see Heboric squatting before her. As he had squatted that day, so long ago now, in Judgement's Round. When Hood's sprites had come to him ... to foretell of Fener's casting down. The flies would not touch his spiral tattoos. I remember that. Everywhere eke, they swarmed like madness. Now, those tattoos had undergone a transformation. 'Treach.'

His eyes narrowed on hers – a cat's eyes, now – he can see! 'Ascended into godhood, Sha'ik—'

'Don't call me that. I am Felisin Paran of House Paran.' She hugged herself suddenly. 'Sha'ik waits for me ... out there, beyond this tent's confines – beyond your wards.'

'And would you return to that embrace, lass?'

She studied the brazier's fire, whispered, 'No choice, Heboric'
'No, I suppose not.'

A thunderous shock bolted her upright. 'Felisin!'

'What?'

'Felisin Younger! I have not ... not seen her! Days? Weeks? What – where is she!'

Heboric's motion was feline as he straightened, fluid and precise. 'The goddess must know, lass—'

'If she does, she's not told me!'

'But why would . . . '

She saw a sudden knowledge in his eyes, and felt her own answering stab of fear. 'Heboric, what do you—'

Then he was guiding her to the tent flap, speaking as he drove her back step by step. 'We spoke, you and I, and all is well. Nothing to concern yourself over. The Adjunct and her legions are coming and there is much to do. As well, there are the secret plans of Febryl to keep an eye on, and for that you must rely upon Bidithal—'

'Heboric!' She struggled against him, but he would not relent. They reached the flap and he pushed her outside. 'What are you—' A hard shove and she stumbled back.

Through a flare of wards.

Sha'ik slowly righted herself. She must have stumbled. Oh yes, a conversation with Ghost Hands. All is well. I'm relieved by that, for it allows me to think on more important things. My nest of betrayers, for example. Must have words with Bidithal again tonight. Yes . . .

She turned from the ex-priest's tent and made her way back to the palace.

Overhead, the stars of the desert sky were shimmering, as they often did when the goddess had come close . . . Sha'ik wondered what had drawn her this time. Perhaps no more than casting a protective eye on her Chosen One . . .

She was unmindful – as was her goddess – of the barely visible shape that slipped out from the entrance to Heboric's tent, flowing in a blur into the nearest shadows. Unmindful, also, of the scent that barbed shape now followed.

Westward, to the city's edge, and then onto the trail, padding between the stone trees, towards a distant glade.

Bidithal sat in the seething shadows, alone once more, although the smile remained fixed on his withered face. Febryl had his games, but so did the once High Priest of the Shadow cult. Even betrayers could be betrayed, after all, a sudden turning of the knife in the hand.

And the sands would fold one more time, the way they did when the air breathed hard, in, out, back, forth, stirring and shifting the grains as would waves against a beach, to lay one layer over another in thin seams of colour. There were no limits to the number of layers, and this Febryl and his fellow conspirators would soon discover, to their grief.

They sought the warren for themselves. It had taken Bidithal a long time to unveil that truth, that deep-buried motivation, for it had remained in the silence between every spoken word. This was not a simple, mundane struggle for power. No. This was usurpation. Expropriation – a detail that itself whispered of yet deeper secrets. They wanted the warren . . . but why? A question yet to be answered, but find an answer he would, and soon.

In this, he knew, the Chosen One relied upon him, and he would not fail her. In so far as what she expects from me, yes, I will deliver. Of course, there are other issues that extend far beyond Sha'ik, this goddess and the Whirlwind Warren she would rule. The shape of the pantheon itself is at stake . . . my long-overdue vengeance against those foreign pretenders to the Throne of Shadow.
Even now, if he listened very – very – carefully, he could hear them. And they were coming. Closer, ever closer.

A tremble of fear took his limbs, and shadows scurried away from him momentarily, only returning when he had settled once more. Rashan . . . and Meanas. Meanas and Thyr. Thyr and Rashan. The three children of the Elder Warrens. Galain, Emurlahn and Thyrllan. Should it be so surprising that they war once more? For do not we ever inherit the spites of our fathers and mothers?

But a ghost of that fear remained. He had not called them, after all. Had not understood the truth of what lay beneath the Whirlwind Warren, the reason why the warren was held in this single place and nowhere else. Had not comprehended how the old battles never died, but simply slept, every bone in the sand restless with memory.

Bidithal raised his hands and the army of shadows crowded within his temple gathered closer.

'My children,' he whispered, beginning the Closing Chant.

'Father.'

'Do you remember?'

'Ver remember.'

'Do you remember the dark?'

'Ve remember the dark. Father—'

'Ask it and close this moment, children.'

'Do you remember the dark?'

The priest's smile broadened. A simple question, one that could be asked of anyone, anyone at all. And perhaps they would understand. But probably not. Yet I understand it.

'Do you remember the dark?'

'I remember.'

As, with sighs, the shadows dispersed, Bidithal stiffened once more to that almost inaudible call. He shivered again. They were getting close indeed.

And he wondered what they would do, when they finally arrived.

There were eleven in all. His chosen.

Korbolo Dom leaned back on his cushions, eyes veiled as he studied the silent, shrouded line of figures standing before him. The Napan held a goblet carved from crystal in his right hand, in which swirled a rare wine from the Grisian valleys on Quon Tali. The woman who had kept him amused earlier this night was asleep, her head resting on his right thigh. He had plied her with enough durhang to ensure oblivion for the next dozen bells, though it was the expedience of security rather than any insipid desire on his part that necessitated such measures.

Drawn from his Dogslayers, the eleven killers were appallingly skilled. Five of them had been personal assassins to Holy Falah'dan in the days before the Empire, rewarded with gifts of alchemy and sorcery to maintain their youthful appearance and vigour.

Three of the remaining six were Malazan – Korbolo Dom's own, created long ago, when he realized he had cause to worry about the Claw. Cause . . . now that's a simplification almost quaint in its coyness. A multitude of realizations, of sudden discoveries, of knowledge I had never expected to gain — of things I had believed long dead and gone. There had been ten such bodyguards, once. Evidence of the need for them stood before
him now. Three left, the result of a brutal process of elimination, leaving only those with the greatest skill and the most fortuitous alliance of Oponn's luck – two qualities that fed each other well.

The remaining three assassins were from various tribes, each of whom had proved his worth during the Chain of Dogs. The arrow from one had slain Sormo E'nath, from a distance of seventy paces, on the Day of Pure Blood. There had been other arrows striking true, but it had been the one through the warlock's neck – the assassin's – that had filled the lad's lungs with blood, that had drowned his very breath, so that he could not call upon his damned spirits for healing.

Korbolo sipped wine, slowly licked his lips. 'Kamist Reloe has chosen among you,' he rumbled after a moment, 'for the singular task that will trigger all that subsequently follows. And I am content with his choices. But do not think this diminishes the rest of you. There will be tasks — essential tasks – on that night. Here in this very camp. I assure you, you will get no sleep that night, so prepare yourselves. Also, two of you will remain with me at all times, for I can guarantee that my death will be sought before that fateful dawn arrives.'

*I expect you to die in my place. Of course. It is what you are sworn to do, should the need arise.*

'Leave me now,' he said, waving his free hand.

The eleven assassins bowed in unison, then filed silently out of the tent.

Korbolo lifted the woman's head from his thigh, by the hair – noting how she remained insensate to the rough handling – and rose from the cushions, letting her head thump back down. He paused to drink a mouthful of the wine, then stepped from the modest dais and approached the side chamber that had been partitioned off by silk hangings.

Within the private room, Kamist Reloe was pacing. Hands wringing, shoulders drawn up, neck taut.

Korbolo leaned against a support post, his mouth twisting into a slight sneer at seeing the High Mage's fretting. 'Which of your many fears plagues you now, Kamist? Oh, do not answer. I admit I've ceased caring.'

'Foolish complacency on your part, then,' the High Mage snapped. 'Do you think we are the only clever people?'

'In the world? No. Here, in Raraku, well, that's another matter. Who should we fear, Kamist Reloe? Sha'ik? Her goddess devours her acuity – day by day, the lass grows less and less aware of what goes on around her. And that goddess barely takes note of us – oh, there are suspicions, perhaps, but that is all. Thus. Who else? L'oric? I've known many a man like him – creating mystery around themselves – and I have found that what it usually hides is an empty vessel. He is all pose and nothing more.'

'You are wrong in that, I fear, but no, I do not worry about L'oric'

'Who else? Ghost Hands? The man's vanished into his own pit of hen'bara. Leoman? He's not here and I've plans for his return. Toblakai? I think we've seen the last of him. Who is left? Why, none other than Bidithal. But Febryl swears he almost has him in our fold – it's simply a question of discovering what the bastard truly desires. Something squalid and disgusting, no doubt. He is slave to his vices, is Bidithal. Offer him ten thousand orphaned girls and the smile will never leave his ugly face.'

Kamist Reloe wrapped his arms about himself as he continued pacing. 'It's not who we know to be among us that is the source of my concerns, Korbolo Dom, it's who is among us that we do not know.'

The Napan scowled. 'And how many hundreds of spies do we have in this camp? And what of the Whirlwind Goddess herself – do you imagine she will permit the infiltration of strangers?'

'Your flaw, Korbolo Dom, is that you think in a strictly linear fashion. Ask that question again, only this time ask it in the context of the goddess having suspicions about us.'

The High Mage was too distracted to notice the Napan's half-step forward, one hand lifting. But Korbolo Dom's blow died at that very moment, as the import of Kamist Reloe's challenge reached him. His eyes slowly widened. Then he shook his head. 'No, that would be too great a risk to take. A Claw let loose in this camp
would endanger everyone – there would be no way to predict their targets—'

'Would there be a need to?'

'What do you mean?'

'We are the Dogslayers, Korbolo Dom. The murderers of Coltaire, the Seventh, and the legions at Aren. More, we also possess the mage cadre for the Army of the Apocalypse. Finally, who will be commanding that army on the day of battle? How many reasons do the Claw need to strike at us, and at us specifically? What chance would Sha'ik have if we were all dead? Why kill Sha'ik at all? We can fight this war without her and her damned goddess – we've done it before. And we're about to—'

'Enough of that, Kamist Reloe. I see your point. So, you fear that the goddess will permit a Claw to infiltrate ... in order to deal with us. With you, Febryl and myself. An interesting possibility, but I still think it remote. The goddess is too heavy-handed, too ensnared by emotion, to think with such devious, insidious clarity.'

'She does not have to initiate the scheme, Korbolo Dom. She need only comprehend the offer, and then decide either to acquiesce or not. It is not her clarity that is relevant, but that of Laseen's Claw. And do you doubt the cleverness of Topper?'

Growling under his breath, Korbolo Dom looked away for a moment. 'No,' he finally admitted. 'But I do rely on the goddess being in no mind to accept communication from the Empress, from Topper, or anyone else who refuses to kneel to her will. You have thought yourself into a nightmare, Kamist Reloe, and now you invite me to join you. I decline the offer, High Mage. We are well protected, and too far advanced in our efforts for all of this fretting.'

'I have survived this long, Korbolo Dom, because of my talent in anticipating what my enemies would attempt. Soldiers say no plan of battle survives contact with the enemy. But the game of subterfuge is the very opposite. Plans derive from persistent contact with the enemy. Thus, you proceed on your terms, and I will proceed on mine.'

'As you like. Now, leave me. It is late, and I would sleep.'

The High Mage stopped pacing to fix the Napan with an unreadable look for a moment, then he swung about and left the chamber.

Korbolo listened until he heard the flap in the outer room swish open, then close. He listened on, and was satisfied to hear the draws being tightened by one of his bodyguards positioned just outside the entrance.

Draining the last of the wine – damned expensive but tastes no different from the dockside swill I choked down on the Isle – he flung the goblet down and strode to the mass of cushions at the far end. Beds in every room. I wonder what that signifies of my personality? Then again, those other ones are not for sleeping in, are they. No, only this one ...

In the front room on the other side of the silk partitions, the woman lay unmoving on her own heap of cushions, where Korbolo had left her some time back.

Continuous, overwhelming imbibing of durhang – like any other intoxicant – created a process of diminishment of its effects. Until, while a layer of insensate numbness still persisted – a useful barrier against such things as having her head yanked up by her hair then dropped back down – cool awareness remained beneath it.

Advantageous, as well, the rituals her master had inflicted upon her, rituals that eliminated the weakness of pleasure. There could be no loss of control, not any more, for her mind no longer warred with feelings, for of feelings she had none. An easy surrender, she had found to her delight, for there had been little in her life before her initiation to seed warm remembrances of childhood.

And so she was well suited to this task. Uttering the right sounds of pleasure to disguise her indifference to all of Korbolo Dom's peculiar preferences. And lying motionless, unmindful even of a throat slowly filling with
phlegm from the near-liquid smoke of the durhang, for as much time as was needed, before the subtle, tasteless drops she had added to his wine took effect.

When she could hear his deep, slow breaths that told her he would not easily awaken, she rolled onto her side in a fit of coughing. When it had passed she paused again, just to be certain that the Napan still slept. Satisfied, she clambered to her feet and tottered to the tent flap.

Fumbled with the ties until a gruff voice from just beyond said, ‘Scillara, off to the latrines again?’

And another voice softly laughed and added, 'It's a wonder there's any meat on her at all, the way she heaves night after night.'

'It's the rust-leaf and the bitter berries crushed in with the durhang,' the other replied, as his hands took over the task of loosening the draws, and the flap was drawn aside.

Scillara staggered out, bumping her way between the two guards.

The hands that reached out to steady invariably found unusual places to rest, and squeeze.

She would have enjoyed that, once, in a slightly offended, irritated way that none the less tickled with pleasure. But now, it was nothing but clumsy lust to be endured.

As everything else in this world had to be endured, while she waited for her final reward, the blissful new world beyond death. *The left hand of life, holding all misery. And the right hand – yes, the one with the glittering blade, dear – the right hand of death, holding, as it does, the reward you would offer to others, and then take upon yourself. At your chosen moment.*

Her master's words made sense, as they always did. Balance was the heart of all things, after all. And life – that time of pain and grief – was but one side of that balance. *The harder, the more miserable, the more terrible and disgusting your life, child, the greater the reward beyond death . . .* Thus, as she knew, it all made sense.

No need, then, to struggle. Acceptance was the only path to walk.

*Barring this one.* She weaved her way between the tent rows. The Dogslayers' encampment was precise and ordered, in the Malazan fashion – a detail she knew well from her days as a child when her mother followed the train of the Ashok Regiment. Before that regiment went overseas, leaving hundreds destitute – lovers and their get, servants and scroungers. Her mother had then sickened and died. She had a father, of course, one of the soldiers. Who might be alive, or dead, but either way was thoroughly indifferent to the child he had left behind.

Balance.

Difficult with a head full of durhang, even inured to it as she had become.

But there were the latrines, down this slope, and onto the wooden walkways spanning the trench. Smudge-pots smouldering to cover some of the stench and keep the flies away. Buckets beside the holed seats, filled with hand-sized bundles of grass. Larger open-topped casks with water, positioned out over the trench and fixed to the walkways.

Hands held out to either side, Scillara navigated carefully across one of the narrow bridges.

Long-term camp trenches such as this one held more than just human wastes. Garbage was regularly dumped in by soldiers and others – or what had passed for garbage with them. But for the orphans of this squalid city, some of that refuse was seen as treasure. To be cleaned, repaired and sold.

And so, figures swarmed in the darkness below.

She reached the other side, her bare feet sinking into the mud made by splashes that had reached the ridge. 'I remember the dark!' she sang out, voice throaty from years of durhang smoke.

There was a scrabbling from the trench, and a small girl, sheathed in excrement, clambered up to her, teeth
flashing white. 'Me too, sister.'

Scillara drew out a small bag of coins from her sash. Their master frowned on such gestures, and indeed, they ran contrary to his teachings, but she could not help herself. She pressed it into the girl's hands. 'For food.'

'He will be displeased, sister—'

'And of the two of us, I alone will suffer a moment of torment. So be it. Now, I have words from this night, to be brought to our master . . .'

He had always walked with a pitching gait, low to the ground, sufficient to have earned him a host of unflattering nicknames. Toad, crab-legs ... the names children gave each other, some of which were known to persist into adulthood. But Heboric had worked hard as a youth – long before his first, fateful visit into a temple of Fener – to excoriate those appellations, to eventually earn Light Touch, in response to certain skills he had acquired on the streets. But now, his sidling walk had undergone a transformation, yielding to an instinctive desire to drop even lower, even to using his hands to propel him along.

Had he considered it, he would have concluded, sourly, that he moved less like a cat than an ape, such as those found in the jungles of Dal Hon. Unpleasant to the eye, perhaps, but efficacious none the less.

He slowed on the trail as he approached Toblakai's glade. A faint smell of smoke, the dull gleam of a fast-cooling fire, the murmur of voices.

Heboric slipped to one side, among the stone trees, then sank down within sight of the two seated at the hearth.

Too long his self-obsession, the seemingly endless efforts to create his temple – that now struck him as a strange kind of neurotic nesting; he had ignored the world beyond the walls for too long. There had been, he realized with a surge of bitter anger, a host of subtle alterations to his personality, concomitant with the physical gifts he had received.

He had ceased being mindful.

And that, he realized as he studied the two figures in the glade, had permitted a terrible crime.

She's healed well. . . but not well enough to disguise the truth of what has happened. Should I reveal myself? No. Neither of them has made a move to expose Bidithal, else they would not be hiding here. That means they would try to talk me out of what must be done.

But I warned Bidithal. I warned him, and he was . . . amused. Well, I think that amusement is about to end.

He slowly backed away.

Then, deep in the shadows, Heboric hesitated. There was no clash between his new and old instincts on this matter. Both demanded blood. And this night. Immediately. But something of the old Heboric was reasserting itself. He was new to this role as Destriant. More than that, Treach himself was a newly arrived god. And while Heboric did not believe Bidithal held any position – not any more – within the realm of Shadow, his temple was sanctified to someone.

An attack would draw in their respective sources of power, and there was no telling how swiftly, and how uncontrollably, that clash could escalate.

Better had I just remained old Heboric. With hands of otataral entwined with an unknown being's immeasurable power . . . Then I could have torn him limb from limb.

He realized that, instead, he could do nothing. Not this night, in any case. He would have to wait, seeking an opportunity, a moment of distraction. But to achieve that, he would have to remain hidden, unseen – Bidithal could not discover his sudden elevation. Could not learn that he had become Destriant to Treach, the new god of war.
The rage suddenly returned, and he struggled to push it away.

After a moment his breathing slowed. He turned round and edged back onto the trail. This would require more thought. Measured thought. Damn you, Treach. You knew the guise of a tiger. Gift me some of your cunning ways, a hunter’s ways, a killer’s ...

He approached the head of the trail, and halted at a faint sound. Singing. Muted, a child's, coming from the ruins of what had once been a modest building of some sort. Indifferent to the darkness, his eyes caught movement and fixed hard on that spot, until a shape resolved itself.

A girl in rags, carrying a stick that she held in both hands. A dozen or so dead rhizan hung by their tails from her belt. As he watched, he saw her leap up and swing the stick. It struck something and she scrambled in pursuit, jumping about to trap a tiny shape writhing on the ground. A moment later and she lifted the rhizan into view. A quick twist of the neck, then another tiny body was tied to her belt. She bent down and retrieved her stick. And began singing once more.

Heboric paused. He would have difficulty passing by her unnoticed. But not impossible.

Probably an unnecessary caution. Even so. He held to the shadows as he edged forward, moving only when her back was turned, his eyes never leaving her form for a moment.

A short while later and he was past.

Dawn was approaching, and the camp was moments from stirring awake. Heboric increased his pace, and eventually reached his tent, slipping inside.

Apart from the girl, he'd seen no-one.

And when she judged that he was finally gone, the girl slowly turned about, her singing falling away as she peered out into the gloom. 'Funny man,' she whispered, 'do you remember the dark?'

A sixth of a bell before dawn, Leoman and two hundred of his desert warriors struck the Malazan encampment. The infantry stationed at the pickets were at the end of their watch, gathered in weary groups to await the sun's rise – a lapse in discipline that presented easy targets for the archers who had, on foot, closed to within thirty paces of the line. A whispery flit of arrows, all loosed at the same time, and the Malazan soldiers were down.

At least half of the thirty or so soldiers had not been killed outright, and their screams of pain and fear broke the stillness of the night. The archers had already set their bows down and were darting forward with their kethra knives to finish the wounded sentries, but they had not gone ten paces before Leoman and his horse warriors thundered around them, striking hard through the breach.

And into the camp.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas rode at his commander's side, a long-hafted weapon that was half sword, half axe, in his right hand. Leoman was the centre of a curved sweep of attackers, protecting a knot of additional horse warriors from which a steady whirring sound rose. Corabb knew what that sound signified – his commander had invented his own answer to Moranth munitions, employing a pair of clay balls filled with oil and connected by a thin chain. Lit like lamps, they were swung and thrown in the manner of bolas.

The desert warriors were among the huge supply wagons now, and Corabb heard the first of those bolas whip out-ward, the sound followed by a whooshing roar of fire. The darkness vanished in a red glare.

And then Corabb saw a figure running from his horse's path. He swung his long-bladed axe. The impact, as it struck the back of the fleeing Malazan’s helmed head, nearly dislocated Corabb’s shoulder. A spray of blood spattered hard against his forearm as he dragged the weapon free – it was suddenly heavier, and he glanced down at it, to see that the blade had taken the helm with it, having cut fully half through. Brains and bits of bone and scalp were spilling from the bronze bowl.

Swearing, he slowed his mount's wild charge and tried to shake the axe clear. There was fighting on all sides,
now, as well as raging flames engulfing at least a dozen wagons – and squad-tents. And soldiers appearing, more and more of them. He could hear barked orders in the Malazan tongue, and crossbow quarrels had begun flitting through the air towards the horse warriors.

A horn sounded, high and wavering. His curses growing fiercer, Corabb wheeled his horse round. He had already lost contact with Leoman, although a few of his comrades were in sight. All of them responding to the call to withdraw. As he must, as well.

The axe dragged at his aching shoulder, still burdened with that damned helm. He drove his horse back up the broad track between the mess-tents. Smoke tumbled, obscuring the view before him, stinging his eyes and harsh in his lungs.

Sudden burning agony slashed across his cheek, snapping his head around. A quarrel clattered against the ground fifteen paces ahead and to one side. Corabb ducked low, twisting in search of where it had come from.

And saw a squad of Malazans, all with crossbows – all but one cocked and trained on the desert warrior, with a sergeant berating the soldier who had fired too early. A scene taken in, in its entirety, between heartbeats. The bastards were less than ten paces distant.

Corabb flung his axe away. With a scream, he pitched his horse sideways, directly into the wall of one of the mess-tents. Ropes tautened and snapped heavy stakes skyward, poles splintering. Amidst this stumbling chaos, the warrior heard the crossbows loose – but his horse was going down, onto its side – and Corabb was already leaping clear of the saddle, his moccasined feet slipping out from the stirrups as he dived.

Into the collapsing tent wall, a moment before his horse, rolling with a scream, followed.

The pressure of that waxed fabric vanished suddenly and Corabb tumbled into a somersault, once, twice, then skidded onto his feet, spinning round—

—in time to see his horse roll back upright.

Corabb leapt alongside his mount and vaulted up into the saddle – and they were off.

And in the desert warrior's mind: numb disbelief.

On the opposite side of the avenue, seven Malazan marines stood or crouched with spent crossbows, staring as the rider thundered off into the smoke.

'Did you see that?' one asked.

Another frozen moment, shattered at last when the soldier named Lutes flung his weapon down in disgust.

'Pick that up,' Sergeant Borduke growled.

'If Maybe hadn't fired early—'

'I wasn't sure!' Maybe replied.

'Load up, idiots – there might be a few left.'

'Hey, Sergeant, maybe that horse killed the cook.'

Borduke spat. 'The gods smiling down on us this night, Hubb?'

'Well...'

'Right. The truth remains, then. We'll have to kill him ourselves. Before he kills us. But never mind that for now. Let's move ...'
The sun had just begun to rise when Leoman drew rein and halted his raiders. Corabb was late in arriving – among the last, in fact – and that earned a pleased nod from his commander. As if he'd assumed that Corabb had been taking up the rear out of a sense of duty. He did not notice that his lieutenant had lost his main weapon.

Behind them, they could see the columns of smoke rising into sunlit sky, and the distant sound of shouts reached them, followed moments later by the thunder of horse hoofs.

Leoman bared his teeth. 'And now comes the real objective of our attack. Well done thus far, my soldiers. Hear those horses? Seti, Wickans and Khundryl – and that will be the precise order of the pursuit. The Khundryl, whom we must be wary of, will be burdened by their armour. The Wickans will range cautiously. But the Seti, once they sight us, will be headlong in their pursuit.' He then raised the flail in his right hand, and all could see the bloody, matted hair on the spike ball. 'And where shall we lead them?'

'To death!' came the roaring reply.

The rising sun had turned the distant wall of spinning, whirling sand gold, a pleasing colour to Febryl's old, watery eyes. He sat facing east, cross-legged atop what had once been a gate tower but was now a shapeless heap of rubble softened by windblown sand.

The city reborn lay to his back, slow to awaken on this day for reasons of which only a scant few were aware, and Febryl was one of those. The goddess devoured. Consuming life's forces, absorbing the ferocious will to survive from her hapless, misguided mortal servants.

The effect was gradual, yet, day after day, moment by moment, it deadened. Unless one was cognizant of that hunger, of course. And was able to take preventative measures to evade her incessant demands.

Long ago, Sha'ik Reborn had claimed to know him, to have plumbed his every secret, to have discerned the hue of his soul. And indeed, she had shown an alarming ability to speak in his mind – almost as if she was always present, and only spoke to occasionally remind him of that terrifying truth. But such moments had diminished in frequency – perhaps as a result of his renewed efforts to mask himself – until, now, he was certain that she could no longer breach his defences.

Perhaps, however, the truth was far less flattering to his own proficiencies. Perhaps the influence of the goddess had lured Sha'ik Reborn into ... indifference. Aye, it may be that I am already dead and am yet to know it. That all I have planned is known to the woman and goddess both. Am I alone in having spies? No. Korbolo has hinted of his own agents, and indeed, nothing of what I seek will come to pass without the efforts of the Napan's hidden cadre of killers.

It was, he reflected with bitter humour, the nature of everyone in this game to hide as much of themselves from others as they could, from allies as well as enemies, since such apppellations were in the habit of reversing without warning.

None the less, Febryl had faith in Kamist Reloe. The High Mage had every reason to remain loyal to the broader scheme – the scheme that was betrayal most prodigious – since the path it offered was the only one that ensured Reloe's survival in what was to come. And as for the more subtle nuances concerning Febryl himself, well, those were not Kamist Reloe's business. Were they?

Even if their fruition should prove fatal ... to everyone but me.

They all thought themselves too clever, and that was a flaw inviting exploitation.

And what of me? Eh, dear Febryl? Do you think yourself clever? He smiled at the distant wall of sand. Cleverness was not essential, provided one insisted on keeping things simple. Complexity beckoned error, like a whore a soldier on leave. The lure of visceral rewards that proved never quite as straightforward as one would have imagined from the start. But I will avoid that trap. I will not suffer deadly lapses, such as has happened to Bidithal, since they lead to complications – although his failings will lead him into my hands, so I suppose I should not complain too much.
'The sun's light folds over darkness.'

He started, twisted around. 'Chosen One!'

'Deep breaths, old man, will ease your hammering heart. I can wait a moment, for I am patient.'

She stood almost at his side – of course he had seen no shadow, for the sun was before him. But how had she come with such silence? How long had she been standing there? 'Chosen One, have you come to join me in greeting the dawn?'

'Is that what you do, when you come here at the beginning of each day? I'd wondered.'

'I am a man of humble habits, mistress.'

'Indeed. A certain bluntness that affects a quality of simplicity. As if by adhering to simple habits in the flesh and bone, your mind will in turn strive towards the same perfection.'

He said nothing, though his heart had anything but slowed its thundering pace.

Sha'ik then sighed. 'Did I say perfection? Perhaps I should tell you something, then, to aid you in your quest.'

'Please,' he gasped softly.

'The Whirlwind Wall is virtually opaque, barring that diffuse sunlight. And so I am afraid I must correct you, Febryl. You are facing northeast, alas.' She pointed. 'The sun is actually over there, High Mage. Do not fret so – you have at least been consistent. Oh, and there is another matter that I believe must be clarified. Few would argue that my goddess is consumed by anger, and so consumes in turn. But what you might see as the loss of many to feed a singular hunger is in truth worthy of an entirely different analogy.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. She does not strictly feed on the energies of her followers, so much as provide for them a certain focus. Little different, in fact, from that Whirlwind Wall out there, which, while seeming to diffuse the light of the sun, in fact acts to trap it. Have you ever sought to pass through that wall, Febryl? Particularly at dusk, when the day's heat has most fully been absorbed? It would burn you down to bone, High Mage, in an instant. So, you see how something that appears one way is in truth the very opposite way? Burnt crisp – a horrible image, isn't it? One would need to be desert-born, or possess powerful sorcery to defy that. Or very deep shadows ...'

Living simply, Febryl belatedly considered, should not be made synonymous with seeing simply, since the former was both noble and laudable, whilst the latter was a flaw most deadly. A careless error, and, alas, he had made it.

And now, he concluded, it was too late.

And as for altering the plans, oh, it was too late for that as well.

Somehow, the newly arriving day had lost its glamour.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was said the captain's adopted child – who at that time was known by the unfortunate name of Grub – refused the wagon on the march. That he walked the entire way, even as, in the first week beneath the year's hottest sun, fit and hale soldiers stumbled and fell.

This is perhaps invention, for by all accounts he was at that time no more than five years of age. And the captain himself, from whose journals much of that journey and the clash in which it culminated is related in detail, writes very little of Grub, more concerned as he was with the rigours of command. As a result, of the future First Sword of the Late Empire period, scant details, beyond the legendary and probably fictitious, are known.

Lives of the Three
Moragalle

The sound of flies and wasps was a solid, buzzing hum in the hot air of the gorge, and already the stench had grown overpowering. Fist Gamet loosened the clasp on the buckle and lifted the battered iron helmet from his head. The felt liner was sodden with sweat, itching against his scalp, but, as the flies swarmed him, he did not remove it.

He continued watching from the slight rise at the south end of the gorge as the Adjunct walked her horse through the carnage below.

Three hundred Seti and over a hundred horses lay dead, mostly from arrows, in the steep-sided ravine they had been led into. It could not have taken long, even including rounding up and leading off the surviving mounts. There had been less than a bell between the advance Seti riders and the Khundryl, and had Temul not ordered his Wickans back to cover the main army ... well, we would have lost them as well.

As it was, those Wickans had prevented another raid on the supply train, their presence alone sufficient to trigger a sudden withdrawal by the enemy – with not a single drop of blood spilled. The warleader commanding the desert horse warriors had been too cagey to see his force ensnared in an out-and-out battle.

Far better to rely upon ... errors in judgement. The Seti not assigned as flanking riders to the vanguard had defied orders, and had died as a result. And all the bastard needs from us is more stupid mistakes.

Something in the scene below was raising the hairs on his neck. The Adjunct rode alone through the slaughter, her back straight, unmindful of her horse's skittish progress.

It's never the flies that are the trouble, it's the wasps. One sting and that well-bred beast will lose its mind. Could rear and throw her off, break her neck. Or could bolt, straight down the gorge, and then try to take one of the steep sides . . . like some of those Seti horses tried to do . . .

Instead, the horse simply continued picking its way over the bodies, and the clouds of wasps did little more than rise and then wheel from its path, alighting once more upon their feast as soon as mount and rider had passed.

An old soldier at the Fist's side coughed and spat, then, at Gamet's glance, mumbled an apology.

'No need... Captain. It's a grisly sight, and we're all too close ...'

'Not that, sir. Only ...' he paused, then slowly shook his head. 'Never mind, sir. Just an old memory, that's all.'

Gamet nodded. 'I've a few of those myself. So, Fist Tene Baralta wants to know if he needs to send his healers forward. The answer you may bring him lies before you.'
'Aye, sir.'

He watched the grizzled old soldier back his horse clear then swing it round and ride off. Then Gamet fixed his attention once more upon the Adjunct.

She had reached the far end, where most of the bodies lay, heaped up against blood-splashed stone walls, and, after a long moment, during which she scanned the scene on all sides, she gathered the reins and began retracing her path.

Gamet set the helm on his head once more and closed the clasp.

She reached the slope and rode up to halt alongside him.

He had never before seen her expression so severe. A woman with few of a woman's charms, as they say of her, in tones approaching pity. 'Adjunct.'

'He left many of them wounded,' she said. 'Anticipating, perhaps, that we'd reach them in time. Wounded Malazans are better than dead ones, after all.'

'Assuming that warleader seeks to delay us, aye.'

'He does. Even with the Khundryl supply lines, our resources are strained as it is. The loss of the wagons last night will be felt by everyone.'

'Then why didn't Sha'ik send this warleader against us as soon as we crossed the Vathar River? We're a week or less away from the Whirlwind Wall. She could have purchased another month or more, and we'd be in far worse shape when we finally arrived.'

'You are correct, Fist. And I have no answer for you. Temul has gauged this raiding party's strength at just under two thousand – he was fairly certain that the midday contact on the flank revealed the enemy's full force, since he sighted supply horses as well as those taken from the Seti. Thus, a rather large raiding army.'

Gamet ruminated on this for a time, then he grunted. 'It's almost as if we're facing a confused opposition, one at odds with itself.'

'The same thought had occurred to me. For the moment, however, we must concern ourselves with this warleader, else he bleed us to death.'

Gamet swung his horse around. 'More words with Gall, then,' he said, grimacing. 'If we can get them out of their great-grandfathers' armour, they might actually manage a ride up a hill without leaving their horses blown.'

'I want the marines out tonight, Fist.'

His eyes narrowed. 'The marines, Adjunct? On foot? You wish the pickets bolstered?'

She drew a deep breath. 'In the year 1147, Dassem Ultor was faced with a similar situation, with a much smaller army and three entire tribal nations mauling him virtually every night.'

After a moment Gamet nodded. 'I know the scenario, Adjunct, and I recall his answer. The marines will be sent out tonight.'

'Be sure they understand what is expected of them, Fist Gamet.'

'There's some veterans among them,' he replied. 'And in any case, I plan to command the operation myself.'

'That will not be—'

'Yes, it will, Adjunct. My apologies. But... yes, it will.'

'So be it.'
It was one thing to doubt his commander's measure, but another entirely to doubt his own.

There were three types of scorpion common in the odhan, none of which displayed any toleration for either of the others. Early in the second week Strings had drawn his two fellow sergeants aside to unveil his scheme. Both Gesler and Borduke had proved agreeable, particularly at the offer of splitting the profits three ways. Borduke was first to draw the odd-coloured stone and was quick to choose the Red-backed Bastard – outwardly the meanest of the three scorpion types. Gesler had followed, choosing the amber In Out – so named for its transparent exoskeleton through which, if one was inclined to look carefully, various poisons could be seen racing beneath its carapace.

The two sergeants had then looked with pity upon their hapless companion. The Lord's luck that the man with the idea in the first place should be left with the Birdshit scorpion – puny and flat and black and looking like its namesake. Of course, when it came to the three-way split of the main profits, none of that really mattered. Only in the private wagers between the three sergeants would Strings come out wanting.

But Strings had affected only mild disappointment at being left with the Birdshit, answering with naught but a slight shrug as he collected the handful of pebbles they had used in choosing the order of selection. And neither Gesler nor Borduke caught the old sapper's twitch of a smile as he turned away, nor his seemingly casual glance to where Cuttle sat in the shade of a boulder – a glance answered with the slightest of nods.

The squads were then set to the task of finding their respective champions whilst on the march, and, when that failed, at dusk when the horrid little creatures were wont to scuttle out from their hiding places in search of something to kill.

Word quickly spread, and soon the wagers started pouring in. Borduke's soldier, Maybe, was chosen for the task of bet-holder, given his extraordinary ability to retain facts. And one Holder was selected from each squad, who then in turn selected a Trainer.

The afternoon following the raid and the slaughter of the Seti, Strings slowed his pace during the march, until he fell in step with Bottle and Tarr. Despite his casual expression, the truth was, the bile roiled sour in his stomach. The Fourteenth had found its own scorpion, out there in the wastes beyond, and it had just delivered its first sting. The mood of the soldiers was low, and uncertainty gnawed at their confidence. None had believed, it was clear, that the first blood they tasted would be their own. Got to get their minds off it.

'How's little Joyful, Bottle?'

The mage shrugged. 'As hungry and nasty as ever, Sergeant.'

Strings nodded. 'And how's the training coming along, Corporal?'

Tarr frowned beneath the rim of his helm. 'All right, I suppose. As soon as I figure out what kind of training it needs, I'll get right on it.'

'Good, the situation sounds ideal. Spread the word. First battle's tonight, one bell after we set camp.'

Both soldiers swung their heads round at this.

'Tonight?' Bottle asked. 'After what just—'

'You heard me. Gesler and Borduke are getting their beauties primed, same as us. We're ready, lads.'

'It's going to draw quite a crowd,' Corporal Tarr said, shaking his head. 'The lieutenant won't help but wonder—'

'Not just the lieutenant, I'd imagine,' Strings replied. 'But there won't be much of a crowd. We'll use the old word-line system. Run the commentary back through the whole camp.'

'Joyful's going to get skewered,' Bottle muttered, his expression growing sorrowful. 'And here I been feeding her, every night. Big juicy capemoths ... she'd just pounce real pretty, then start eating until there wasn't nothing
left but a couple wings and a crunched-up ball. Then she'd spend half the night cleaning her pincers and licking her lips—'

' Lips?' Smiles asked from behind the three men. 'What lips? Scorpions don't have lips—'

'What do you know?' Bottle shot back. 'You won't even get close—'

'When I get close to a scorpion I kill it. Which is what any sane person would do.'

'Sane?' the mage retorted. 'You pick them up and start pulling things off! Tail, pincers, legs – I ain't seen nothing so cruel in my life!'

'Well, ain't that close enough to see if it's got lips?'

'Where's it all go, I wonder?' Tarr muttered.

Bottle nodded. 'I know, it's amazing. She's so tiny ...'

'That's our secret,' Strings said quietly.

'What is?'

'The reason why I picked a Birdshit, soldiers.'

'You didn't pick ...'

At the suspicious silence that followed, Strings simply smiled. Then he shrugged. 'Hunting's one thing. An easy thing. Birdshits don't need to get... elaborate, killing a maimed capemoth. It's when they have to fight. Protecting territory, or their young. That's when the surprise comes. You think Joyful's going to lose tonight, Bottle? Think your heart's going to get broken? Relax, lad, old Strings here has always got your tender feelings in mind ...'

'You can drop that "Strings" bit, Sergeant,' Bottle said after a moment. 'We all know who you are. We all know your real name.'

'Well, that's damned unfortunate. If it gets out to the command—'

'Oh, it won't, Fiddler.'

'Maybe not on purpose, but in the heat of battle?'

'Who's going to listen to our screams of panic in a battle, Sergeant?'

Fiddler shot the young man a look, gauging, then he grinned. 'Good point. Still, be careful what you say and when you say it.'

'Aye, Sergeant. Now, could you explain that surprise you were talking about?'

'No. Wait and see.'

Strings fell silent then, noting a small party of riders approaching down the line of march. 'Straighten up, soldiers. Officers coming.'

Fist Gamet, the sergeant saw, was looking old, worn out. Getting dragged out of retirement was never a good thing, he knew, since the first thing that an old soldier put away was his nerve, and that was hard, if not impossible, to get back. That stepping away, of course, marked a particular kind of retirement – and one a cautious soldier usually avoided. Abandoning the lifestyle was one thing, but surrendering the deadly edge was another. Studying the Fist as the man rode up, Fiddler felt a tremor of unease.

Accompanying Gamet were Captain Keneb and the lieutenant, the latter so grim-faced as to be near comical. *His officer mask, with which he tries to look older and thus more professional. Instead, it's the scowl of a constipated man. Someone should tell him ...*
The threesome reined in to walk their horses alongside Fiddler's own squad – somewhat unnerving to the
sergeant, though he offered them a nod. Keneb's eyes, he noted, were on Cuttle.

But it was Ranal who spoke first. 'Sergeant Strings.'

'Aye, sir?'

'You and Cuttle, please, off to one side for a private conversation.' Then he raised his voice to the squad
marching ahead. 'Sergeant Gesler and Corporal Stormy, back with us on the double.'

'Four should be enough,' the Fist rumbled, 'to see the instructions properly delivered to the other squads.'

'Yes, sir,' said Ranal, who had been about to call over Borduke.

When the four marines were assembled, Fist Gamet cleared his throat, then began, 'It's clear you are all
veterans. And Captain Keneb informs me that you have marched in these lands before – no, I need no more
details of that. My reliance depends on that very experience, however. The Adjunct wishes the marines to
answer the desert raiders tonight.'

He fell silent then.

And no-one spoke for a time, as the significance of the Fist's words slowly settled in the minds of the four
marines.

Finally, Captain Keneb said, 'Aye, Dassem's answer, all those years ago. It's fortunate, then, that you'd
planned on using the word-line this evening. Simple enough to keep it going once the three-way fight's
finished.' He leaned over slightly in his saddle and said to Fiddler, 'You've the Birdshit, Sergeant? What are the
odds running at right now?'

'Maybe says it's about forty to one,' Fiddler replied, keeping his face straight.

'Even better than I'd hoped,' Keneb replied, leaning back. 'But I should add, Sergeant, that I've convinced the
Fist to back your Birdshit as well.'

'Ten jakatas,' Gamet said, 'and in this I rely upon the captain's ... experience. And yours, Sergeant ... Strings.'

'Uh, we'll do our best, sir.'

Gesler turned to Stormy. 'Smell something, Corporal?'

The huge Falari with the flint sword on his back scowled. 'Ain't no scorpions on the coasts, dammit. Aye,
Sergeant, I'm smelling something all right.'

'Get used to it,' Cuttle advised.

Ranal was looking confused, but wisely said nothing ... for now.

'Use the word-line,' Keneb said, resuming his instructions, 'and remember, make sure the toughest squads are
the ones showing their smiles.'

'Aye, Captain,' Fiddler replied, wondering if he should reassess his opinion of Keneb.

'One last thing,' the man added. 'Fist Gamet will be commanding the operation tonight. Accordingly, I want
your two squads and Borduke's to double your duties tonight.'

_Oh, Hood's balls under a big rock._ 'Understood, Captain.'

The soldiers of the Fourteenth Army were strangely arrayed throughout the encampment once the tents had
been raised and the cookfires started, seemingly casually seated in a manner that, if seen from on high, would
have resembled a vast, knotted rope. And following the meal, activities seemed to cease entirely, barring the
reluctant marching out of the soldiers on first picket duty.

In one particular place, centred on the marines of the 9th Company of the 8th Legion, a somewhat different assembly of soldiers was apparent – a smallish, exclusive ring, surrounding a still smaller ring of daggers thrust into the ground, edge inward, at a spacing of two finger-widths. For the moment, that inner ring was empty, the sand smoothed flat and free of pebbles.

Maybe was the last soldier to join the others waiting impatiently around the modest arena, saying nothing though his lips moved in a silent recitation of numbers and names. Seeing the eyes of the others on him, he gave a single nod.

Fiddler swung to Bottle. 'Bring out Joyful Union, lad.'

Borduke and Gesler issued similar instructions for their respective combatants. The Red-backed Bastard had been named Mangonel by Borduke's squad, while Gesler and company had named their amber In Out scorpion Clawmaster.

The three boxes were brought forward and Fiddler said to his fellow sergeants, 'All right, here and now we're to look upon our beauties, and so swear that no alterations have been made to them, either by sorcery or alchemy or any other means. They are natural as the day we first found them. Unchanged. Each of us will examine each of the three scorpions – as closely as we might choose, including the assistance of a mage if desired, and then swear out loud, by whatever gods we normally swear by, as precise a statement of what we see as we can. Here, I'll start.'

He gestured and the three boxes were set down just outside the knife ring. The first wooden container – Borduke's – had its lid removed and Fiddler leaned close. He was silent for a long time, then he nodded. 'I, Sergeant Strings of the 4th squad in the 9th Company of the 8th Legion, swear by the ghosts of the Deadhouse and every other nasty nightmare that haunts me that the creature before me is a natural, unaltered Red-backed Bastard scorpion.'

The sergeant then moved on to Gesler's champion, and after a long examination he sighed and nodded, repeating his sworn vow on behalf of the In Out scorpion scuttling about in the small wooden box.

He then concluded with his own Joyful Union.

Gesler followed the procedure, seeking the added opinions of both Tavos Pond and Sands during his protracted examination of Joyful Union, whilst Fiddler leaned back with a slight smile on his bearded face, waiting patiently until, with a snarl, Gesler swore his vow. 'I, Sergeant Gesler of the 5th squad in the 9th Company of the 8th Legion, swear by the two Lords of Summer, Fener and Treach, that the creature before me is a natural, unaltered Birdshit scorpion – even though I know there's something about it I'm not seeing and I'm about to lose my life's savings on the Sergeants' Wager.'

Fiddler's smile broadened momentarily.

Borduke crawled up to Joyful Union and came as close as was possible without being stung, his face almost inside the small box. Since that draped the motionless creature in shadow he cursed and leaned back slightly. 'I should know about scorpions, shouldn't I? But all I ever do is stamp on them – like any sane man would do. Sure, I knew a whore once who kept one on a thong about her neck, as golden as the skin of her breasts – tender nipples, you see, and she didn't like them manhandled—'

'Get on with it,' Gesler snapped.

'Don't rush me. I don't like being rushed.'

'All right, I won't rush you. Just swear your damned vow before my heart flies out to fill my breeches.'

'I, Borduke of the 6th squad in the 9th Company of the 8th Legion, swear on the downy belly of the Queen of Dreams that the creature before me is a natural, unaltered Birdshit scorpion, and may my father's ghost remain in its tomb, since the inheritance was mine to lose anyway, right? Dead means you don't care any more, right? It had better, because if it doesn't, then I'm doomed to paternal haunting for the rest of my days.'
“The worst kind,’ Lutes muttered.

‘Another word from you, soldier,’ Borduke growled, moving back into the circle, ‘and I'll make you the only one smiling later tonight.’

‘Besides,’ Balgrid said, ‘it ain't the worst kind. Maternal haunting – now that's a killer. How long can a man stand being seven years old?’

‘Will you two be quiet!’ Borduke snarled, his large-knuckled fingers clutching as if squeezing invisible throats.

‘We ready?’ Fiddler quietly asked.

‘She'll hide, won't she?’ Gesler demanded. ‘Wait till the other two have chopped and stabbed each other up before pouncing on the mangled survivor! That's it, isn't it? Her jelly brains are purer than theirs, purer and smarter, aren't they?’

Fiddler shrugged. ‘Wouldn't know about that, Gesler. Are you done?’

The bronzed-hued marine settled back, the muscles of his jaw bunching.

‘How's the word-line, Cuttle?’

‘Been repeating every word since we first settled, Fid,’ the sapper replied.

‘And so legends were born,’ Koryk rumbled with facetious portent.

‘Into the arena, then,’ Fiddler instructed.

The boxes were gingerly lifted and held over the arena.

‘Equidistant? Good. Tip 'em, lads.’

Mangonel was the first to land, tail arched and pincers out as it scuttled close to the knife-edge barrier, upon which, a hair's breadth from the iron blades, it halted and then backed away, its carapace flushing red with its characteristic mindless rage. Clawmaster was next, seeming to leap down ready for war, fluids racing beneath its amber-tinted shell.

Joyful Union came last, slow and measured, so low on the sand as to seem belly-down. Pincers tucked away, tail curled to port and quiescent. Dwarfed by the other two scorpions, its black shell somewhere between glossy and flat. Its multiple legs scuttled it forward slightly, then it froze.

Gesler hissed. ‘If she plucks a couple knives from the ring and uses 'em, I'm going to kill you, Fid.’

‘No need,’ Fiddler replied, his attention divided between what was going on in the arena and Ibb’s running commentary, the man’s voice harsh with tension as he waxed creative in describing what had, up to now, been essentially nothing worth comment.

That suddenly changed as three things occurred almost simultaneously. Joyful Union sauntered into the middle of the arena. Mangonel's assortment of natural weapons all cocked in unison, even as the creature began backing up, its shell turning fiery red. Clawmaster suddenly wheeled and darted straight at the nearest wall of blades, halting a moment before impact, pincers waving wildly.

‘He wants mommy, looks like, Hubb,’ Koryk drily observed.

Clawmaster’s Holder softly whimpered in answer.

Then, after a frozen moment from all three scorpions, Joyful Union finally lifted its tail.

Upon which, all but Fiddler stared in utter disbelief, as Joyful Union seemed to ... split. Horizontally. Into two identical, but thinner, flatter scorpions. That then raced outward, one to Mangonel, the other to Clawmaster
– each like a village mongrel charging a bull bhederin, so extreme their comparative sizes.

Red-backed Bastard and In Out both did their best, but were no match in speed, nor ferocity, as tiny pincers snipped – audibly – through legs, through tail, through arm-joints, then, with the larger creature immobile and helpless, a casual, almost delicate stab of stinger.

With In Out's translucent shell, the horrid bright green of that poison was visible – and thus described in ghastly detail by Ibb – as it spread out from the puncture until Clawmaster's once beautiful amber was gone, replaced by a sickly green that deepened before their eyes to a murky black.

'Dead as dung,' Hubb moaned. 'Clawmaster ...'

Mangonel suffered an identical fate.

With its enemies vanquished, the two Birdshit scorpions rushed back into each other's arms – and, in the blink of an eye, were as one once more.

'Cheat!' Stormy bellowed, rearing to his feet and fumbling to draw his flint sword.

Gesler leapt up and, along with Truth, struggled to restrain their raging comrade. 'We looked, Stormy!' Gesler yelled. 'We looked for anything – then we swore! I swore! By Fener and Treach, damn you! How could any of us have known "Joyful Union" wasn't just a cute name?'

Glancing up, Fiddler met Cuttle's steady gaze. The sapper mouthed the words We're rich, you bastard.

The sergeant, with a final glance at Gesler and Truth – who were dragging a foaming Stormy away – then moved to crouch down beside Ibb. 'All right, lad, what follows is for the marines only, and especially the sergeants. We're about to become our own Joyful Union to big, bad Mangonel tonight. I'll explain what the Adjunct has ordered – repeat what I say, Ibb, word for word – got it?'

Three bells had passed since the sunset. Dust from the Whirlwind Wall obscured the stars, making the darkness beyond the hearth-fires almost impenetrable. Squads from the infantry trooped out to relieve those stationed at the pickets. In the Khundryl camp, the warriors removed their heavy armour and prepared to settle in for the night. Along the army encampment's outermost trenches, Wickan and Seti horse warriors patrolled.

At the 4th squad's fire, Fiddler returned from the company's wagons with his kit bag. He set it down and untied the draws.

Nearby sprawled Cuttle, his eyes glittering reflected flames, watching as the sergeant began withdrawing variously sized, hide-wrapped objects. Moments later he had assembled a dozen such items, which he then began unwrapping, revealing the glint of polished wood and blackened iron.

The others in the squad were busy checking over their weapons and armour one last time, saying nothing as the tension slowly built among the small group of soldiers.

'Been some time since I last saw one of those,' Cuttle muttered as Fiddler laid out the objects. 'I've seen imitations, some of them as good as the originals.'

Fiddler grunted. 'There's a few out there. It's the knock-back where the biggest danger lies, since if it's too hard the whole damn thing explodes upon release. Me and Hedge worked out this design ourselves, then we found a Mare jeweller in Malaz City – what she was doing there I've no idea—'

'A jeweller? Not a weaponsmith?'

'Aye.' He began assembling the crossbow. 'And a wood-carver for the stops and plugs – those need replacing after twenty or so shots—'

'When they're pulped.'

'Or splitting, aye. It's the ribs, when they spring back – that's what sends the shockwave forward. Unlike a
regular crossbow, where the quarrel's fast enough out of the slot to escape that vibration. Here, the quarrel's a pig, heavy and weighted on the head end – it never leaves the slot as fast as you'd like, so you need something to absorb that knock-back, before it gets to the quarrel shaft.'

'And the clay ball attached to it. Clever solution, Fid.'

'It's worked so far.'

'And if it does fail...'

Fiddler looked up and grinned. 'I won't be the one with breath to complain.' The last fitting clicked into place, and the sergeant set the bulky weapon down, turning his attention to the individually wrapped quarrels.

Cuttle slowly straightened. 'Those ain't got sharpers on them.'

'Hood no, I can throw sharpers.'

'And that crossbow can lob cussers far enough? Hard to believe.'

'Well, the idea is to aim and shoot, then bite a mouthful of dirt.'

'I can see the wisdom in that, Fid. Now, you let us all know when you're firing, right?'

'Nice and loud, aye.'

'And what word should we listen for?'

Fiddler noticed that the rest of his squad had ceased their preparations and were now waiting for his answer. He shrugged. 'Duck. Or sometimes what Hedge used to use.'

'Which was?'

'A scream of terror.' He climbed to his feet. 'All right, soldiers, it's time.'

When the last grains trickled down, the Adjunct turned from the hourglass and nodded to Gamet. 'When will you join your companies, Fist?'

'In a few moments, Adjunct. Although, because I intend to remain in my saddle, I will not ride out to them until the fighting starts.'

He saw her frown at that, but she made no comment, focusing instead on the two Wickan youths standing near the tent's entrance. 'Have you completed your rituals?'

The lad, Nil, shrugged. 'We have spoken with the spirits, as you ordered.'

'Spoken? That is all?'

'Once, perhaps, we could have ... compelled. But as we warned you long ago in Aren, our power is not as it once was.'

Nether added, 'This land's spirits are agitated at the moment, easily distracted. Something else is happening. We have done all we could, Adjunct. At the very least, if the desert raiders have a shaman among them, there will be little chance of the secret's unveiling.'

'Something else is happening, you said. What, specifically?'

Before she could answer, Gamet said, 'Your pardon, Adjunct. I will take my leave now.'

'Of course.'

The Fist left them to resume their conversation. A fog had settled on his mind, the moments before an
engagement when uncertainty engendered unease and confusion. He had heard of this affliction claiming other commanders, but had not thought it would befall him. The rush of his own blood had created a wall of sound, muting the world beyond. And it seemed his other senses had dulled as well.

As he made his way towards his horse – held ready by a soldier – he shook his head, seeking to clear it. If the soldier said something to him when he took the reins and swung up into the saddle, he did not hear it.

The Adjunct had been displeased by his decision to ride into the battle. But the added mobility was, to Gamet's mind, worth the risk. He set out through the camp at a slow canter. Fires had been allowed to die, the scenes surrounding him strangely ethereal. He passed figures hunched down around coals and envied them their freedom. Life had been simpler as a plain soldier. Gamet had begun to doubt his ability to command.

_Age is no instant purchase of wisdom. But it's more than that, isn't it? She may have made me a Fist and given me a legion. And soldiers might well salute when they pass — though of course not here, in enemy territory, thank Hood. No, all these trappings are no assurance of my competence._

_This night shall be my first test. Gods, I should have stayed retired. I should have refused her insistence – dammit, her assumption – that I would simply accept her wishes._

There was, he had come to believe, a weakness within him. A fool might call it a virtue, such ... pliable equanimity. But he knew better.

He rode on, the fog of his mind growing ever thicker.

Eight hundred warriors crouched motionless, ghostly, amidst the boulders on the plain. Wearing dulled armour and telabas the colour of the terrain around them, they were virtually invisible, and Corabb Bhilan Then'ulas felt a surge of dark pride, even as another part of his mind wondered at Leoman's protracted ... hesitation.

Their warchief lay flat on the slope's rise ten paces ahead. He had not moved in some time. Despite the chill, sweat trickled beneath Corabb's armour, and he shifted his grip once more on the unfamiliar tulwar in his right hand. He'd always preferred axe-like weapons – something with a haft he could, if need be, grip with his other hand. He disliked the blade edge that reached down all the way to the hilt and wished he'd had time to file it blunt for the first half of its length.

_I am a warrior who cannot tolerate sharp edges close to his body. Which spirits thought to make of me such an embodiment of confused irony? I curse them all._

He could wait no longer, and slowly crawled up alongside Leoman of the Rails.

Beyond the crest sprawled another basin, this one hummocked and thick with thorny brush. It flanked the encamped Malazan army on this side, and was between sixty and seventy paces in breadth.

'Foolish,' Corabb muttered, 'to have chosen to stop here. I think we need have nothing to fear from this Adjunct.'

The breath slowly hissed between Leoman's teeth. 'Aye, plenty of cover for our approach.'

'Then why do we wait, Warchief?'

'I am wondering, Corabb.'

'Wondering?'

'About the Empress. She was once Mistress of the Claw. Its fierce potency was given shape by her, and we have all learned to fear those mage-assassins. Ominous origins, yes? And then, as Empress, there were the great leaders of her imperial military. Dujek Onearm. Admiral Nok. Coltaine. Greymane.'

'But here, this night, Warchief, we face none of those.'

'True. We face the Adjunct Tavore, who was personally chosen by the Empress. To act as the fist of her
vengeance."

Corabb frowned, then he shrugged. 'Did the Empress not also choose High Fist Pormqual? Korbolo Dom? Did she not demote Whiskeyjack – the fiercest Malazan our tribes ever faced? And, if the tales are true, she was also responsible for the assassination of Dassem Ultor.'

'Your words are sharp, Corabb. She is not immune to grave ... errors in judgement. Well then, let us make her pay for them.' He twisted round and gestured his warriors forward.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas grinned. Perhaps the spirits would smile on him this night. Pray that I find a worthy axe or mace among the countless dead Malazan soldiers.

Borduke's squad had found a small hill for their position, swearing and cursing as they clawed their way to its modest summit, then began digging holes and repositioning rocks.

Their hill was likely some old round barrow – the hummocks in this basin were far too regular to be natural. Twenty paces away, Fiddler listened to the 6th squad marines muttering and shuffling about on their strong-point, their efforts punctuated every now and then by Borduke's impatient growl. Fifty paces to the west another squad was digging in on another hill, and the sergeant began to wonder if they'd held off too long. Barrows tended to be big heaps of rocks beneath the cloak of sandy soil, after all, and burrowing into them was never easy. He could hear rocks being pried loose, iron shovels grating on heavy granite, and a few tumbling wildly down the hillsides through the thick, brittle bushes. 

Hood's breath, how clumsy do you idiots have to get?

As Corabb was about to move on to the next cover, Leoman's gloved hand reached out and snagged his shoulder. The warrior froze.

And now he could hear it. There were soldiers in the basin.

Leoman moved up alongside him. 'Outlying pickets,' he muttered under his breath. 'On those barrows. It seems she's sent us a gift after all,' the Warchief added with a grin. 'Listen to them stumble about – they waited too long, and now the darkness confounds them.'

There was no difficulty in locating the enemy positions – they'd selected the barrows one and all, and were making loud work of digging in. And, Corabb realized, they were spaced too far apart for mutual support. Each position could be easily isolated, surrounded, and every last soldier slaughtered. Long before any relief could arrive from the main camp.

Likely, Corabb reflected as he slipped through the darkness towards the nearest enemy position, the Malazans had been anticipating a pre-dawn raid, identical to the first one. And so the Adjunct had ordered the emplacements as a pre-emptive measure. But, as Leoman had once explained to him, every element of an army in the field needed to follow the rules of mutual support – even the pickets where first contact would occur. Clearly, the Adjunct had failed to apply this most basic tenet.

Added to her inability to control her Seti horse warriors, this was further proof, in Corabb's eyes, of Tavore's incompetence.

He adjusted his grip on the tulwar, halting fifteen paces from the nearest strong-point. He could actually see the helms of at least two of the Malazan soldiers, poking up over the holes they had dug. Corabb concentrated on slowing his breathing, and waited for the signal.

Gamet reined in at the edge of the now unoccupied marine camp. The quiet call would have gone out through the rest of the army, awakening the cutters and healers. Precautionary, of course, since there was no way to predict whether the raiders would attack from the approach the Adjunct had arranged. Given that all the other angles held either natural obstacles or easily defensible positions, the desert warleader might well balk at such
an obvious invitation. As he waited, the Fist began to think that nothing would come of this gambit, at least on this night. And what were the chances that a day's march would bring the army to yet another ideal combination of terrain and timing?

He settled back in the saddle, the strange, cloying lassitude in his mind deepening. The night had, if anything, grown even darker, the stars struggling to pierce the veil of suspended dust.

A capemoth flitted in front of his face, triggering an involuntary flinch. An omen? He shook himself and straightened once more. Three bells remained before dawn. But there could be no recall and so the marines would take shifts on the wagons come the morrow's march. And I had better do the same, if we're to repeat this —

A wavering wolf howl broke the stillness of the night. Although Corabb had been waiting for it, he was still startled into a momentary immobility. To either side, warriors rose from their cover and sprinted for the barrow. Arrows whispered, struck the visible helms with solid crunching sounds. He saw one of those bronze helms spin away through the air – realized that it had not been covering a soldier's head.

A flash of unease—

Warcries filled the air. The glint of heavily armoured figures rising up on the barrows, crossbows lowering. Smaller objects flew out, one of them striking the ground five paces to Corabb's right.

A detonation that stabbed at his ears. The blast threw him to one side, and he stumbled, then fell over a thorn bush.

Multiple explosions – flames shot up to light the scene—

At the wolf's howl, Fiddler flattened himself still further beneath his cloak of sand and brush – not a moment too soon as a moccasined foot thumped down on his back as a raider ran over him.

The barrows had done their job – drawing the attackers in to what, by all outward appearances, seemed isolated positions. One squad in three had shown face to the enemy; the remaining two had preceded them by a bell or more to take cover between the barrows.

And now the trap was sprung.

The sergeant lifted his head, and saw a dozen backs between him and Borduke's strong-point. Their charge slowed as three of their number suddenly pitched down to the ground, quarrels buried deep.

'Up, dammit!' Fiddler hissed.

His soldiers rose around him, shedding dusty sand and branches.

Crouching low, cusser-fitted crossbow cradled in his arms, the sergeant set out, away from Borduke's position. Gesler's marines were easily sufficient to support the squad at the barrow. Fiddler had seen a mass of raiders moving along the ridge beyond the basin – easily two hundred in all – and suspected they were moving to flank the ambush. The narrowest of corridors awaited them, but if they overran the infantry picket stationed there, they could then strike into the heart of the supply camp.

He grinned at the snapping crack of sharpers detonating behind him, along with the deadly whoosh of burners filling the basin with red, flaring light. The raid had been stopped in its tracks, and confusion had snared the attackers. Fiddler and the five marines trailing in his wake were low enough to keep their silhouettes from being back-lit by the flames as they reached the base of the slope.

They had ascended halfway to the ridge when Fiddler held up a fisted hand.

Cuttle scrambled up beside him. 'We won't even have to duck on this one,' he growled.
The sergeant raised his crossbow, sighting well above the crest line and settling the metal stock against his shoulder. He drew a breath, held it, and slowly pressed the release.

The iron ribs thunked, and the cusser quarrel leapt away, describing a graceful arc up and over the ridge. It sank out of sight.

Bodies were thrown skyward at the explosion, and screams filled the air.

'Crossbows to bear,' Cuttle snapped, 'in case they come rolling over the—'

On the crest above them, the skyline was suddenly crowded with warriors.

'Fall back!' Fiddler shouted as he continued to reload. 'Fall back!'

After sprawling into the thorn bush, Corabb dragged himself clear, spitting curses, and scrambled to his feet. The bodies of his comrades lay on all sides, struck down by heavy crossbow bolts or those terrible Moranth munitions. There had been more marines, hidden between the barrows, and now he could hear horses behind them, sweeping on to take the ridge – Khundryl – the bastards were in light armour only, and they had been ready and waiting.

He looked for Leoman, but could not see him among those warriors made visible by the sheets of flames left by the Malazan fire-grenados – and of those, few were still on their feet. Time had come, he decided, to withdraw.

He collected the tulwar from where it had fallen, then spun about and ran for the ridge.

And plunged headlong into a squad of marines.

Sudden shouts.

A huge soldier wearing the trappings of a Seti slammed a hide-wrapped shield into Corabb's face. The desert warrior reeled back, blood gushing from his nose and mouth, and took a wild swing. The tulwar's heavy blade cracked hard against something – and snapped clean just above the hilt.

Corabb landed hard on the ground.

A soldier passed close and left something on his lap.

Somewhere just up on the ridge another explosion ripped through the night – this one louder by far than any he had yet heard.

Stunned, blinking tears, Corabb sat up, and saw a small round clay ball roll down to land in front of his crotch.

Smoke rose from it – sputtering, foaming acid, just a drop, eating its way through.

Whimpering, Corabb rolled to one side – and came up against a discarded helm. He grabbed it and lunged back at the sharper, slamming the bronze cap over it.

Then he closed his eyes.

As the squad continued its retreat – the slope behind it a mass of blasted bodies from Fiddler's second cusser, with Khundryl Burned Tears now crashing into the flank of the remaining attackers – Cuttle grabbed the sergeant's shoulder and spun him around.

'The bastard Koryk knocked down is about to be surprised, Fid.'

Fiddler fixed his gaze on the figure just now sitting up.
'Left a smoking sharper in his lap,' Cuttle added.

Both sappers halted to watch.

'Four...'

The warrior made his horrific discovery and plunged to one side.

'Three...'

Then rolled back directly onto the sharper.

'Two...'

Thumping a helm down over it.

'One.'

The detonation lifted the hapless man into the air on a man-high column of fire.

Yet he had managed to hold on to the helm, even as it lifted him still higher, up and over. Feet scything wildly in the air, he plummeted back down, landing to kick up a cloud of dust and smoke.

'Now that—'

But Cuttle got no further, and both sappers simply stared in disbelief as the warrior scrambled upright, looked around, collected a discarded lance, then raced off back up the slope.

Gamet drove heels into his horse's flanks. The mount pounded down into the basin from the west side, opposite where the Khundryl had come from.

Three knots of desert warriors had managed to weather the cross-bow fire and munitions to assault one of the strong-points. They had driven the two hidden squads back onto the barrow as well, and the Fist saw his marines dragging wounded comrades into the trenchworks. Fewer than ten soldiers among the three squads were still fighting, desperately holding back the screaming raiders.

Gamet pulled his sword free as he urged his horse directly towards the beleaguered position. As he approached, he saw two marines go down before an onrush from one of the attacking groups – and the barrow was suddenly overrun.

The fugue gripping his senses seemed to redouble, and he began sawing the reins, confused, bewildered by the roar of sounds surrounding him.

'Fist!'

He lifted his sword, as his horse cantered, as if of its own will, towards the barrow.

'Fist Gamet! Pull out of there!'

Too many voices. Screams of the dying. The flames — they're falling away. Darkness closing in. My soldiers are dying. Everywhere. It's failed — the whole plan has failed—

A dozen raiders were rushing at him – and more movement, there, to his right – another squad of marines, fast closing, as if they'd been on their way to relieve the overrun strong-point, but now they were sprinting in his direction.

I don't understand. Not here – the other way. Go there, go to my soldiers—

He saw something large fly from one of the marines' hands, down into the midst of the warriors attacking him.
'Fist!'  
  
  Two lances whipped out, seeking him.  
  
  Then the night exploded.  
  
  He felt his horse lifted beneath him, pushing him down over the back of the saddle. The animal's head snapped upward, impossibly so, as it continued arching back – to thump down between Gamet's thighs a moment before he tumbled, boots leaving the stirrups, over the horse's rump.  
  
  Down into a mist of blood and grit.  
  
  He blinked his eyes open, found himself lying in sodden mud, amidst bodies and parts of bodies, at the base of a crater. His helmet was gone. No sword in his hand.  
  
  I was ... I was on a horse ...  
  
  Someone slid down to slam against his side. He attempted to clamber away, but was dragged back down.  
  
  'Fist Gamet, sir! I'm Sergeant Gesler – Captain Keneb's 9th Company – can you hear me?'  
  
  'Y-yes – I thought you were—'  
  
  'Aye, Fist. But we dropped 'em, and now the rest of my squad and Borduke's are relieving 3rd Company's marines. We need to get you to a healer, sir.'  
  
  'No, that's all right.' He struggled to sit up, but something was wrong with his legs – they were indifferent to his commands. 'Tend to those on the barrow, Sergeant—'  
  
  'We are, sir. Pella! Down here, help me with the Fist.'  
  
  Another marine arrived, this one much younger – oh, no, too young for this. I will ask the Adjunct to send him home. To his mother and father, yes. He should not have to die – 'You should not have to die.'  
  
  'Sir?'  
  
  'Only his horse between him and a cusser blast,' Gesler said. 'He's addled, Pella. Now, take his arms ...'  
  
  Addled? No, my mind is clear. Perfectly clear, now. Finally. They're all too young for this. It's Laseen's war – let her fight it. Tavore – she was a child, once. But then the Empress murdered that child. Murdered her. I must tell the Adjunct...  
  
  Fiddler settled wearily beside the now dead hearth. He set his crossbow down and wiped the sweat and grime from his eyes. Cuttle eased down beside him. 'Koryk's head still aches,' the sapper muttered, 'but it don't look like anything's broken that wasn't already broken.'  
  
  'Except his helm,' Fiddler replied.  
  
  'Aye, except that. The only real scrap of the night for our squad, barring a few dozen quarrels loosed. And we didn't even kill the bastard.'  
  
  'You got too cute, Cuttle.'  
  
  The man sighed. 'Aye, I did. Must be getting old.'  
  
  'That's what I concluded. Next time, just stab a pigsticker in the bastard.'  
  
  'Amazed he survived it in any case.'  
  
  The pursuit by the Khundryl had taken the Burned Tears far beyond the ridge, and what had begun as a raid against a Malazan army was now a tribal war. Two bells remained before dawn. Infantry had moved out into
the basin to collect wounded, retrieve quarrels, and strip down the Malazan corpses – leaving nothing for the enemy to use. The grim, ugly conclusion to every battle, the only mercy the cover of darkness.

Sergeant Gesler appeared out of the gloom and joined them at the lifeless hearth. He drew off his gauntlets and dropped them into the dust, then rubbed at his face.

Cuttle spoke. 'Heard a position was overrun.'

'Aye. We'd had it in hand, at least to start. Closing in fast. Most of the poor bastards could have walked away from that barrow. As it is, only four did.'

Fiddler looked up. 'Out of three squads?'

Gesler nodded, then spat into the ashes.

Silence.

Then Cuttle grunted. 'Something always goes wrong.'

Gesler sighed, collected his gauntlets and rose. 'Could have been worse.'

Fiddler and Cuttle watched the man wander off.

'What happened, do you think?'

Fiddler shrugged. 'I suppose we'll find out soon enough. Now, find Corporal Tarr and get him to gather the rest. I need to explain all the things we did wrong tonight.'

'Starting with you leading us up the slope?'

Fiddler grimaced. 'Starting with that, aye.'

'Mind you, if you hadn't,' Cuttle mused, 'more of those raiders could have followed down to the overrun barrow through the breach. Your lobbed cusser did its work – distracted them. Long enough for the Khundryl to arrive and keep them busy.'

'Even so,' the sergeant conceded. 'But if we'd been alongside Gesler, maybe we could have saved a few more marines.'

'Or messed it up worse, Fid. You know better than to think like that.'

'I guess you're right. Now, gather them up.'

'Aye.'

Gamet looked up as the Adjunct entered the cutters' tent. She was pale – from lack of sleep, no doubt – and had removed her helm, revealing her short-cropped, mouse-coloured hair.

'I will not complain,' Gamet said, as the healer finally moved away.

'Regarding what?' the Adjunct asked, head turning to scan the other cots on which wounded soldiers lay.

'The removal of my command,' he replied.

Her gaze fixed on him once more. 'You were careless, Fist, in placing yourself at such risk. Hardly cause to strip you of your rank.'

'Very presence diverted marines rushing to the aid of their comrades, Adjunct. My presence resulted in lives lost.'

She said nothing for a moment, then stepped closer. 'Every engagement takes lives, Gamet. This is the
burden of command. Did you think this war would be won without the spilling of blood?"

He looked away, grimacing against the waves of dull pain that came from forced healing. The cutters had removed a dozen shards of clay from his legs. Muscles had been shredded. Even so, he knew that the Lady's luck had been with him this night. The same could not be said for his hapless horse. 'I was a soldier once, Adjunct,' he rasped. 'I am one no longer. This is what I discovered tonight. As for being a Fist, well, commanding house guards was a fair representation of my level of competence. An entire legion? No. I am sorry, Adjunct...'

She studied him, then nodded. 'It will be some time before you are fully recovered from your wounds. Which of your captains would you recommend for a temporary field promotion?'

Yes, the way it should be done. Good. 'Captain Keneb, Adjunct.'

'I concur. And now I must leave you. The Khundryl are returning.'

'With trophies, I hope.'

She nodded.

Gamet managed a smile. 'That is well.'

The sun was climbing near zenith when Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas reined in his lathered horse alongside Leoman. Other warriors were straggling in all the time, but it might be days before the scattered elements of the company were finally reassembled. In light armour, the Khundryl had been able to maintain persistent contact with the Raraku horse warriors, and had proved themselves fierce and capable fighters.

The ambush had been reversed, the message delivered with succinct precision. They had underestimated the Adjunct.

'Your first suspicions were right,' Corabb growled as he settled down in his saddle, the horse trembling beneath him. 'The Empress chose wisely.'

Leoman's right cheek had been grazed by a crossbow quarrel, leaving a crusted brown line that glistened in places through the layer of dust. At Corabb's observation he grimaced, leaned to one side and spat.

'Hood curse those damned marines,' Corabb continued. 'If not for their grenados and those assault crossbows, we would have taken them all down. Would that I had found one of those crossbows – the loading mechanism must be—'

'Be quiet, Corabb,' Leoman muttered. 'I have orders for you. Select a worthy messenger and have him take three spare horses and ride back to Sha'ik as fast as he can. He is to tell her I will be continuing with my raids, seeking the pattern to this Adjunct's responses, and will rejoin the Chosen One three days before the Malazan army arrives. Also, that I no longer hold any faith in Korbolo Dom's strategy for the day of battle, nor his tactics – aye, Corabb, she will not listen to such words, but they must be said, before witnesses. Do you understand?'

'I do, Leoman of the Flails, and I shall choose the finest rider among us.'

'Go, then.'
CHAPTER TWENTY

Shadow is ever besieged, for that is its nature. Whilst darkness devours, and light steals. And so one sees shadow ever retreat to hidden places, only to return in the wake of the war between dark and light.

Observations of the Warrens
Insallan Enura

The rope had visited the edur ships. corpses lay everywhere, already rotting on the deck beneath squabbling, shrieking gulls and crows. Cutter stood near the prow and watched in silence as Apsalar walked among the bodies, pausing every now and then to examine some detail or other, her measured calm leaving the Daru chilled.

They had drawn the sleek runner up alongside, and Cutter could hear its steady bumping against the hull as the morning breeze continued to freshen. Despite the enlivening weather, lassitude gripped them both. They were to sail away, but precisely where had not been specified by the patron god of assassins. Another servant of Shadow awaited them ... somewhere.

He tested his left arm once more, lifting it out to the side. The shoulder throbbed, but not as badly as yesterday. Fighting with knives was all very well, until one had to face an armoured sword-wielder, then the drawbacks to short-bladed, close-in stickers became all too apparent.

He needed, he concluded, to learn the use of the bow. And then, once he'd acquired some competence, perhaps a long-knife – a Seven Cities weapon that combined the advantages of a knife with the reach of a three-quarter-length longsword. For some reason, the thought of using a true longsword did not appeal to him. Perhaps because it was a soldier's weapon, best used in conjunction with a shield or buckler. A waste of his left hand, given his skills. Sighing, Cutter looked down at the deck and, fighting revulsion, scanned the corpses beneath the jostling birds.

And saw a bow. Its string had been cut through, and the arrows lay scattered out from a quiver still strapped to an Edur's hip. Cutter stepped over and crouched down. The bow was heavier than it looked, sharply recurved and braced with horn. Its length was somewhere between a longbow and a horse warrior's bow – probably a simple short bow for these Edur. Unstrung, it stood at a height matching Cutter's shoulders.

He began collecting the arrows, then, waving to drive back the gulls and crows, he dragged the archer's corpse clear and removed the belted quiver. He found a small leather pouch tied near it containing a half-dozen waxed strings, spare fletching, a few nuggets of hard pine sap, a thin iron blade and three spare barbed arrowheads.

Selecting one of the strings, Cutter straightened. He slipped one of the cord-bound ends into the notch at the bow's base end, then anchored the weapon against the outside of his right foot and pushed down on the upper rib.

Harder than he'd expected. The bow shook as he struggled to slip the loop into the notch. Finally succeeding, Cutter lifted the bow for a more gauging regard, then drew it back. The breath hissed between his teeth as he sought to hold the weapon taut. This would, he realized as he finally relaxed the string, prove something of a challenge.

Sensing eyes on him, he turned.

Apsalar stood near the main mast. Flecks and globules of dried blood covered her forearms.

'What have you been doing?' he asked.

She shrugged. 'Looking around.'
Inside someone's chest? 'We should go.'

'Have you decided where yet?'

'I'm sure that will be answered soon enough,' he said, bending down to collect the arrows and the belt holding the quiver and kit pouch.

'The sorcery here is ... strange.'

His head snapped up. 'What do you mean?'

'I am not sure. My familiarity with warrens is somewhat vicarious.'

I know.

'But,' she continued, 'if this is Kurald Emurlahn, then it is tainted in some way. Necromantically. Life and death magicks, carved directly into the wood of this ship. As if warlocks and shoulder-women had done the consecrating.'

Cutter frowned. 'Consecrating. You make it sound as if this ship was a temple.'

'It was. Is. The spilling of blood has done nothing to desecrate it, which is precisely my point. Perhaps even warrens can sink into barbarity.'

'Meaning the wielders of a warren can affect its nature. My late uncle would have found the notion fascinating. Not desecration, then, but denigration.'

She slowly glanced around. 'Rashan. Meanas. Thyr.'

He comprehended the thought. 'You think all warrens accessible to humans are in fact denigrations of Elder Warrens.'

She raised her hands then. 'Even blood decays.'

Cutter's frown deepened. He was not sure what she meant by that, and found himself disinclined to ask. Easier, safer, to simply grunt and make his way to the gunnel. 'We should make use of this breeze. Assuming you're done here.'

In answer she walked to the ship's side and clambered over the rail.

Cutter watched her climb down to the runner, taking her place at the tiller. He paused for a final look around. And stiffened.

On the distant strand of Drift Avalii, there stood a lone figure, leaning on a two-handed sword.

Traveller.

And Cutter now saw that there were others, squatting or seated around him. A half-dozen Malazan soldiers. In the trees behind them stood Tiste Andii, silver-haired and ghostly. The image seemed to burn in his mind, as of a touch so cold as to feel like fire. He shivered, pulling his gaze away with an effort, and quickly joined Apsalar in the runner, taking the mooring line with him.

He set the oars in their locks and pushed the craft away from the ship's black hull.

'I believe they intend to commandeer this Edur dromon,' Apsalar said.

'What about protecting the Throne?'

'There are demons from Shadow on the island now. Your patron god has clearly decided to take a more active role in defending the secret.'

'Your patron god.' Thank you for that, Apsalar. And who was it who held your soul cupped in his two hands?
A killer's hands. 'Why not just take it back to the Shadow Realm?'

'No doubt if he could, he would,' she replied. 'But when Anomander Rake placed his kin here to guard it, he also wrought sorcery around the Throne. It will not be moved.'

Cutter shipped the oars and began preparing the sail. 'Then Shadowthrone need only come here and plant his scrawny arse on it, right?'

He disliked her answering smile. 'Thus ensuring that no-one else could claim its power, or the position of King of High House Shadow. Unless, of course, they killed Shadowthrone first. A god of courage and unassailable power might well plant his scrawny arse on that throne to end the argument once and for all. But Shadowthrone did just that, once before, as Emperor Kellanved.'

'He did?'

'He claimed the First Throne. The throne of the T'lan Imass.'

Oh.

'Fortunately,' Apsalar continued, 'as Shadowthrone, he has shown little interest in making use of his role as Emperor of the T'lan Imass.'

'Well, why bother? This way, he negates the chance of anyone else finding and taking that throne, while his avoidance of using it himself ensures that no-one takes notice he has it in the first place – gods, I'm starting to sound like Kruppe! In any case, that seems clever, not cowardly.'

She studied him for a long moment. 'I had not thought of that. You are right, of course. Unveiling power invites convergence, after all. It seems Shadowthrone has absorbed well his early residence in the Deadhouse. More so, perhaps, than Cotillion has.'

'Aye, it's an Azath tactic, isn't it? Negation serves to disarm. Given the chance, he'd probably plant himself in every throne in sight, then, with all the power accrued to him, he would do nothing with it. Nothing at all.'

Her eyes slowly widened.

He frowned at her expression. Then his heart started pounding hard. No. I was only kidding. That's not just ambitious, it's insane. He could never pull it off. . . but what if he did? 'All the games of the gods...'

'Would be seriously ... curtailed. Crokus, have you stumbled onto the truth? Have you just articulated Shadowthrone's vast scheme? His prodigious gambit to achieve absolute domination?'

'Only if he is truly mad, Apsalar,' the Daru replied, shaking his head. 'It's impossible. He would never succeed. He would not even get close.'

Apsalar settled back on the tiller as the sails filled and the runner leapt forward. 'For two years,' she said, 'Dancer and the Emperor vanished. Left the empire for Surly to rule. My stolen memories are vague of that time, but I do know that both men were changed, irrevocably, by all that happened to them during those two years. Not just the play for the Shadow Realm, which no doubt was central to their desires. Other things occurred ... truths revealed, mysteries uncovered. One thing I know for certain, Crokus, is that, for most of those two years, Dancer and Kellanved were not in this realm.'

'Then where in Hood's name were they?'

She shook her head. 'I cannot answer that question. But I sense that they were following a trail, one that wound through all the warrens, and to realms where even the known warrens do not reach.'

'What kind of trail? Whose?'

'Suspicions ... the trail had something to do with, well, with the Houses of the Azath.'

Mysteries uncovered indeed. The Azath – the deepest mystery of them all.
'You should know, Crokus,' Apsalar continued, 'that they knew that Surly was waiting for them. They knew what she had planned. Yet they returned none the less.'

'But that makes no sense.'

'Unless she proceeded to do precisely what they wanted her to do. After all, we both know that the assassinations failed – failed in killing either of them. The question then becomes: what did that entire mess achieve?'

'A rhetorical question?'

She cocked her head. 'No.' Surprised.

Cutter rubbed at the bristle on his jaw, then shrugged. 'All right. It left Surly on the Malazan throne. Empress Laseen was born. It stripped from Kellanved his secular seat of power. Hmm. Let's ask it another way. What if Kellanved and Dancer had returned and successfully reclaimed the imperial throne? But, at the same time, they had taken over the Shadow Realm. Thus, there would be an empire spanning two warrens, an empire of Shadow.' He paused, then slowly nodded. 'They wouldn't have stood for that – the gods, that is. Ascendants of all kinds would have converged on the Malazan Empire. They would have pounded the empire and the two men ruling it into dust.'

'Probably. And neither Kellanved nor Dancer was in any position to mount a successful resistance to such a protracted assault. They'd yet to consolidate their claim on the Shadow Realm.'

'Right, so they orchestrated their own deaths, and kept their identity as the new rulers of Shadow a secret for as long as they could, whilst laying out the groundwork for a resumption of their grand schemes. Well, that's all very cosy, if more than a little diabolical. But does it help us answer the question of what they're up to right now? If anything, I'm more confused than ever.'

'Why should you be? Cotillion recruited you to see to the true Throne of Shadow on Drift Avalii, the outcome of which could not have proved more advantageous to him and Shadowthrone. Darist dead, the sword Vengeance removed and in the hands of a darkly fated wanderer. The Edur expedition wiped out, the secret thus resurrected and likely to remain unviolated for some time to come. True, it ended up demanding Cotillion's direct, most personal intervention, which he would have liked to have avoided, no doubt.'

'Well, I doubt he would have bothered had not the Hound balked.'

'What?'

'I called upon Blind – you were already down. And one of the Edur mages made the Hound cower with a single word.'

'Ah. Then Cotillion has learned yet another vital fact – he cannot rely upon the Hounds when dealing with the Tiste Edur, for the Hounds remember their original masters.'

'I suppose so. No wonder he was disgusted with Blind.'

They would have continued, Cutter taking full advantage of Apsalar's lapse in taciturnity, had not the sky suddenly darkened, shadows rising on all sides, closing and swallowing them—

A thunderous crash—

The huge tortoise was the only object to break the flat plain, lumbering with the infinite patience of the truly mindless across the ancient seabed. Twin shadows grew to flank it.

'Too bad there's not two of them,' Trull Sengar said, 'then we could ride in style.'

'I would think,' Onrack replied, as they slowed their pace to match that of the tortoise, 'that it feels the same.'

'Hence this grand journey ... indeed, a noble quest, in which I find a certain sympathy.'
'You miss your kin, then, do you, Trull Sengar?'
'Too general a statement.'
'Ah, the needs of procreation.'
'Hardly. My needs have nothing to do with engendering whelps with my hairline, nor, gods forbid, my ears.' He reached down and tapped the tortoise's dusty shell. 'Like this fellow here, there's no time to think of eggs it won't even lay. Singular intent, disconnected from time – from those messy consequences that inevitably follow, if only to afflict whatever lass tortoise our dogged friend here happens to pounce upon.'
'They are not wont to pounce, Trull Sengar. Indeed, the act is a far more clumsy endeavour—'
'Aren't they all?'
'My own memories—'
'Enough of that, Onrack. Do you think I want to hear of your supple prowess? I will have you know that I have yet to lie with a woman. Thus, I am left with naught but my sparsely seeded imagination. Inflict no luscious details upon me, I beg you.'
The T'lan Imass slowly turned its head. 'It is your people's custom to withhold such activities until marriage?'
'It is. It wasn't among the Imass?'
'Well, yes, it was. But the custom was flouted at every opportunity. In any case, as I explained earlier, I had a mate.'
'Whom you gave up because you fell in love with another woman.'
'Gave up, Trull Sengar? No. Whom I lost. Nor was that loss solitary. They never are. From all you have said, I assume then that you are rather young.'
The Tiste Edur shrugged. 'I suppose I am, especially in my present company.'
'Then let us leave this creature's side, so as to spare you the reminder.'
Trull Sengar shot the T'lan Imass a look, then grinned. 'Good idea.'
They increased their pace, and within a few strides had left the tortoise behind. Glancing back, Trull Sengar gave a shout.

Onrack halted and swung round.
The tortoise was turning back, stumpy legs taking it in a wide circle.
'What is it doing?'
'It has finally seen us,' Onrack replied, 'and so it runs away.'
'Ah, no fun and games tonight, then. Poor beast.'
'In time it will judge it safe to resume its journey, Trull Sengar. We have presented but a momentary obstacle.'
'A humbling reminder, then.'
'As you wish.'

The day was cloudless, heat rising from the old seabed in shimmering waves. The odhan's grassy steppes resumed a few thousand paces ahead. The salt-crusted ground resisted signs of passages, though Onrack could detect the subtle indications left behind by the six renegade T'lan Imass, a scrape here, a scuff there. One of the
six dragged a leg as it walked, whilst another placed more weight on one side than the other. They were all no doubt severely damaged. The Ritual, despite the cessation of the Vow itself, had left residual powers, but there was something else as well, a vague hint of chaos, of unknown warrens – or perhaps familiar ones twisted beyond recognition. There was, Onrack suspected, a bonecaster among those six.

Olar Ethil, Kilava Onas, Monok Ochem, Hentos Urn, Tern Benasto, Ulpan Nodost, Tenag Ilbaie, Ay Estos, Absin Tholai . . . the bonecasters of the Logros T’lan Imass. Who among them are lost? Kilava, of course, but that is as it has always been. Hentos Ilm and Monok Ochem have both in their turn partaken of the hunt. Olar Ethil seeks the other armies of the T’lan Imass – for the summons was heard by all. Benasto and Ulpan remain with Logros. Ay Estos was lost here on the Jhaq Odhan in the last war. I know naught of the fate of Absin Tholai. Leaving Tenag Ilbaie, whom Logros sent to the Kron, to aid in the L’aederon Wars. Thus. Absin Tholai, Tenag Ilbaie or Ay Estos.

Of course, there was no reason to assume that the renegades were from the Logros, although their presence here on this continent suggested so, since the caves and the weapons caches were not the only ones to exist; similar secret places could be found on every other continent. Yet these renegades had come to Seven Cities, to the very birthplace of the First Empire, in order to recover their weapons. And it was Logros who was tasked with the holding of the homeland.

‘Trull Sengar?’

‘Yes?’

‘What do you know of the cult of the Nameless Ones?’

‘Only that they’re very successful.’

The T’lan Imass cocked its head. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, their existence has remained hidden from me. I’ve never heard of them.’

Ah. ‘Logros commanded that the First Throne be removed from this land, because the Nameless Ones were drawing ever closer to discovering its location. They had come to realize that its power could be claimed, that the T’lan Imass could be made to bow in service to the first mortal to seat him or herself upon it.’

‘And Logros didn’t want one of these Nameless Ones to be that mortal. Why? What terrible purpose drives them? And before you answer, Onrack, I should tell you that as far as I am concerned, “terrible purpose” has rather dire measure, given both your kind and my own.’

‘I understand, Trull Sengar, and it is a valid point you make. The Nameless Ones serve the Houses of the Azath. Logros believed that, had a priest of that cult taken the First Throne, the first and only command given to the T’lan Imass would be to voluntarily accept eternal imprisonment. We would have been removed from this world.’

‘So the throne was moved.’

‘Yes, to a continent south of Seven Cities. Where it was found by a mage – Kellanved, the Emperor of the Malazan Empire.’

‘Who now commands all the T’lan Imass? No wonder the Malazan Empire is as powerful as it seems to be – then again, by now, it should have conquered the whole world, since he could have called upon all the T’lan Imass to fight his wars.’

‘The Emperor’s exploitation of our abilities was ... modest. Surprisingly constrained. He was then assassinated. The new Empress does not command us.’

‘Why didn’t she just sit on the First Throne herself?’

‘She would, could she find it.’
'Ah, so you are free once more.'

'So it seems,' Onrack replied after a moment. 'There are other ... concerns, Trull Sengar. Kellanved was resident in a House of the Azath for a time ...'

They reached the slope beyond the salt flat, began making their way upward. 'These are matters of which I know very little,' the Tiste Edur said. 'You fear that the Emperor was either one of these Nameless Ones, or had contact with them. If so, then why didn't he issue that one command you so dreaded?'

'We do not know.'

'How did he manage to find the First Throne in the first place?'

'We do not know.'

'All right. Now, what has all this to do with what we are up to right now?'

'A suspicion, Trull Sengar, regarding where these six renegade T'lan Imass are heading.'

'Well, southward, it seems. Oh, I see.'

'If there are among them kin of Logros, then they know where the First Throne will be found.'

'Well, is there any reason to believe that you are unique among the T'lan Imass? Do you not think others of your kind may have arrived at the same suspicion?'

'I am not sure of that. I share something with the renegades that they do not, Trull Sengar. Like them, I am unburdened. Freed from the Ritual's Vow. This has resulted in a certain . . . liberation of thought. Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan pursue a quarry, and the mind of a hunter is ever consumed by that quarry.'

They reached the first rise and halted. Onrack drew out his sword and jammed it point first into the ground, so deep that it remained standing upright when he walked away from it. He took ten paces before stopping once more.

'What are you doing?'

'If you do not object, Trull Sengar, I would await Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan. They, and Logros in turn, must be informed of my suspicion.'

'And you assume that Monok will spare us the time to talk? Our last moments together were less than pleasant, as I recall. I'd feel better if you weren't standing so far away from your sword.' The Tiste Edur found a nearby boulder to sit on, and regarded Onrack for a long moment before continuing, 'And what about what you did in the cave, where that Tellann Ritual was active?' He gestured at Onrack's new left arm and the melded additions to the other places where damage had occurred. 'It's . . . obvious. That arm's shorter than your own, you know. Noticeably. Something tells me you weren't supposed to do ... what you did.'

'You are right... or would be, were I still bound by the Vow.'

'I see. And will Monok Ochem display similar equanimity when he sees what you have done?'

'I do not expect so.'

'Didn't you proclaim a vow to serve me, Onrack?'

The T'lan Imass lifted its head. 'I did.'

'And what if I don't want to see you put yourself – and me, I might add – at such risk?'

'You make a valid point, Trull Sengar, which I had not considered. However, let me ask you this. These renegades serve the same master as do your kin. Should they lead one of your mortal kin to take the First Throne, thus acquiring mastery over all the T'lan Imass, do you imagine they will be as circumspect in using
those armies as was Emperor Kellanved?"

The Tiste Edur said nothing for a time, then he sighed. 'All right. But you lead me to wonder, if the First Throne is so vulnerable, why have you not set someone of your own choosing upon it?'

'To command the First Throne, one must be mortal. Which mortal can we trust to such a responsibility? We did not even choose Kellanved – his exploitation was opportunistic. Furthermore, the issue may soon become irrelevant. The T'lan Imass have been summoned – and all hear it, whether bound to the Vow or freed from it. A new, mortal bonecaster has arisen in a distant land.'

'And you want that bonecaster to take the First Throne.'

'No. We want the summoner to free us all.'

'From the Vow?'

'No. From existence, Trull Sengar.' Onrack shrugged heavily. 'Or so, I expect, the Bound will ask, or, perhaps, have already asked. Oddly enough, I find that I do not share that sentiment any more.'

'Nor would any others who'd escaped the Vow. I would think, then, that this new mortal bonecaster is in grave danger.'

'And so protected accordingly.'

'Are you able to resist that bonecaster's summons?'

'I am ... free to choose.'

The Tiste Edur cocked his head. 'It would seem, Onrack, that you are already free. Maybe not in the way that this bonecaster might offer you, but even so ...'

'Yes. But the alternative I represent is not available to those still bound by the Vow.'

'Let's hope Monok Ochem is not too resentful.'

Onrack slowly turned. 'We shall see.'

Dust swirled upward from the grasses at the edge of the crest, twin columns that resolved into the bonecaster Monok Ochem and the clan leader, Ibra Gholan. The latter lifted its sword and strode directly towards Onrack.

Trull Sengar stepped into the warrior's path. 'Hold, Ibra Gholan. Onrack has information you will want to hear. Bonecaster Monok Ochem – you especially, so call off the clan leader. Listen first, then decide whether Onrack has earned a reprieve.'

Ibra Gholan halted, then took a single step back, lowering its sword.

Onrack studied Monok Ochem. Though the spiritual chains that had once linked them had since snapped, the bonecaster's enmity – Monok's fury – was palpable. Onrack knew his list of crimes, of outrages, had grown long, and this last theft of the body parts of another T'lan Imass was the greatest abomination, the most dire twisting of the powers of Tellann thus far. 'Monok Ochem. The renegades would lead their new master to the First Throne. They travel the paths of chaos. It is their intent, I believe, to place a mortal Tiste Edur upon that throne. Such a new ruler of the T'lan Imass would, in turn, command the new mortal bonecaster – the one who has voiced the summons.'

Ibra Gholan slowly turned to face Monok Ochem, and Onrack could sense their consternation.

Onrack then continued, 'Inform Logros that I, Onrack, and the one to whom I am now bound – the Tiste Edur Trull Sengar – share your dismay. We would work in concert with you.'

'Logros hears you,' Monok Ochem rasped, 'and accepts.'
The swiftness of that surprised Onrack and he cocked his head. A moment's thought, then, 'How many guardians protect the First Throne?'

'None.'

Trull Sengar straightened. 'None?'

'Do any T'lan Imass remain on the continent of Quon Tali?' Onrack asked.

'No, Onrack the Broken,' Monok Ochem replied. 'This intention you describe was... unanticipated. Logros's army is massed here in Seven Cities.'

Onrack had never before experienced such agitation, rattling through him, and he identified the emotion, belatedly, as shock. 'Monok Ochem, why has Logros not marched in answer to the summons?'

'Representatives were sent,' the bonecaster replied. 'Logros holds his army here in anticipation of imminent need.'

'Need? And none can be spared?'

'No, Onrack the Broken. None can be spared. In any case, we are closest to the renegades.'

'There are, I believe, six renegades,' Onrack said. 'And one among them is a bonecaster. Monok Ochem, while we may well succeed in intercepting them, we are too few...'

'At least let me find a worthy weapon,' Trull Sengar muttered. 'I may end up facing my own kin, after all.'

Ibra Gholan spoke. 'Tiste Edur, what is your weapon of choice?'

'Spear. I am fair with a bow as well, but for combat... spear.'

'I will acquire one for you,' the clan leader said. 'And a bow as well. Yet I am curious – there were spears to be found among the cache you but recently departed. Why did you not avail yourself of a weapon at that time?'

Trull Sengar's reply was low and cool. 'I am not a thief.'

The clan leader faced Onrack, then said, 'You chose well, Onrack the Broken.'

'I know. Monok Ochem, has Logros a thought as to who the renegade bonecaster might be?'

'Tenag Ilbaie,' Monok Ochem immediately replied. 'It is likely he has chosen a new name.'

'And Logros is certain?'

'All others are accounted for, barring Kilava Onas.'

Who remains in her mortal flesh and so cannot be among the renegades. Born of Ban Raile's clan, a tenag Soletaken. Before he was chosen as the clan's bonecaster, he was known as Haran 'Alle, birthed as he was in the Summer of the Great Death among the Caribou. He was a loyal bonecaster—'

'Until he failed against the Forkrul Assail in the L'aederon Wars,' Monok Ochem cut in.

'As we in turn fail,' Onrack rasped.

'What do you mean?' Monok Ochem demanded. 'In what way have we failed?'

'We chose to see failure as disloyalty, Bonecaster. Yet in our harsh judgement of fallen kin, we committed our own act of disloyalty. Tenag Ilbaie strove to succeed in his task. His defeat was not by choice. Tell me, when have we ever triumphed in a clash with Forkrul Assail? Thus, Tenag Ilbaie was doomed from the very beginning. Yet he accepted what was commanded of him. Knowing full well he would be destroyed and so condemned. I have learned this, Monok Ochem, and through you shall say to Logros and all the T'lan Imass: these renegades are of our own making.'
'Then it falls to us to deal with them,' Ibra Gholan growled.

'And what if we should fail?' Onrack asked.

To that, neither T'lan Imass gave answer.

Trull Sengar sighed. 'If we are to indeed intercept these renegades, we should get moving.'

'We shall travel by the Warren of Tellann,' Monok Ochem said. 'Logros has given leave that you may accompany us on that path.'

'Generous of him,' Trull Sengar muttered.

As Monok Ochem prepared to open the warren, the bonecaster paused and looked back at Onrack once more.

'When you ... repaired yourself, Onrack the Broken ... where was the rest of the body?'

'I do not know. It had been ... taken away.'

'And who destroyed it in the first place?'

Indeed, a troubling question. 'I do not know, Monok Ochem. There is another detail that left me uneasy.'

'And that is?'

'The renegade was cut in half by a single blow.'

The winding track that led up the boulder-strewn hillside was all too familiar, and Lostara Yil could feel the scowl settling into her face. Pearl remained a few paces behind her, muttering every time her boots dislodged a stone that tumbled downward. She heard him curse as one such rock cracked against a shin, and felt the scowl shift into a savage smile.

The bastard's smooth surface was wearing off, revealing unsightly patches that she found cause both for derision and a strange, insipid attraction. Too old to dream of perfection, perhaps, she had instead discovered a certain delicious appeal in flaws. And Pearl had plenty of those.

He resented most the relinquishing of the lead, but this terrain belonged to Lostara, to her memories. The ancient, exposed temple floor lay directly ahead, the place where she had driven a bolt into Sha'ik's forehead. And, if not for those two bodyguards – that Toblakai in particular – that day would have ended in even greater triumph, as the Red Blades returned to G'danisban with Sha'ik's head riding a lance. Thus ending the rebellion before it began.

So many lives saved, had that occurred, had reality played out as seamlessly as the scene in her mind. On such things, the fate of an entire subcontinent had irrevocably tumbled headlong into this moment's sordid, blood-soaked situation.

That damned Toblakai. With that damned wooden sword. If not for him, what would this day be like? We'd likely not be here, for one thing. Felisin Paran would not have needed to cross all of Seven Cities seeking to avoid murder at the hands of frenzied rebels. Coltaine would be alive, closing the imperial fist around every smouldering ember before it rose in conflagration. And High Fist Pormqual would have been sent to the Empress to give an accounting of his incompetence and corruption. All, but for that one obnoxious Toblakai...

She passed by the large boulders they had hidden behind, then the one she had used to draw close enough to ensure the lethality of her shot. And there, ten paces from the temple floor, the scattered remains of the last Red Blade to fall during the retreat.

Lostara stepped onto the flagstoned floor and halted.

Pearl arrived at her side, looking around curiously.

Lostara pointed. 'She was seated there.'
'Those bodyguards didn't bother burying the Red Blades,' he commented.

'No, why would they?'

'Nor,' the Claw continued, 'it seems, did they bother with Sha'ik.' He walked over to a shadowed spot between the two pillars of an old arched gate.

Lostara followed, her heart suddenly pounding in her chest.

The form was tiny, wrapped in wind-frayed tent cloth. The black hair had grown, and grown, long after death, and the effect – after Pearl crouched and tugged the canvas away to reveal the desiccated face and scalp – was horrific. The hole the quarrel had punched into her forehead revealed a skull filled with windblown sand. More of the fine grains had pooled in the corpse's eye sockets, nose and gaping mouth.

'Raraku reclaims its own,' Pearl muttered after a moment. 'And you're certain this was Sha'ik, lass?'

She nodded. 'The Book of Dryjhna was being delivered, as I explained. Directly into her hands. From which, it was prophesied, a rebirth would occur, and that in turn would trigger the Whirlwind, the Apocalypse ... the rebellion.'

'Describe for me again these bodyguards.'

'A Toblakai and the one known as Leoman of the Flails. Sha'ik's most personal bodyguards.'

'Yet, it would appear that the rebellion had no need for Sha'ik, or the Whirlwind. It was well under way by the time Felisin arrived at this place. So, what occurred in that time? Are you suggesting that the bodyguards simply ... waited? Here? Waited for what?'

Lostara shrugged. 'For the rebirth, perhaps. The beauty of prophecies is that they are so conveniently open to countless reinterpretations, as the demand presents itself. The fools waited, and waited ...'

Frowning, Pearl straightened and looked around. 'But the rebirth did occur. The Whirlwind rose, to give focus – to provide a raging heart – for the rebellion. It all happened, just as it had been prophesied. I wonder ...'

Lostara watched him from beneath half-closed lids. A certain grace to his movements, she conceded. An elegance that would have been feminine in a man less deadly. He was like a flare-neck snake, calm and self-contained ... until provoked. 'But look at her,' she said. 'There was no rebirth. We're wasting time here, Pearl. So, maybe Felisin stumbled here, onto all this, before continuing onward.'

'You are being deliberately obtuse, dear,' Pearl murmured, disappointing her that he had not risen to the bait. 'Am I?'

Her irritation deepened at the smile he flashed her.

'You are quite right, Lostara, in observing that nothing whatsoever could have been reborn from this corpse. Thus, only one conclusion follows. The Sha'ik alive and well in the heart of Raraku is not the same Sha'ik. Those bodyguards found a ... replacement. An impostor, someone they could fit neatly into the role – the flexibility of prophecies you noted a moment ago would have served them well. Reborn. Very well, younger in appearance, yes? An old woman cannot lead an army into a new war, after all. And further, an old woman would find it hard to con-vince anyone that she'd been reborn.'

'Pearl.'

'What?'

'I refuse the possibility – yes, I know what you are thinking. But it's impossible.'

'Why? Nothing else fits—'

'I don't care how well it fits! Is that all we mortals are? The victims of tortured irony to amuse an insane
murder of gods?"

'A murder of crows, a murder of gods – I like that, lass. As for tortured irony, more like exquisite irony. You
don't think Felisin would leap at the chance to become such a direct instrument of vengeance against her sister?
Against the empire that sent her to a prison mine? Fate may well present itself, but the opportunity still must be
embraced, wilfully, eagerly. There was less chance or coincidence in all this – more like a timely convergence
of desires and necessities.'

'We must return to the Adjunct,' Lostara pronounced.

'Alas, the Whirlwind stands between us. I can use no warrens to hasten our journey within that sphere of
power. And it would take us far too long to go around it. Fear not, we shall endeavour to reach Tavore in time,
with our ghastly revelation. But we shall have to pass through the Whirlwind, through Raraku itself, and
quietly, carefully. Discovery would prove fatal.'

'You are delighted with this, aren't you?'

His eyes widened – a look of his of which she had grown far too fond, she realized with a surge of irritation.
'Unfair, my dear Lostara Yil. I am satisfied that the mystery has been solved, that our task of ascertaining
Felisin's fate has been concluded. As far as we can take it at the moment, that is.'

'And what of your hunt for the leader of the Talons?'

'Oh, I think I will find satisfaction in that area soon, as well. All things are converging nicely, in fact.'

'See, I knew you were pleased!'

He spread his hands. 'Would you rather I lacerate my flesh in flagellation?' At her cocked eyebrow his gaze
narrowed suspiciously for a brief moment, then he drew a breath and resumed, 'We are nearly done, lass, with
this mission. And soon we will be able to sit ourselves down in a cool tent, goblets of chilled wine in our hands,
and ruminate at leisure over the countless discoveries we have made.'

'I can't wait,' she remarked drily, crossing her arms.

He swung about and faced the Whirlwind. The roaring, shrieking maelstrom commanded the sky, spinning
out an endless rain of dust. 'Of course, first we will have to breach the goddess's defences, undetected. You are
of Pardu blood, so she will take no heed of you. I, on the other hand, am one-fourth Tiste Andii—'

She started, breath catching. 'You are?'

He looked back, surprised. 'You didn't know? My mother was from Drift Avalii, a half-blood white-haired
beauty – or so I'm told, as I have no direct recollection, since she left me with my father as soon as I'd been
weaned.'

Lostara's imagination conjured up an image of Pearl suckling at his mother's breast, and found the scene
alarming. 'So you were a live birth?'

And smiled at his offended silence.

They made their way down the trail towards the basin, where the Whirlwind's fierce storm raged ceaselessly,
rising to tower over them the closer they approached. It was nearing dusk. They were short on food, though
they had plenty of water, replenished from the spring near the ruined temple. Lostara's boots were falling apart
around her feet, and Pearl's moccasins were now mostly wrapped rags. The seams of their clothing had frayed
and grown brittle beneath the unrelenting sun. Leather had cracked and iron had become pitted and layered in
patination and rust-stains from their harrowing passage through the Thyrllan Warren.

She felt worn out and weathered; in appearance, she knew, looking ten years older than she was in truth. All
the more reason for her alternating fury and dismay at seeing Pearl's hale, unlined face and his oddly shaped
eyes so clear and bright. The lightness of his step made her want to brain him with the flat of her sword.
'How do you intend to evade the Whirlwind's notice, Pearl?' she asked as they drew closer.

He shrugged. 'I have a plan. Which may or may not work.'

'Sounds like most of your plans. Tell me, then, what precarious role do you have in mind for me?'

'Rashan, Thyr and Meanas,' he replied. 'The perpetual war. This fragment of warren before us is not fully comprehended by the goddess herself. Not surprising, since she was likely little more than a zephyr spirit to begin with. I, however, do comprehend ... well, better than her, anyway.'

'Are you even capable of answering succinctly? "Do your feet hurt?" "Oh, the warrens of Mockra and Rashan and Omtose Phellack, from which arise all aches below the knee—"'

'All right. Fine. I intend to hide in your shadow.'

'Well, I'm already used to that, Pearl. But I should point out, that Whirlwind Wall is obscuring the sunset rather thoroughly.'

'True, yet it exists none the less. I will just have to step carefully. Provided, of course, you make no sudden, unexpected moves.'

'In your company, Pearl, the thought has yet to occur to me.'

'Ah, that's good. I in turn feel I should point out, however, that you persist in fomenting a certain tension between us. One that is anything but, uh, professional. Oddly enough, it seems to increase with every insult you throw my way. A peculiar flirtation—'

'Flirtation? You damned fool. I'd be much happier seeing you fall flat on your face and get beaten helpless by that damned goddess, if only for the satisfaction I'd receive—'

'Precisely as I was saying, dear.'

'Really? So if I was to pour boiling oil all over you, you'd be telling me – in between screams – to get my head out from between your—' She shut her mouth with an audible snap.

Wisely, Pearl made no comment.

Flat of the sword? No, the edge. 'I want to kill you, Pearl.'

'I know.'

'But for the moment, I'll settle with having you in my shadow.'

'Thank you. Now, just walk on ahead, a nice even pace. Straight into that wall of sand. And mind you squint your eyes right down – wouldn't want those glorious windows of fire damaged ...'

She'd expected to meet resistance, but the journey proved effortless. Six steps within a dull, ochre world, then out onto the blasted plain of Raraku, blinking in the dusk's hazy light. Four more steps, out onto scoured bedrock, then she spun round.

Smiling, Pearl raised both hands, palms upward. Standing a pace behind her.

She closed the distance, one gloved hand reaching up to the back of his head, the other reaching much lower as she closed her mouth on his.

Moments later they were tearing at each other's clothes.

No resistance at all.

Less than four leagues to the southwest, as darkness descended, Kalam Mekhar woke suddenly, sheathed in
The torment of his dreams still echoed, even as their substance eluded him. That song again ... I think. Rising to a roar that seemed to grip the throat of the world... He slowly sat up, wincing at the various aches from his muscles and joints. Being jammed into a narrow, shadowed fissure was not conducive to restorative sleep.

And the voices within the song ... strange, yet familiar. Like friends ... who never sang a word in their lives. Nothing to quell the spirit – no, these voices give music to war ...

He collected his waterskin and drank deep to wash the taste of dust from his mouth, then spent a few moments checking his weapons and gear. By the time he was done his heart had slowed and the trembling was gone from his hands.

He did not think it likely that the Whirlwind Goddess would detect his presence, so long as he travelled through shadows at every opportunity. And, in a sense, he well knew, night itself was naught but a shadow. Provided he hid well during the day, he expected to be able to reach Sha'ik's encampment undiscovered.

Shouldering his pack, he set off. The stars overhead were barely visible through the suspended dust. Raraku, for all its wild, blasted appearance, was crisscrossed with countless trails. Many led to false or poisoned springs; others to an equally certain death in the wastes of sand. And beneath the skein of footpaths and old tribal cairns, the remnants of coastal roads wound atop the ridges, linking what would have been islands in a vast, shallow bay long ago.

Kalam made his way in a steady jog across a stone-littered depression where a half-dozen ships – the wood petrified and looking like grey bones in the gloom – had scattered their remnants in the hard-packed clay. The Whirlwind had lifted the mantle of sands to reveal Raraku's prehistory, the long-lost civilizations that had known only darkness for millennia. The scene was vaguely disturbing, as if whispering back to the nightmares that had plagued his sleep.

And that damned song.

The bones of sea-creatures crunched underfoot as the assassin continued on. There was no wind, the air almost preternatural in its stillness. Two hundred paces ahead, the land rose once more, climbing to an ancient, crumbled causeway. A glance up to the ridge froze Kalam in his tracks. He dropped low, hands closing on the grips of his long-knives.

A column of soldiers was walking along the causeway. Helmed heads lowered, burdened with wounded comrades, pikes wavering and glinting in the grainy darkness.

Kalam judged their numbers as close to six hundred. A third of the way along the column rose a standard. Affixed to the top of the pole was a human ribcage, the ribs bound together by leather strips, in which two skulls had been placed. Antlers rode the shaft all the way down to the bearer's pallid hands.

The soldiers marched in silence.

Hood's breath. They're ghosts.

The assassin slowly straightened. Strode forward. He ascended the slope until he stood, like someone driven to the roadside by the army's passage, whilst the soldiers shambled past – those on his side close enough to reach out and touch, were they flesh and blood.

'He walks up from the sea.'

Kalam started. An unknown language, yet he understood it. A glance back – and the depression he had just crossed was filled with shimmering water. Five ships rode low in the waters a hundred sweeps of the oar offshore, three of them in flames, shedding ashes and wreckage as they drifted. Of the remaining two, one was fast sinking, whilst the last seemed lifeless, bodies visible on its deck and in the rigging.

'A soldier.'

'A killer.'
'Too many spectres on this road, friends. Are we not haunted enough?'

'Aye, Dessimbelackis throws endless legions at us, and no matter how many we slaughter, the First Emperor finds more.'

'Not true, Kullsan. Five of the Seven Protectors are no more. Does that mean nothing? And the sixth will not recover, now that we have banished the black beast itself.'

'I wonder, did we indeed drive it from this realm?'

'If the Nameless Ones speak true, then yes—'

'Your question, Kullsan, confuses me. Are we not marching from the city? Were we not just victorious?'

The conversation had begun to fade as the soldiers who had been speaking marched onward, but Kalam heard the doubting Kullsan's reply: 'Then why is our road lined with ghosts, Erethal?'

More importantly, Kalam added to himself, why is mine?

He waited as the last of the soldiers marched past, then stepped forward to cross the ancient road.

And saw, on the opposite side, a tall, gaunt figure in faded orange robes. Black pits for eyes. One fleshless hand gripping an ivory staff carved spirally, on which the apparition leaned as if it was the only thing holding it up.

'Listen to them now, spirit from the future,' it rasped, cocking its head.

And now Kalam heard it. The ghost soldiers had begun singing.

Sweat sprang out on the assassin's midnight skin. 'I've heard that song before ... or no, something just like it. A variation. ... 'What in the Abyss ... You, Tanno Spiritwalker, explain this—'

'Spiritwalker? Is that the name I will acquire? Is it an honorific? Or the acknowledgement of a curse?'

'What do you mean, priest?'

'I am no priest. I am Tanno, the Eleventh and last Seneschal of Yaraghatan, banished by the First Emperor for my treasonous alliance with the Nameless Ones. Did you know what he would do? Would any of us have guessed? Seven Protectors indeed, but far more than that, oh yes, far more ...' Steps halting, the spectre walked onto the road and began dragging itself along in the wake of the column. 'I gave them a song, to mark their last battle,' it rasped. 'I gave them that at least...'

Kalam watched as the figures disappeared into the darkness. He swung about. The sea was gone, the basin's bones revealed once more. He shivered. Why am I witness to these things? I'm reasonably certain I'm not dead . . . although I soon might be, I suppose. Are these death-visions? He had heard of such things, but held little stock in them. Hood's embrace was far too random to be knotted into the skein of fate ... until it had already occurred – or so the assassin's experience told him.

He shook his head and crossed the road, slipping down the crumbling verge to the boulder-strewn flat beyond. This stretch had once been naught but dunes, before the Whirlwind's rise. Its elevation was higher – perhaps twice the height of a man – than the ancient seabed he had just traversed, and here, beyond the tumbled stones, lay the gridwork foundations of a city. Deep canals cut through it, and he could make out where bridges had once spanned them here and there. Few of the wall foundations rose higher than the assassin's shins, but some of the buildings looked to have been large – a match to anything found in Unta, or Malaz City. Deep pits marked where cisterns had been built, where the seawater from the other side of the causeway could, stripped of salt by the intervening sands, collect. The remnants of terraces indicated a proliferation of public gardens.

He set out, and soon found himself walking down what had once been a main thoroughfare, aligned north–south. The ground underfoot was a thick, solid carpet of potsherds, scoured and bleached by sand and salt. And now I am like a ghost, the last to walk these thoroughfares, with every wall transparent, every secret revealed.
It was then that he heard horses.

Kalam sprinted to the nearest cover, a set of sunken stairs that once led to the subterranean level of a large building. The thump of horse hoofs drew closer, approaching from one of the side avenues on the opposite side of the main street. The assassin ducked lower as the first rider appeared.

Pardu.

Drawing rein, cautious, weapons out. Then a gesture. Four more desert warriors appeared, followed by a fifth Pardu, this last one a shaman, Kalam concluded, given the man's wild hair, fetishes and ratty goat-hide cape. Glaring about, eyes glinting as if raging with some internal fire, the shaman drew out a long bone and began waving it in circles overhead. Then he lifted his head and loudly sniffed the air.

Kalam slowly eased his long-knives from their scabbards.

The shaman growled a few words, then pivoted on the high Pardu saddle and slipped to the ground. He landed badly, twisting an ankle, and spent the next few moments hobbling about, cursing and spitting. His warriors swung down from their horses in a more graceful fashion, and Kalam caught the flash of a quickly hidden grin from one of them.

The shaman began stamping around, muttering under his breath, reaching up with his free hand to tug at his tangled hair every now and then. And in his movements Kalam saw the beginnings of a ritual.

Something told the assassin that these Pardu did not belong to Sha'ik's Army of the Apocalypse. They were too furtive by far. He slowly sheathed his otataral long-knife and settled back in the deep shadow of the recess, to wait, and watch.

The shaman's muttering had fallen into a rhythmic cadence, and he reached into a bag of sewn hides at his belt, collecting a handful of small objects which he began scattering about as he walked his endless circle. Black and glittering, the objects crackled and popped on the ground as if they had been just plucked from a hearth. An acrid stench wafted out from the ritual circle.

Kalam never discovered if what occurred next had been intended; without doubt its conclusion was not. The darkness lying heavy on the street seemed to convulsively explode – and then screams tore the air. Two massive beasts had arrived, immediately attacking the Pardu warriors. As if darkness itself had taken form, only the shimmer of their sleek hides betrayed their presence, and they moved with blurring speed, amidst spraying blood and snapping bones. The shaman shrieked as one of the enormous beasts closed. Huge black head swung to one side, jaws opening wide, and the shaman's head vanished within the maw. A wet crunch as the jaws ground shut.

The hound – for that, Kalam realized, was what it was – then stepped away, as the shaman's headless body staggered back, then sat down with a thump.

The other hound had begun feeding on the corpses of the Pardu warriors, and the sickening sound of breaking bones continued.

These, Kalam could well see, were not Hounds of Shadow. If anything, they were larger, bulkier, massing more like a bear than a dog. Yet, as they now filled their bellies with raw human flesh, they moved with savage grace, primal and deadly. Devoid of fear and supremely confident, as if this strange place they had come to was as familiar to them as their own hunting grounds.

The sight of them made the assassin's skin crawl. Motionless, he had slowed his own breathing, then the pace of his heart. There were no other alternatives available to him, at least until the hounds left.

But they seemed to be in no hurry, both settling down to split the last long bones and gnaw at joints.

Hungry, these bastards. Wonder where they came from . . . and what they're going to do now.

Then one lifted its head, and stiffened. With a deep grunt it rose. The other continued crunching through a human knee, seemingly indifferent to its companion's sudden tension.
Even when the beast turned to stare at the place where Kalam crouched.

It came at him fast.

Kalam leapt up the worn stairs, one hand reaching into the folds of his telaba. He pivoted hard and sprinted, even as he flung his last handful of smoky diamonds — his own cache, not Iskaral Pust’s — into his wake.

A skittering of claws immediately behind him, and he flung himself to one side, rolling over a shoulder as the hound flashed through the place where he had been a moment earlier. The assassin continued rolling until he was on his feet once more, tugging desperately at the whistle looped around his neck.

The hound skidded across dusty flagstones, legs cycling wildly beneath it as it twisted around.

A glance showed the other hound entirely unmindful, still gnawing away in the street beyond.

Then Kalam clamped the whistle between his teeth. He scrambled in a half-circle to bring the scatter of diamonds between himself and the attacking hound.

And blew through the bone tube as hard as he could.

Five azalan demons rose from the ancient stone floor. There seemed to be no moment of disorientation among them, for three of the five closed instantly on the nearer hound, whilst the remaining two flanked Kalam as they clambered, in a blur of limbs, towards the hound in the street. Which finally looked up.

Curious as he might have been to witness the clash of behemoths, Kalam wasted no time in lingering. He ran, angling southward as he leapt over wall foundations, skirted around black-bottomed pits, and set his gaze fixedly on the higher ground fifteen hundred paces distant.

Snaps and snarls and the crash and grind of tumbling stones evinced an ongoing battle in the main street behind him. My apologies, Shadowthrone . . . but at least one of your demons should survive long enough to escape. In which case, you will be informed of a new menace unleashed on this world. And consider this — if there’s two of them, there’s probably more.

He ran onward through the night, until all sounds behind him vanished.

An evening of surprises. In a jewelmonger’s kiosk in G’danisban. At a sumptuous, indolent dinner shared by a Kaleffa merchant and one of his prized client’s equally prized wives. And in Ehrlitan, among a fell gathering of flesh-traders and murderers plotting the betrayal of a Malazan collaborator who had issued a secret invitation to Admiral Nok’s avenging fleet — which even now was rounding the Otataral Sea on its way to an ominous rendezvous with eleven transports approaching from Genabackis — a collaborator who, it would turn out, would awaken the next morning not only hale, but no longer facing imminent assassination. And on the coastal caravan trail twenty leagues west of Ehrlitan, the quietude of the night would be broken by horrified screams — loud and lingering, sufficient to awaken a maul-fisted old man living alone in a tower overlooking the Otataral Sea, if only momentarily, before he rolled over and fell once more into dreamless, restful sleep.

At the distant, virtually inaudible whistle, countless smoky diamonds that had originated from a trader in G’danisban’s market round crumbled into dust — whether placed for safe-keeping in locked chests, worn as rings or pendants, or residing in a merchant’s hoard. And from the dust rose azalan demons, awakened long before their intended moment. But that suited them just fine.

They had, one and all, appointed tasks that demanded a certain solitude, at least initially. Making it necessary to quickly silence every witness, which the azalan were pleased to do. Proficiently and succinctly.

For those that had appeared in the ruins of a city in Raraku, however, to find two creatures whose existence was very nearly lost to the demons’ racial memory, the moments immediately following their arrival proved somewhat more problematic. For it became quickly apparent that the hounds were not inclined to relinquish their territory, such as it was.

The fight was fierce and protracted, concluding unsatisfactorily for the five azalan, who were eventually
driven off, battered and bleeding and eager to seek deep shadows in which to hide from the coming day. To hide, and lick their wounds.

And in the realm known as Shadow, a certain god sat motionless on his insubstantial throne. Already recovered from his shock, his mind was racing.

Racing.

Grinding, splintering wood, mast snapping overhead to drag cordage down, a heavy concussion that shivered through the entire craft, then only the sound of water dripping onto a stone floor.

With a muted groan, Cutter dragged himself upright. 'Apsalar?'

'I'm here.'

Their voices echoed. Walls and ceiling were close – the runner had landed in a chamber.

'So much for subtle,' the Daru muttered, searching for his pack amidst the wreckage. 'I've a lantern. Give me a moment.'

'I am not going anywhere,' she replied from somewhere near the stern.

Her words chilled him, so forlorn did they sound. His groping hands closed on his pack and he dragged it close. He rummaged inside until his hand closed on and retrieved first the small lantern and then the tinder box.

The fire-making kit was from Darujhistan, and consisted of flint and iron bar, wick-sticks, igniting powder, the fibrous inner lining from tree bark, and a long-burning gel the city's alchemists rendered from the gas-filled caverns beneath the city. Sparks flashed three times before the powder caught with a hiss and flare of flame. The bark lining followed, then, dipping a wick-stick into the gel, Cutter set it alight. He then transferred the flame to the lantern.

A sphere of light burgeoned in the chamber, revealing the crushed wreckage of the runner, rough-hewn stone walls and vaulted ceiling. Apsalar was still seated near the splintered shaft of the tiller, barely illumined by the lantern's light. More like an apparition than a flesh and blood person.

'I see a doorway beyond,' she said.

He swung about, lifting the lantern. 'All right, at least we're not in a tomb, then. More like some kind of storage room.'

'I smell dust... and sand.'

He slowly nodded, then scowled in sudden suspicion. 'Let's do some exploring,' he grated as he began collecting his gear, including the bow. He froze at a chittering sound from the doorway, looked up to see a score of eyes, gleaming with the lantern's reflected light. Close-set but framing the doorway on all sides, including the arch where, Cutter suspected, they were hanging upside down.

'Bhok'arala,' Apsalar said. 'We've returned to Seven Cities.'

'I know,' the Daru replied, wanting to spit. 'We spent most of last year trudging across that damned wasteland, and now we're back where we started.'

'So it would seem. So, Crokus, are you enjoying being the plaything of a god?'

He saw little value in replying to that question, and chose instead to clamber down to the puddled floor and approach the doorway.

The bhok'arala scampered with tiny shrieks, vanishing into the darkness of the hallway beyond. Cutter paused at the threshold and glanced back. 'Coming?'
Apsalar shrugged in the gloom, then made her way forward.

The corridor ran straight and level for twenty paces, then twisted to the right, the floor forming an uneven, runnelled ramp that led upward to the next level. There were no side chambers or passages until they reached a circular room, where sealed doorways lining the circumference hinted at entrances to tombs. In one curved wall, between two such doorways, there was an alcove in which stairs were visible.

And crouched at the base of those stairs was a familiar figure, teeth gleaming in a wide smile.

'Iskaral Pust!'

'Missed me, didn't you, lad?' He edged forward like a crab, then cocked his head. 'I should soothe him now – both of them, yes. Welcoming words, a wide embrace, old friends, yes, reunited in a great cause once more. Never mind the extremity of what will be demanded of us in the days and nights to come. As if I need help – Iskaral Pust requires the assistance of no-one. Oh, she might be useful, but she hardly looks inclined, does she? Miserable with knowledge, is my dear lass.' He straightened, managing something between an upright stance and a crouch. His smile suddenly broadened. 'Welcome! My friends!'

Cutter advanced on him. 'I've no time for any of this, you damned weasel—'

'No time? Of course you have, lad! There's much to be done, and much time in which to do it! Doesn't that make for a change? Rush about? Not us. No, we can dawdle! Isn't that wonderful?'

'What does Cotillion want of us?' Cutter demanded, forcing his fists to unclench.

'You are asking me what Cotillion wants of you? How should I know?' He ducked down. 'Does he believe me?'

'No.'

'No what? Have you lost your mind, lad? You won't find it here! Although my wife might – she's ever cleaning and clearing up – at least, I think she is. Though she refuses to touch the offerings – my little bhok'arala children leave them everywhere I go, of course. I've become used to the smell. Now, where was I? Oh yes, dearest Apsalar – should you and I flirt? Won't that make the witch spit and hiss! Hee hee!'

'I'd rather flirt with a bhok'aral,' she replied.

'That too – I'm not the jealous type, you'll be relieved to hear, lass. Plenty of 'em about for you to choose from, in any case. Now, are you hungry? Thirsty? Hope you brought your own supplies. Just head on up these stairs, and when she asks, you haven't seen me.'

Iskaral Pust stepped back and vanished.

Apsalar sighed. 'Perhaps his . . . wife will prove a more reasonable host.'

Cutter glanced back at her. *Somehow I doubt it.*
'Mezla one and all,' Febryl muttered as he hobbled along the worn, dusty path, his breath growing harsher. There was little in this world that much pleased him any more. Malazans. His failing body. The blind insanity of power so brutally evinced in the Whirlwind Goddess. In his mind, the world was plunging into chaos, and all that it had been – all that he had been – was trapped in the past.

But the past was not dead. It merely slept. The perfect, measured resurrection of old patterns could achieve a rebirth. Not a rebirth such as had taken Sha'ik – that had been nothing more than the discarding of one, badly worn vessel for a new one not nearly so battered. No, the rebirth Febryl imagined was far more profound.

He had once served the Holy Falah'd Enqura. The Holy City of Ugarat and its host of tributary cities had been in the midst of a renaissance. Eleven great schools of learning were thriving in Ugarat. Knowledge long lost was being rediscovered. The flower of a great civilization had turned to face the sun, had begun to open.

The Mezla and their implacable legions had destroyed ... everything. Ugarat had fallen to Dassem Ultor. The schools were assailed by soldiers, only to discover, to their fury, that their many riches and texts had, along with philosophers and academics, vanished. Enqura had well understood the Mezla thirst for knowledge, the Emperor's lust for foreign secrets, and the city's Holy Protector would give them nothing. Instead, he had commanded Febryl, a week before the arrival of the Malazan armies, to shut down the schools, to confiscate the hundred thousand scrolls and bound volumes, the ancient relics of the First Empire, and the teachers and scholars themselves. By the Protector's decree, Ugarat's coliseum became the site of a vast conflagration, as everything was burned, destroyed. The scholars were crucified – those that did not fling themselves on the pyre in a fit of madness and grief – and their bodies dumped into the pits containing the smashed relics just outside the city wall.

Febryl had done as he had been commanded. His last gesture of loyalty, of pure, unsullied courage. The terrible act was necessary. Enqura's denial was perhaps the greatest defiance in the entire war. One for which the Holy Protector paid with his life, when the horror that was said to have struck Dassem Ultor upon hearing of the deed transformed into rage.

Febryl's loss of faith had come in the interval, and it had left him a broken man. In following Enqura's commands, he had so outraged his mother and father – both learned nobles in their own right – that they had disowned him to his face. And Febryl had lost his mind that night, recovering his sanity with dawn staining the horizon, to find that he had murdered his parents. And their servants. That he had unleashed sorcery to flay the flesh from the guards. That such power had poured through him as to leave him old beyond his years, wrinkled and withered, his bones brittle and bent.

The old man hobbling out through the city gate that day was beneath notice. Enqura searched for him, but Febryl succeeded in evading the Holy Protector, in leaving the man to his fate.

Unforgivable.

A hard word, a truth harder than stone. But Febryl was never able to decide to which crime it applied. Three betrayals, or two? Was the destruction of all that knowledge – the slaying of all those scholars and teachers – was it, as the Mezla and other Falad'han later pronounced – the foulest deed of all? Fouler even than the T'lan Imass rising to slaughter the citizens of Aren? So much so that Enqura's name has become a curse for Mezla and natives of Seven Cities alike? Three, not two?
And the bitch knew. She knew his every secret. It had not been enough to change his name; not enough that he had the appearance of an old man, when the High Mage Iltara, most trusted servant to Enqura, had been young, tall and lusted after by both men and women? No, she had obliterated, seemingly effortlessly, his every barricade, and plundered the pits of his soul.

Unforgivable.

No possessor of his secrets could be permitted to live. He refused to be so ... vulnerable. To anyone. Even Sha'ik. Especially Sha'ik.

And so she must be removed. Even if it means dealing with Mezla. He had no illusions about Korbolo Dom. The Napan's ambitions – no matter what claims he made at present – went far beyond this rebellion. No, his ambitions were imperial. Somewhere to the south, Mallick Rel, the Jhistal priest of Elder Mael, was trekking towards Aren, there to surrender himself. He would, in turn, be brought before the Empress herself.

And then what? That snake of a priest would announce an extraordinary reversal of fortunes in Seven Cities. Korbolo Dom had been working in her interests all along. Or some such nonsense. Febryl was certain of his suspicions. Korbolo Dom wanted a triumphant return into the imperial fold. Probably the title of High Fist of Seven Cities as well. Mallick Rel would have twisted his part in the events at the Fall and immediately afterwards. The dead man, Pormqual, would be made the singular focus for the debacle of Coltaine's death and the slaying of the High Fist's army. The Jhistal would slip through, somehow, or, if all went awry, he would somehow manage to escape. Korbolo Dom, Febryl believed, had agents in the palace in Unta – what was being played out here in Raraku was but a tremble on a much vaster web.

But I shall defeat it in the end. Even if I must appear to acquiesce right now. He has accepted my conditions, after all — a lie, of course — and I in turn accept his — another lie, naturally.

He had walked through the outskirts of the city and now found himself in the wilder region of the oasis. The trail had the appearance of long disuse, covered in crackling, dried palm fronds and gourd husks, and Febryl knew his careless passage was destroying that illusion, but he was indifferent to that. Korbolo's killers would repair the mess, after all. It fed their self-deceptions well enough.

He rounded a bend in the path and entered a clearing ringed in low stones. There had once been a well here, but the sands had long since filled it. Kamist Reloe stood near the centre, hooded and vulpine, with four of Korbolo's assassins positioned in a half-circle behind him.

'You're late,' Kamist Reloe hissed.

Febryl shrugged. 'Do I look like a prancing foal? Now, have you begun the preparations?'

'The knowledge here is yours, Febryl, not mine.'

Febryl hissed, then waved one claw-like hand. 'No matter. There's still time. Your words only remind me that I must suffer fools—'

'You're not alone in that,' Kamist Reloe drawled.

Febryl hobbled forward. 'The path your ... servants would take is a long one. It has not been trod by mortals since the First Empire. It has likely grown treacherous—'

'Enough warnings, Febryl,' Kamist Reloe snapped, his fear showing through. 'You need only open the path. That is all we ask of you – all we have ever asked.'

'You need more than that, Kamist Reloe,' Febryl said with a smile. 'Would you have these fools stride in blind? The goddess was a spirit, once—'

'That is no secret.'

'Perhaps, but what kind of spirit? One that rides the desert winds, you might think. But you are wrong. A spirit of stone? Sand? No, none of these.' He waved one hand. 'Look about you. Raraku holds the bones of
countless civilizations, leading back to the First Empire, the empire of Dessimbelackis. And still further – aye, the signs of that are mostly obliterated, yet some remain, if one has the eyes to see . . . and understand.’ He limped over to one of the low stones ringing the clearing, struggling to hide the wince of pain from his overworked bones. ‘Were you to dig down through this sand, Kamist Reloe, you would discover that these boulders are in fact menhirs, stones standing taller than any of us here. And their flanks are pitted and grooved in strange patterns . . .

Kamist swung in a slow circle, studying the protruding rocks with narrowed eyes. ‘T’lan Imass?’

Febryl nodded. ‘The First Empire of Dessimbelackis, Kamist Reloe, was not the first. That belonged to the T’lan Imass. There was little, it is true, that you or I might recognize as being ... imperial. No cities. No breaking of the ground to plant crops or irrigate. And its armies were undead. There was a throne, of course, upon which was meant to sit a mortal – the progeny race of the T’lan Imass. A human. Alas, humans viewed empire ... differently. And their vision did not include T’lan Imass. Thus, betrayal. Then war. An unequal contest, but the T’lan Imass were reluctant to annihilate their mortal children. And so they left—’

‘Only to return with the shattering of the warren,’ Kamist Reloe muttered, nodding. ‘When the chaos erupted with the ritual of Soletaken and D’ivers.’ He faced Febryl once more. ‘The goddess spirit is ... was ... T’lan Imass?’

Febryl shrugged. ‘There were once texts – inscribed on fired clay – from a cult of the First Empire, copies of which survived until the fall of Ugarat. The few T’lan Imass the humans managed to destroy when they rebelled were each buried in sacred sites. Sites such as this one, Kamist Reloe.’

But the other mage shook his head. ‘She is a creature of rage. Such fury does not belong to T’lan Imass—’

‘Unless she had reason. Memories of a betrayal, perhaps, from her mortal life. A wound too deep to be eradicated by the Ritual of Tellann.’ Febryl shrugged. ‘It does not matter. The spirit is T’lan Imass.’

‘It is rather late in the day for you to be revealing this to us,’ Kamist Reloe growled, turning his head to spit. ‘Does the Ritual of Tellann still bind her?’

‘No. She broke those chains long ago and has reclaimed her soul – Raraku’s secret gifts are those of life and death, as primal as existence itself. It returned to her all that she had lost – perhaps even the rebirth of her rage. Raraku, Kamist Reloe, remains the deepest mystery of all, for it holds its own memories ... of the sea, of life’s very own waters. And memories are power.’

Kamist Reloe drew his cloak tighter about his gaunt form. ‘Open the path.’

And when I have done this for you and your Mezla friends, High Mage, you will be indebted to me, and my desires. Seven Cities shall be liberated. The Malazan Empire will withdraw all interests, and our civilization shall flower once more ...

He stepped to the centre of the ring of stones and raised his hands.

Something was coming. Bestial and wild with power. And with each passing moment, as it drew ever nearer, L’oric’s fear grew. Ancient wars. . . such is the feel of this, as of enmity reborn, a hatred that defies millennia. And though he sensed that no-one mortal in the oasis city was the subject of that wrath, the truth remained that... we are all in the way.

He needed to learn more. But he was at a loss as to which path he should take. Seven Cities was a land groaning beneath unseen burdens. Its skin was thick with layers, weathered hard. Their secrets were not easily prised loose, especially in Raraku.

He sat cross-legged on the floor of his tent, head lowered, thoughts racing. The Whirlwind’s rage had never before been so fierce, leading him to suspect that the Malazan army was drawing close, that the final clash of wills was fast approaching. This was, in truth, a convergence, and the currents had trapped other powers, pulling them along with relentless force.
And behind it all, the whispers of a song . . .

He should flee this place. Take Felisin – and possibly Heboric as well – with him. And soon. Yet curiosity held him here, at least for the present. Those layers were splitting, and there would be truths revealed, and he would know them. I came to Raraku because I sensed my father’s presence . . . somewhere close. Perhaps here no longer, but he had been, not long ago. The chance of finding his trail...

The Queen of Dreams had said Osric was lost. What did that mean? How? Why? He hungered for answers to such questions.

Kurald Thyrllan had been born of violence, the shattering of Darkness. The Elder Warren had since branched off in many directions, reaching to within the grasp of mortal humans as Thyr. And, before that, in the guise of life-giving fire, Tellann.

Tellann was a powerful presence here in Seven Cities, obscure and buried deep perhaps, but pervasive none the less. Whereas Kurald Thyrllan had been twisted and left fraught by the shattering of its sister warren. There were no easy passages into Thyrllan, as he well knew.

Very well, then. I shall try Tellann.

He sighed, then slowly climbed to his feet. There were plenty of risks, of course. Collecting his bleached telaba in the crook of one arm, he moved to the chest beside his cot. He crouched, passing a hand over it to temporarily dispel its wards, then lifted back the lid.

Liosan armour, the white enamel gouged and scarred. A visored helm of the same material, the leather underlining webbed over eyes and cheeks by black iron mail. A light, narrow-bladed longsword, its point long and tapering, scabbarded in pale wood.

He drew the armour on, including the helm, then pulled his telaba over it, raising the hood as well. Leather gauntlets and sword and belt followed.

Then he paused.

He despised fighting. Unlike his Liosan kin, he was averse to harsh judgement, to the assertion of a brutally delineated world-view that permitted no ambiguity. He did not believe order could be shaped by a sword’s edge. Finality, yes, but finality stained with failure.

Necessity was a most bitter flavour, but he saw no choice and so would have to suffer the taste.

Once more he would have to venture forth, through the encampment, drawing ever so carefully on his powers to remain unseen by mortals yet beneath the notice of the goddess. The ferocity of her anger was his greatest ally, and he would have to trust in that.

He set out.

The sun was a crimson glare behind the veil of suspended sand, still a bell from setting, when L’oric reached the Toblakai’s glade. He found Felisin sleeping beneath the shade they had rigged between three poles on the side opposite the carved trees, and decided he would leave her to her rest. Instead, sparing a single bemused glance at the two Teblor statues, he strode over to stand before the seven stone faces.

Their spirits were long gone, if they had ever been present. These mysterious T’lan Imass who were Toblakai’s gods. And the sanctification had been wrested from them, leaving this place sacred to something else. But a fissure remained, the trail, perhaps, from a brief visitation. Sufficient, he hoped, for him to breach a way into the Warren of Tellann.

He unveiled power, forcing his will into the fissure, widening it until he was able to step through—

Onto a muddy beach at the edge of a vast lake. His boots sank to the ankles. Clouds of insects flitted up from the shoreline to swarm around him. L’oric paused, stared upward at an overcast sky. The air was sultry with late
I am in the wrong place . . . or the wrong time. This is Raraku's most ancient memory.

He faced inland. A marshy flat extended for another twenty paces, the reeds waving in the mild wind, then the terrain rose gently onto savanna. A low ridge of darker hills marked the horizon. A few majestic trees rose from the grasslands, filled with raucous white-winged birds.

A flash of movement in the reeds caught his attention, and his hand reached for the hilt of his sword as a bestial head appeared, followed by humped shoulders. A hyena, such as could be found west of Aren and, more rarely, in Karashimesh, but this one was as large as a bear. It lifted its wide, stubby head, nose testing the air, eyes seeming to squint.

The hyena took a step forward.

L’oric slid the sword from the scabbard.

At the blade’s hiss the beast reared up, lunging to its left, and bolted into the reeds.

He could mark its flight by the waving stalks, then it appeared once more, sprinting up the slope.

L’oric resheathed his weapon. He strode from the muddy bank, intending to take the trail the hyena had broken through the reeds, and, four paces in, came upon the gnawed remains of a corpse. Far along in its decay, limbs scattered by the scavenger’s feeding, it was a moment before the High Mage could comprehend its form. Humanoid, he concluded. As tall as a normal man, yet what remained of its skin revealed a pelt of fine dark hair. The waters had bloated the flesh, suggesting the creature had drowned. A moment’s search and he found the head.

He crouched down over it and was motionless for some time.

Sloped forehead, solid chinless jaw, a brow ridge so heavy it formed a contiguous shelf over the deep-set eye sockets. The hair still clinging to fragments of scalp was little longer than what had covered the body, dark brown and wavy.

More ape-like than a T’lan Imass . . . the skull behind the face is smaller, as well. Yet it stood taller by far, more human in proportion. What manner of man was this?

There was no evidence of clothing, or any other sort of adornment. The creature – a male – had died naked.

L’oric straightened. He could see the hyena’s route through the reeds, and he set out along it.

The overcast was burning away and the air growing hotter and, if anything, thicker. He reached the sward and stepped onto dry ground for the first time. The hyena was nowhere to be seen, and L’oric wondered if it was still running. An odd reaction, he mused, for which he could fashion no satisfactory explanation.

He had no destination in mind; nor was he even certain that what he sought would be found here. This was not, after all, Tellann. If anything, he had come to what lay beneath Tellann, as if the Imass, in choosing their sacred sites, had been in turn responding to a sensitivity to a still older power. He understood now that Toblakai’s glade was not a place freshly sanctified by the giant warrior; nor even by the T’lan Imass he had worshipped as his gods. It had, at the very beginning, belonged to Raraku, to whatever natural power the land possessed. And so he had pushed through to a place of beginnings. But did I push, or was I pulled?

A herd of huge beasts crested a distant rise on his right, the ground trembling as they picked up speed, stampeding in wild panic.

L’oric hesitated. They were not running towards him, but he well knew that such stampedes could veer at any time. Instead, they swung suddenly the other way, wheeling as a single mass. Close enough for him to make out their shapes. Similar to wild cattle, although larger and bearing stubby horns or antlers. Their hides were mottled white and tan, their long manes black.
He wondered what had panicked them and swung his gaze back to the place where the herd had first appeared.

L'oric dropped into a crouch, his heart pounding hard in his chest.

Seven hounds, black as midnight, of a size to challenge the wild antlered cattle. Moving with casual arrogance along the ridge. And flanking them, like jackals flanking a pride of lions, a score or more of the half-human creatures such as the one he had discovered at the lakeshore. They were clearly subservient, in the role of scavengers to predators. No doubt there was some mutual benefit to the partnership, though L'oric could imagine no real threat in this world to those dark hounds.

And, there was no doubt in his mind, those hounds did not belong here.

Intruders. Strangers to this realm, against which nothing in this world can challenge. They are the dominators . . . and they know it.

And now he saw that other observers were tracking the terrible beasts. K'Chain Che'Malle, three of them, the heavy blades at the end of their arms revealing that they were K'ell Hunters, were padding along a parallel course a few hundred paces distant from the hounds. Their heads were turned, fixed on the intruders – who in turn ignored them.

Not of this world either, if my father's thoughts on the matter are accurate. He was Rake's guest for months in Moon's Spawn, delving its mysteries. But the K'Chain Che'Malle cities lie on distant continents. Perhaps they but recently arrived here, seeking new sites for their colonies . . . only to find their dominance challenged.

If the hounds saw L'oric, they made no sign of it. Nor did the half-humans.

The High Mage watched them continue on, until they finally dipped into a basin and disappeared from sight.

The K'ell Hunters all halted, then spread out cautiously and slowly closed to where the hounds had vanished.

A fatal error.

Blurs of darkness, launching up from the basin. The K'ell Hunters, suddenly surrounded, swung their massive swords. Yet, fast as they were, in the span of a single heartbeat two of the three were down, throats and bellies torn open. The third one had leapt high, sailing twenty paces to land in a thumping run.

The hounds did not pursue, gathering to sniff at the K'Chain Che'Malle corpses whilst the half-humans arrived with hoots and barks, a few males clambering onto the dead creatures and jumping up and down, arms waving.

L'oric thought he now understood why the K'Chain Che'Malle had never established colonies on this continent.

He watched the hounds and the half-humans mill about the kill site for a while longer, then the High Mage began a cautious retreat, back to the lake. He was nearing the edge of the slope down to the reeds when his last parting glance over one shoulder revealed the seven beasts all facing in his direction, heads raised.

Then two began a slow lope towards him. A moment later the remaining five fanned out and followed.

Oh...

Sudden calm descended upon him. He knew he was as good as already dead. There would be no time to open the warren to return to his own world – nor would he, in any case, since to do so would give the hounds a path to follow – and I'll not have their arrival in the oasis a crime staining my soul. Better to die here and now. Duly punished for my obsessive curiosity.

The hounds showed nothing of the speed they had unveiled against the K'ell Hunters, as if they sensed L'oric's comparative weakness.

He heard water rushing behind him and spun round.
A dragon filled his vision, low over the water – so fast as to lift a thrashing wave in its wake – and the talons spread wide, the huge clawed hands reaching down.

He threw his arms over his face and head as the enormous scaled fingers closed like a cage around him, then snatched him skyward.

A brief, disjointed glimpse of the hounds scattering from the dragon's shadow – the distant sound of half-human yelps and shrieks – then naught before his eyes but the glistening white belly of the dragon, seen between two curled talons.

He was carried far, out onto a sea, then towards an island where stood a squat tower, its flat roof broad and solid enough for the dragon, wings spreading to thunder against the air, to settle.

The claws opened, tumbling L'oric onto the gouged and scraped stones. He rolled up against the platform's low wall, then slowly sat up.

And stared at the enormous gold and white dragon, its lambent eyes fixed upon him with, L'oric knew instinctively, reproach. The High Mage managed a shrug.

'Father,' he said, 'I've been looking for you.'

Osric was not one for furnishings and decor. The chamber beneath the platform was barren, its floor littered with the detritus left by nesting swallows, the air pungent with guano.

L'oric leaned against a wall, arms crossed, watching his father pace.

He was pure Liosan in appearance, tall and pale as snow, his long, wavy hair silver and streaked with gold. His eyes seemed to rage with an inner fire, its tones a match to his hair, silver licked by gold. He was wearing plain grey leathers, the sword at his belt virtually identical to the one L'oric carried.

'Father. The Queen of Dreams believes you lost,' he said after a long moment.

'I am. Or, rather, I was. Further, I would remain so.'

'You do not trust her?'

He paused, studied his son briefly, then said, 'Of course I trust her. And my trust is made purer by her ignorance. What are you doing here?'

'Sometimes longing is to be preferred to reality.' L'oric sighed. 'I am not even sure where here is. I was ... questing for truths.'

Osric grunted and began pacing once more. 'You said earlier you were looking for me. How did you discover my trail?'

'I didn't. My searching for you was more of a, ah, generalized sort of thing. This present excursion was an altogether different hunt.'

'That was about to see you killed.'

L'oric nodded. He looked around the chamber. 'You live here?'

His father grimaced. 'An observation point. The K'Chain Che'Malle skykeeps invariably approach from the north, over water.'

'Skykeeps ... such as Moon's Spawn?'

A veiled glance, then a nod. 'Yes.'

'And it was in Rake's floating fortress that you first embarked on the trail that took you here. What did you
discovered that the Tiste Andii Lord of Darkness didn’t?"

Osric snorted. ‘Only that which was at his very feet. Moon’s Spawn bore signs of damage, of breaching. Then slaughter. None the less, a few survived, at least long enough to begin it on its journey home. North, out over the icefields. Of course, it never made it past those icefields. Did you know that the glacier that held Moon’s Spawn had travelled a thousand leagues with its prize? A thousand leagues, L’oric, before Rake and I stumbled upon it north of Laederon Plateau."

‘You are saying Moon’s Spawn was originally one of these skykeeps that arrived here?"

‘It was. Three have come in the time that I have been here. None survived the Deragoth.’

The what?”

Osric halted and faced his son once more. ‘The Hounds of Darkness. The seven beasts that Dessimbelackis made pact with – and oh, weren’t the Nameless Ones shaken by that unholy alliance? The seven beasts, L’oric, that gave the name to Seven Cities, although no memory survives of that particular truth. The Seven Holy Cities of our time are not the original ones, of course. Only the number has survived.’

L’oric closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the damp stone wall. ‘Deragoth. What happened to them? Why are they here and not there?’

‘I don’t know. Probably it had something to do with the violent collapse of the First Empire.’

‘What warren is this?’

‘Not a warren at all, L’oric. A memory. Soon to end, I believe, since it is … shrinking. Fly northward and by day’s end you will see before you a wall of nothingness, of oblivion.’

‘A memory. Whose memory?’

Osric shrugged. ‘Raraku’s.’

‘You make that desert sound as if it is alive, as if it is an entity.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘You’re saying it is?’

‘No, I’m not saying that. I was asking you – have you not just come from there?’

L’oric opened his eyes and regarded his father. You are a frustrating man. No wonder Anomander Rake lost his temper. ‘What of those half-humans that ran with these Deragoth?’

‘A quaint reversal, wouldn’t you say? The Deragoth’s only act of domestication. Most scholars, in their species-bound arrogance, believe that humans domesticated dogs, but it may well have been the other way round, at least to start. Who ran with whom?’

‘But those creatures aren’t humans. They’re not even Imass.’

‘No, but they will be, one day. I’ve seen others, scampering on the edges of wolf packs. Standing upright gives them better vision, a valuable asset to complement the wolves’ superior hearing and sense of smell. A formidable combination, but the wolves are the ones in charge. That will eventually change … but not for those serving the Deragoth, I suspect.’

‘Why?’

‘Because something is about to happen. Here, in this trapped memory. I only hope that I will be privileged to witness it before the world fades entirely.’

‘You called the Deragoth “Hounds of Darkness”. Are they children of Mother Dark, then?’
'They are no-one's children,' Osric growled, then he shook his head. 'They have that stench about them, but in truth I have no idea. It just seemed an appropriate name. "Deragoth" in the Tiste Andii tongue.'

'Well,' L'oric muttered, 'actually, it would be Dera'tin'jeragoth.'

Osric studied his son. 'So like your mother,' he sighed. 'And is it any wonder we could not stand each other's company? The third day, always by the third day. We could make a lifetime of those three days. Exaltation, then comfort, then mutual contempt. One, two, three.'

L'oric looked away. 'And for your only son?'

Osric grunted. 'More like three bells.'

Climbing to his feet, L'oric brushed dust from his hands. 'Very well. I may require your help in opening the path back to Raraku. But you might wish to know something of the Liosan and Kurald Thyrllan. Your people and their realm have lost their protector. They pray for your return, Father.'

'What of your familiar?'

'Slain. By T'lan Imass.'

'So,' Osric said, 'find yourself another.'

L'oric flinched, then scowled. 'It's not as easy as that! In any case, do you hold no sense of responsibility for the Liosan? They worship you, dammit!'

'The Liosan worship themselves, L'oric. I happen to be a convenient figurehead. Kurald Thyrllan may appear vulnerable, but it isn't.'

'And what if these Deragoth are servants of Darkness in truth? Do you still make the same claim, Father?'

He was silent, then strode towards the gaping entrance-way. 'It's all her fault,' he muttered as he passed.

L'oric followed his father outside. 'This ... observation tower. Is it Jaghut?'

'Yes.'

'So, where are they?'

'West. South. East. But not here – I've seen none.'

'You don't know where they are, do you?'

'They are not in this memory, L'oric. That is that. Now, stay back.'

The High Mage remained near the tower, watching his father veer into his draconic form. The air suddenly redolent with a sweet, spicy aroma, a blurring of shape before L'oric's eyes. Like Anomander Rake, Osric was more dragon than anything else. They were kin in blood, if not in personality. I wish I could understand this man, this father of mine. Queen take me, I wish I could even like him. He strode forward.

The dragon lifted one forelimb, talons opening.

L'oric frowned. 'I would rather ride your shoulders, Father—'

But the reptilian hand reached out and closed about him.

He resolved to suffer the indignity in silence.

Osric flew westward, following the coastline. Before too long forest appeared, and the land reached around northward. The air whipping between the dragon's scaled fingers grew cold, then icy. The ground far below began climbing, the forests flanking mountain sides shifting into conifers. Then L'oric saw snow, reaching like
frozen rivers in crevasses and chasms.

He could recall no mountains from the future to match this ancient scene. Perhaps this memory, like so many others, is flawed.

Osric began to descend – and L'oric suddenly saw a vast white emptiness, as if the mountain rearing before them had been cut neatly in half. They were approaching that edge.

A vaguely level, snow-crusted stretch was the dragon's destination. Its southern side was marked by a sheer cliff. To the north ... opaque oblivion.

Wings pounding, raising clouds of powdery white, Osric hovered for a moment, then released L'oric.

The High Mage landed in waist-deep snow. Cursing, he kicked his way onto firmer footing, as the enormous dragon settled with a shuddering crunch off to one side.

Osric quickly sembled into Liosan form, the wind whipping at his hair, and strode over.

There were ... things near the faded edge of the memory. Some of them moving about feebly. Osric stomped through the deep snow towards them, speaking as he went. 'Creatures stumble out. You will find such all along the verge. Most of them quickly die, but some linger.'

'What are they?'
'Demons, mostly.'

Osric changed direction slightly, closing on one such creature, from which steam was rising. Its four limbs were moving, claws scraping through the slush surrounding it.

Father and son halted before it.

Dog-sized and reptilian, with four hands, similar to an ape's. A wide, flat head with a broad mouth, two slits for nostrils, and four liquid, slightly protruding eyes in a diamond pattern, the pupils vertical and, in the harsh glare of the snow and sky, surprisingly open.

'This one might suit Kurald Thyrllan,' Osric said.

'What kind of demon is it?' L'oric asked, staring down at the creature.

'I have no idea,' Osric replied. 'Reach out to it. See if it is amenable.'

'Assuming it has any mind at all,' L'oric muttered, crouching down.

Can you hear me? Can you comprehend?

The four eyes blinked up at him. And it replied. 'Sorcerer. Declaration. Recognition. We were told you'd come, but so soon? Rhetorical.'

I am not from this place, L'oric explained. You are dying, I think.

'Is that what this is? Bemused.'

I would offer you an alternative. Have you a name?


No, I will save you none the less. We will return to my world ... to a warmer place.

'Warmth? Thinking. Ah, air that does not steal my strength. Considering. Save me, Sorcerer, and then we will talk more of this alliance.'
L’oric nodded. ‘Very well.’

‘It’s done?’ Osric asked.

His son straightened. ‘No, but it comes with us.’

‘Without the binding, you will have no control over the demon, L’oric. It could well turn on you as soon as you return to Raraku. Best we resume our search, find a creature more tractable.’

‘No. I will risk this one.’

Osric shrugged. ‘As you like, then. We must proceed now to the lake, where you first appeared.’

L’oric watched his father walk away, then halt and veer once more into his dragon form.

‘Eleint!’ the demon cried in the High Mage’s mind. ‘Wonder. You have an Eleint for a companion!’

My father.

‘Your father! Excited delight! Eager. I am named Greyfrog, born of Mirepool’s Clutch in the Twentieth Season of Darkness. Proudly. I have fathered thirty-one clutches of my own—’

And how, Greyfrog, did you come here?

’Sudden moroseness. One hop too far.’

The dragon approached.

Greyfrog dragged itself onto the warm sand. L’oric turned about, but the gate was already closing. So, he had found his father, and the parting had been as blunt as the meeting. Not precisely indifference. More like … distraction. Osric’s interest was with Osric. His own pursuits.

Only now did a thousand more questions rise in L’oric’s thoughts, questions he should have asked.

‘Regret?’

L’oric glanced down at the demon. ‘Recovering, Greyfrog? I am named L’oric. Shall we now discuss our partnership?’


‘As you wish. As for raw meat … I will find you something that is appropriate. There are rules, regarding what you can and cannot kill.’

‘Explain them to me. Cautious. Not wishing to offend. But hungry.’

‘I shall...’

Vengeance had been her lifeblood for so long, and now, within days, she would come face to face with her sister, to play out the game’s end run. A vicious game, but a game none the less. Sha’ik knew that virtually every conceivable advantage lay with her. Tavore’s legions were green, the territory was Sha’ik’s own, her Army of the Apocalypse were veterans of the rebellion and numerically superior. The Whirlwind Goddess drew power from an Elder Warren – she now realized – perhaps not pure but either immune or resistant to the effects of otataral. Tavore’s mages amounted to two Wickan warlocks both broken of spirit, whilst Sha’ik’s cadre included four High Mages and a score of shamans, witches and sorcerers, including Fayelle and Henaras. In all, defeat seemed impossible.

And yet Sha’ik was terrified.

She sat alone in the central chamber of the vast, multi-roomed tent that was her palace. The braziers near the
thronewerewaslowlydimming,shadowsencroachingonallsides.Shewantedtorun.Thegamewastoohard,too
fraught.Itsfinalpromisewascold—colderthanshehadeverimagined.Vengeanceisausedemotion,yetI
haveletitconsume me. I gave it like a gift to the goddess.

Fragments of clarity—they were diminishing, withering like flowers in winter—as the hold of the Whirlwind
Goddess tightened on her soul. My sister traded me for the faith of the Empress, to convince Laseen of Tavore’s
own loyalty. All to serve her ambition. And her reward was the position of Adjunct. Such are the facts, the cold
truths. And I, in turn, have traded my freedom for the power of the Whirlwind Goddess, so that I can deliver
just vengeance against my sister.

Are we, then, so different?

Fragments of clarity, but they led nowhere. She could ask questions, yet seemed incapable of seeking
answers. She could make statements, but they seemed strangely hollow, devoid of significance. She was being
kept from thinking.

Why?

Another question she knew she would not answer, would not, even, make an effort to answer. The goddess
doesn’t want me to think. Well, at least that was a recognition of sorts.

She sensed the approach of someone, and issued a silent command to her guards—Mathok’s chosen warriors—
to permit the visitor to pass within. The curtains covering the entrance to the chamber parted.

‘A late night for an ancient one such as you, Bidithal,’ Sha’ik said. ‘You should be resting, in preparation for
the battle.’

‘There are many battles, Chosen One, and some have already begun.’ He leaned heavily on his staff, looking
around with a slight smile on his wrinkled lips. ‘The coals are fading,’ he murmured.

‘I would have thought the growing shadows would please you.’

His smile tightened, then he shrugged. ‘They are not mine, Chosen One.’

‘Aren’t they?’

The smile grew more strained still. ‘I was never a priest of Meanas.’

‘No, here it was Rashan, ghost-child of Kurald Galain ... yet the warren it claimed was, none the less,
Shadow. We are both well aware that the distinctions diminish the closer one delves into the mysteries of the
most ancient triumvirate. Shadow, after all, was born of the clash between Light and Dark. And Meanas is, in
essence, drawn from the warrens of Thyrllan and Galain, Thyr and Rashan. It is, if you will, a hybrid
discipline.’

‘Most sorcerous arts available to mortal humans are, Chosen One. I do not, I am afraid, comprehend the point
you wish to make.’

She shrugged. ‘Only that you send your shadow servants here to spy on me, Bidithal. What is it you hope to
witness? I am as you see me.’

He spread his hands, staff resting against one shoulder. ‘Perhaps not spies, then, but protectors.’

‘And I am in such dire need of protection, Bidithal? Are your fears ... specific? Is this what you have come to
tell me?’

‘I am close to discovering the precise nature of that threat, Chosen One. Soon, I will be able to deliver my
revelations. My present concerns, however, are with High Mage L’oric and, perhaps, Ghost Hands.’

‘Surely you do not suspect either of them of being part of the conspiracy.’

‘No, but I am coming to believe that other forces are at play here. We are at the heart of a convergence,
Chosen One, and not just between us and the Malazans.'

'Indeed.'

'Ghost Hands is not as he once was. He is a priest once more.'

Sha'ik's brows lifted in frank disbelief. 'Fener is gone, Bidithal—'

'Not Fener. But consider this. The god of war has been dethroned. And another has risen in its place, as necessity demanded. The Tiger of Summer, who was once the First Hero, Treach. A Soletaken of the First Empire ... now a god. His need will be great, Chosen One, for mortal champions and avatars, to aid him in establishing the role he would assume. A Mortal Sword, a Shield Anvil, a Destriant – all of the ancient titles ... and the powers the god invests in them.'

'Ghost Hands would never accept a god other than Fener,' Sha'ik asserted. 'Nor, I imagine, would a god be foolish enough to embrace him in turn. You know little of his past, Bidithal. He is not a pious man. He has committed ... crimes—'

'None the less, Chosen One. The Tiger of Summer has made his choice.'

'As what?'

Bidithal shrugged. 'What else could he be but Destriant.'

'What proof have you of this extraordinary transformation?'

'He hides well... but not well enough, Chosen One.'

Sha'ik was silent for a long moment, then she replied with a shrug of her own. 'Destriant to the new god of war. Why wouldn't he be here? We are at war, after all. I will think of this ... development, Bidithal. At the moment, however, I cannot – assuming it is true – see its relevance.'

'Perhaps, Chosen One, the most significant relevance is also the simplest one: Ghost Hands is not the broken, useless man he once was. And, given his ... ambivalence to our cause, he presents us with a potential threat—'

'I think not,' Sha'ik said. 'But, as I said, I will give it some thought. Now, your vast web of suspicions has snared L'oric as well? Why?'

'He has been more elusive of late than is usual, Chosen One. His efforts to disguise his comings and goings have become somewhat extreme.'

'Perhaps he grows weary of your incessant spying, Bidithal.'

'Perhaps, though I am certain he remains unaware that the one ever seeking to maintain an eye on his activities is indeed me. Febryl and the Napan have their own spies, after all. I am not alone in my interests. They fear L'oric, for he has rebuffed their every approach—'

'It pleases me to hear that, Bidithal. Call off your shadows, regarding L'oric. And that is a command. You better serve the Whirlwind's interests in concentrating on Febryl, Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe.'

He bowed slightly. 'Very well, Chosen One.'

Sha'ik studied the old man. 'Be careful, Bidithal.'

She saw him pale slightly, then he nodded. 'I am ever that, Chosen One.'

A slight wave of her hand dismissed him.

Bidithal bowed once more, then, gripping his walking stick, he hobbled from the chamber. Out through the intervening chambers, past a dozen of Mathok's silent desert warriors, then out, finally into the cool night air.

Call off my shadows, Chosen One? Command or no, I am not so foolish as to do that.
Shadows gathered around him as he strode down the narrow alleyways between tents and huts. Do you remember the dark?

Bidithal smiled to himself. Soon, this fragment of shattered warren would become a realm unto itself. And the Whirlwind Goddess would see the need for a priesthood, a structure of power in the mortal world. And in such an organization, there would be no place for Sha’ik, except perhaps a minor shrine honouring her memory.

For now, of course, the Malazan Empire must be dealt with, summarily, and for that Sha’ik, as a vessel of the Whirlwind’s power, would be needed. This particular path of shadows was narrow indeed. Bidithal suspected that Febryl’s alliance with the Napan and Kamist Reloe was but temporary. The mad old bastard had no love for Malazans. Probably, his plans held a hidden, final betrayal, one concluding in the mutual annihilation of every interest but his own.

And I cannot pierce to the truth of that, a failure on my part that forces my hand. I must be . . . pre-emptive. I must side with Sha’ik, for it will be her hand that crushes the conspirators.

A hiss of spectral voices and Bidithal halted, startled from his dark musings.

To find Febryl standing before him.

'Was your audience with the Chosen One fruitful, Bidithal?'

'As always, Febryl,' Bidithal smiled, wondering at how the ancient High Mage managed to get so close before being detected by his secret guardians. 'What do you wish of me? It's late.'

'The time has come,' Febryl said in a low, rasping tone. 'You must choose. Join us, or stand aside.'

Bidithal raised his brows. 'Is there not a third option?'

'If you mean you would fight us, the answer is, regrettably, no. I suggest, however, we withhold on that discussion for the moment. Instead, hear our reward for you – granted whether you join us or simply remove yourself from our path.'

'Reward? I am listening, Febryl.'

'She will be gone, as will the Malazan Empire. Seven Cities will be free as it once was. Yet the Whirlwind Warren will remain, returned to the Dryjhna – to the cult of the Apocalypse which is and always has been at the heart of the rebellion. Such a cult needs a master, a High Priest, ensconced in a vast, rich temple, duly honoured by all. How would you shape such a cult?' Febryl smiled. 'It seems you have already begun, Bidithal. Oh yes, we know all about your ... special children. Imagine, then, all of Seven Cities at your disposal. All of Seven Cities, honoured to deliver to you their unwanted daughters.'

Bidithal licked his lips, eyes shifting away. 'I must think on this—'

'There's no more time for that. Join us, or stand aside.'

'When do you begin?'

'Why, Bidithal, we already have. The Adjunct and her legions are but days away. We have already moved our agents, they are all in place, ready to complete their appointed tasks. The time for indecision is past. Decide. Now.'

'Very well. Your path is clear, Febryl. I accept your offer. But my cult must remain my own, to shape as I choose. No interference—'

'None. That is a promise—'

'Whose?'

'Mine.'
And what of Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe?’

Febryl's smile broadened. 'What worth their vows, Bidithal? The Empress had Korbolo Dom's once. Sha'ik did as well...'

As she had yours, too, Febryl. 'Then we – you and I – understand each other.'

'We do indeed.'

Bidithal watched the High Mage stride away. He knew my shadow spirits surrounded me, yet was dismissive of them. There was no third option. Had I voiced defiance, I would now be dead. I know it. I can feel Hood's cold breath, here in this alley. My powers are... compromised. How? He needed to discover the source of Febryl's confidence. Before he could do anything, before he could make a single move. And which move will that be? Febryl's offer... appeals.

Yet Febryl had promised no interference, even as he had revealed an arrogant indifference to the power Bidithal had already fashioned. An indifference that bespoke of intimate knowledge. You do not dismiss what you know nothing of, after all. Not at this stage.

Bidithal resumed his journey back to his temple. He felt... vulnerable. An unfamiliar sensation, and it brought a tremble to his limbs.

A faint stinging bite, then numbness spreading out from her lungs. Scillara leaned her head back, reluctant to exhale, believing for the briefest of moments that her need for air had vanished. Then she exploded into coughing.

'Be quiet,' Korbolo Dom snarled, rolling a stoppered bottle across the blankets towards her. 'Drink, woman. Then open those screens – I can barely see with all the water wrung from my eyes.'

She listened to his boots on the rushes, moving off into one of the back chambers. The coughing was past. Her chest felt full of thick, clinging liquid. Her head was swimming, and she struggled to recall what had happened a few moments earlier. Febryl had arrived. Excited, she believed. Something about her master, Bidithal. The culmination of a long-awaited triumph. They had both gone to the inner rooms.

There had been a time, once, she was fairly certain, when her thoughts had been clear – though, she suspected, most of them had been unpleasant ones. And so there was little reason to miss those days. Except for the clarity itself – its acuity that made recollection effortless. She so wanted to serve her master, and serve him well. With distinction, sufficient to earn her new responsibilities, to assume new roles – ones that did not, perhaps, involve surrendering her body to men. One day, Bidithal would not be able to attend to all the new girls as he did now – there would be too many, even for him. She was certain she could manage the scarring, the cutting away of pleasure.

They would not appreciate the freeing, of course. Not at first. But she could help them in that. Kind words and plenty of durhang to blunt the physical pain... and the outrage.

Had she felt outrage? Where had that word come from, to arrive so sudden and unexpected in her thoughts?

She sat up, stumbled away from the cushions to the heavy screens blocking the outside night air. She was naked, but unmindful of the cold. A slight discomfort in the heaviness of her unbound breasts. She had twice been pregnant, but Bidithal had taken care of that, giving her bitter teas that broke the seed's roots and flushed it from her body. There had been that same heaviness at those times, and she wondered if yet another of the Napan's seeds had taken within her.

Scillara fumbled at the ties until one of the screens folded down, and she looked out onto the dark street.

The guards were both visible, near the entrance which was situated a few paces to her left. They glanced over, faces hidden by helms and the hoods of their telabas. And, it seemed, continued staring, though offering no greeting, no comment.
There was a strange dullness to the night air, as if the smoke filling the tent chamber had settled a permanent layer over her eyes, obscuring all that she looked at. She stood for a moment longer, weaving, then walked over to the entrance.

Febryl had left the flaps untied. She pushed them aside and stepped out between the two guards.

‘Had his fill of you this night, Scillara?’ one asked.

‘I want to walk. It’s hard to breathe. I think I’m drowning.’

‘Drowning in the desert, aye,’ the other grunted, then laughed.

She staggered past, choosing a direction at random.

_February_. _Filled up. Drowning in the desert._

‘Not this night, lass.’

She stumbled as she turned about, threw both arms out for balance, and squinted at the guard who had followed. ‘What?’

‘Febryl has wearied of your spying. He wants Bidithal blind and deaf in this camp. It grieves me, Scillara. It does. Truly.’ He took her by the arm, gauntleted fingers closing tight. ‘It’s a mercy, I think, and I will make it as painless as possible. For I liked you, once. Always smiling, you were, though of course that was mostly the durhang.’ He was leading her away as he spoke, down from the main avenue into the rubbish-cluttered aisles between tent-walls. ‘I’m tempted to take my pleasure of you first. Better a son of the desert than a bow-legged Napan for your last memory of love, yes?’

‘You mean to kill me?’ She was having trouble with the thought, with thinking at all.

‘I’m afraid I must, lass. I cannot defy my master, especially in this. Still, you should be relieved that it is me and not some stranger. For I will not be cruel, as I have said. Here, into these ruins, Scillara – the floor has been swept clean – not the first time it’s seen use, but if all signs are removed immediately there is no evidence to be found, is there? There’s an old well in the garden for the bodies.’

‘You mean to throw me down the well?’

‘Not you, just your body. Your soul will be through Hood’s gate by then, lass. I will make certain of that. Now, lie yourself down, here, on my cloak. I have looked upon your lovely body unable to touch for long enough. I have dreamt of kissing those lips, too.’

She was lying on the cloak, staring up at dim, blurry stars, as the guard unhitched his sword-belt then began removing his armour. She saw him draw a knife, the blade gleaming black, and set it to one side on the flagstoned floor.

Then his hands were pushing her thighs apart.

_There is no pleasure. It is gone. He is a handsome man. A woman’s husband. He prefers pleasure before business, as I once did. I think. But now, I know nothing of pleasure._

Leaving naught but business.

The cloak was bunching beneath her as his grunts filled her ears. She calmly reached out to one side and closed her hand around the hilt of the knife. Raised it, the other hand joining it over and above the guard.

Then she drove the knife down into his lower back, the blade’s edge gouging between two vertebrae, severing the cord, the point continuing on in a stuttering motion as it pierced membranes and tore deep into the guard’s middle and lower intestines.

He spilled into her at the moment of death, his shudders becoming twitches, the breath hissing from a suddenly slack mouth as his forehead struck the stone floor beside her right ear.
She left the knife buried halfway to its hilt – as deep as her strength had taken it – in his back, and pushed at his limp body until it rolled to one side.

*A desert woman for your last memory of love.*

Scillara sat up, wanting to cough but swallowing until the urge passed. Heavy, and heavier still.

*I am a vessel ever filled, yet there's always room for more. More durhang. More men and their seeds. My master found my place of pleasure and removed it. Ever filled, yet never filled up. There is no base to this vessel. This is what he has done.*

*To all of us.*

She tottered upright. Stared down at the guard's corpse, at the wet stains spreading out beneath him.

A sound behind her. Scillara turned.

'You murdering bitch.'

She frowned at the second guard as he advanced, drawing a dagger.

'The fool wanted you alone for a time. This is what he gets for ignoring Febryl's commands – I warned him —'

She was staring at the hand gripping the dagger, so was caught unawares as the other hand flashed, knuckles cracking hard against her jaw.

Her eyes blinked open to jostling, sickening motion. She was being dragged through rubbish by one arm. From somewhere ahead flowed the stench of the latrine trench, thick as fog, a breath of warm, poisoned air. Her lips were broken and her mouth tasted of blood. The shoulder of the arm the guard gripped was throbbing.

The man was muttering,'... pretty thing indeed. Hardly. When she's drowning in filth. The fool, and now he's dead. It was a simple task, after all. There's no shortage of whores in this damned camp. What – who—'

He had stopped.

Head lolling, Scillara caught a blurred glimpse of a squat figure emerging from darkness.

The guard released her wrist and her arm fell with a thump onto damp, foul mud. She saw him reaching for his sword.

Then his head snapped up with a sound of cracked teeth, followed by a hot spray that spattered across Scillara's thighs. Blood.

She thought she saw a strange emerald glow trailing from one hand of the guard's killer – a hand taloned like a huge cat's.

The figure stepped over the crumpled form of the guard, who had ceased moving, and slowly crouched down beside Scillara.

'I've been looking for you,' the man growled. 'Or so I've just realized. Extraordinary, how single lives just fold into the whole mess, over and over again, all caught up in the greater swirl. Spinning round and round, and ever downward, it seems. Ever downward. Fools, all of us, to think we can swim clear of that current.'

The shadows were strange on him. As if he stood beneath palms and tall grasses – but no, there was only the night sky above the squat, broad-shouldered man. He was tattooed, she realized, in the barbs of a tiger.

'Plenty of killing going on lately,' he muttered, staring down at her with amber eyes. 'All those loose threads being knotted, I expect.'

She watched him reach down with that glowing, taloned hand. It settled, palm-downward, warm between her
breasts. The tips of the claws pricked her skin and a tremble ran through her.

That spread, coursing hot through her veins. That heat grew suddenly fierce, along her throat, in her lungs, between her legs.

The man grunted. 'I thought it was consumption, that rattling breath. But no, it's just too much durhang. As for the rest, well, it's an odd thing about pleasure. Something Bidithal would have you never know. Its enemy is not pain. No, pain is simply the path taken to indifference. And indifference destroys the soul. Of course, Bidithal likes destroyed souls – to mirror his own.'

If he continued speaking beyond that, she did not hear, as sensations long lost flooded into her, only slightly blunted by the lingering, satisfying haze of the durhang. She felt badly used between her legs, but knew that feeling would pass.

'Outrage.'

He was gathering her into his arms, but paused. 'You spoke?'

_Outrage. Yes. That._ 'Where are you taking me?' The question came out between coughs, and she pushed his arms aside to bend over and spit out phlegm while he answered.

'To my temple. Fear not, it's safe. Neither Febryl nor Bidithal will find you there. You've been force-healed, lass, and will need to sleep.'

'What do you want with me?'

'I'm not sure yet. I think I will need your help, and soon. But the choice is yours. Nor will you have to surrender ... anything you don't want to. And, if you choose to simply walk away, that is fine as well. I will give you money and supplies – and maybe even find you a horse. We can discuss that tomorrow. What is your name?'

He reached down once more and lifted her effortlessly.

'Scillara.'

'I am Heboric, Destriant to Treach, the Tiger of Summer and the God of War.'

She stared up at him as he began carrying her along the path. 'I am afraid I am going to disappoint you, Heboric. I think I have had my fill of priests.'

She felt his shrug, then he smiled wearily down at her. 'That's all right. Me too.'

Felisin awoke shortly after L'oric returned with a freshly slaughtered lamb for his demon familiar, Greyfrog. Probably, the High Mage reflected when she first stirred beneath the tarpaulin, she had been roused to wakefulness by the sound of crunching bones.

The demon's appetite was voracious, and L'oric admired its singlemindedness, if not its rather untidy approach to eating.

Felisin emerged, wrapped in her blankets, and walked to L'oric's side. She was silent, her hair in disarray around her young, tanned face, and watched the demon consuming the last of the lamb with loud, violent gulps.

'Greyfrog,' L'oric murmured. 'My new familiar.'

'Your familiar? You are certain it's not the other way round? That thing could eat both of us.'

'Observant. She is right, companion L'oric. Maudlin. I would waddle. Alas. Torpid vulnerability. Distraught. All alone.'

'All right.' L'oric smiled. 'An alliance is a better word for our partnership.'
'There is mud on your boots, and snagged pieces of reed and grass.'
'I have travelled this night, Felisin.'
'Seeking allies?'
'Not intentionally. No, my search was for answers.'
'And did you find any?'

He hesitated, then sighed. 'Some. Fewer than I would have hoped. But I return knowing one thing for certain. And that is, you must leave. As soon as possible.'

Her glance was searching. 'And what of you?'
'I will follow, as soon as I can.'
'I'm to go alone?'
'No. You will have Greyfrog with you. And one other... I hope.'

She nodded. 'I am ready. I have had enough of this place. I no longer dream of vengeance against Bidithal. I just want to be gone. Is that cowardly of me?'

L'oric slowly shook his head. 'Bidithal will be taken care of, lass, in a manner befitting his crimes.'

'If you are intending to murder him, then I would advise against sending Greyfrog with me. Bidithal is powerful – perhaps more so than you realize. I can travel alone – no-one will be hunting me, after all.'

'No. Much as I would like to kill Bidithal myself, it will not be by my hand.'

'There is something ominous in what you are saying, or, perhaps, in what you're not saying, L'oric'

'There will be a convergence, Felisin. With some ... unexpected guests. And I do not think anyone here will survive their company for long. There will be ... vast slaughter.'

'Then why are you staying?'
'To witness, lass. For as long as I can.'

'Why?'

He grimaced. 'As I said, I am still seeking answers.'

'And are they important enough to risk your own life?'

'They are. And now, I will leave you here in Greyfrog's trust for a time. You are safe, and when I return it will be with the necessary supplies and mounts.'

She glanced over at the scaled, ape-like creature with its four eyes. 'Safe, you said. At least until it gets hungry.'

'Appreciative. I will protect this one. But do not be gone too long. Ha ha.'

Dawn was breathing light into the eastern sky as Heboric stepped outside to await his visitor. The Destriant remained in as much darkness as he could manage, not to hide from L'oric – whom he now watched stride into view and approach – but against any other watchers. They might well discern a figure, crouched there in the tent's doorway, but little more than that. He had drawn a heavy cloak about himself, hood drawn up over his head, and he kept his hands beneath the folds.

L'oric's steps slowed as he drew near. There would be no hiding the truth from this man, and Heboric smiled
as he saw the High Mage's eyes widen.

'Aye,' Heboric muttered, 'I was reluctant. But it is done, and I have made peace with that.'

'And what is Treach's interest here?' L'oric asked after a long, uneasy moment.

'There will be a battle,' Heboric replied, shrugging. 'Beyond that... well, I'm not sure. We'll see, I expect.'

L'oric looked weary. 'I was hoping to convince you to leave. To take Felisin away from here.'

'When?'

'Tonight.'

'Move her camp a league, out beyond the northeast edge of the oasis. Three saddled horses, three more pack horses. Food and water sufficient for three, to take us as far as G'danisban.'

'Three?'

Heboric smiled. 'You are not aware of it, but there is a certain ... poetry to there being three of us.'

'Very well. And how long should she expect to wait?'

'As long as she deems acceptable, L'oric. Like you, I intend to remain here for a few days yet.'

His eyes grew veiled. 'The convergence.'

Heboric nodded.

L'oric sighed. 'We are fools, you and I.'

'Probably.'

'I had once hoped, Ghost Hands, for an alliance between us.'

'It exists, more or less, L'oric. Sufficient to ensure Felisin's safety. Not that we have managed well in that responsibility thus far. I could have helped,' Heboric growled.

'I am surprised, if you know what Bidithal did to her, that you have not sought vengeance.'

'Vengeance? What is the point in that? No, L'oric, I have a better answer to Bidithal's butchery. Leave Bidithal to his fate ...'

The High Mage started, then smiled. 'Odd, only a short time ago I voiced similar words to Felisin.'

Heboric watched the man walk away. After a moment, the Destriant turned and re-entered his temple.

'There is something ... inexorable about them ...'

They were in the path of the distant legions, seeing the glimmer of iron wavering like molten metal beneath a pillar of dust that, from this angle, seemed to rise straight up, spreading out in a hazy stain in the high desert winds. At Leoman's words, Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas shivered. Dust was sifted down the folds of his ragged telaba; the air this close to the Whirlwind Wall was thick with suspended sand, filling his mouth with grit.

Leoman twisted in his saddle to study his warriors.

Anchoring his splintered lance into the stirrup cup, Corabb settled back in the saddle. He was exhausted. Virtually every night, they had attempted raids, and even when his own company had not been directly involved in the fighting there had been retreats to cover, counterattacks to blunt, then flight. Always flight. Had Sha'lik given Leoman five thousand warriors, the Adjunct and her army would be the ones retreating. All the way back to Aren, mauled and limping.
Leoman had done what he could with what he had, however, and they had purchased – with blood – a handful of precious days. Moreover, they had gauged the Adjunct’s tactics, and the mettle of the soldiers. More than once, concerted pressure on the regular infantry had buckled them, and had Leoman the numbers, he could have pressed home and routed them. Instead, Gall’s Burned Tears would arrive, or Wickans, or those damned marines, and the desert warriors would be the ones fleeing. Out into the night, pursued by horse warriors as skilled and tenacious as Leoman’s own.

Seven hundred or so remained – they’d had to leave so many wounded behind, found and butchered by the Khundryl Burned Tears, with various body parts collected as trophies.

Leoman faced forward on his saddle once more. ‘We are done.’

Corabb nodded. The Malazan army would reach the Whirlwind Wall by dusk. ‘Perhaps her otataral will fail,’ he offered. ‘Perhaps the goddess will destroy them all this very night.’

The lines bracketing Leoman’s blue eyes deepened as he narrowed his gaze on the advancing legions. ‘I think not. There is nothing pure in the Whirlwind’s sorcery, Corabb. No, there will be a battle, at the very edge of the oasis. Korbolo Dom will command the Army of the Apocalypse. And you and I, and likely Mathok, shall find ourselves a suitable vantage point... to watch.’

Corabb leaned to one side and spat.

‘Our war is done,’ Leoman finished, collecting his reins.

‘Korbolo Dom will need us,’ Corabb asserted.

‘If he does, then we have lost.’

They urged their weary horses into motion, and rode through the Whirlwind Wall.

He could ride at a canter for half a day, dropping the Jhag horse into a head-dipping, loping gait for the span of a bell, then resume the canter until dusk. Havok was a beast unlike any other he had known, including his namesake. He had ridden close enough to the north side of Ugarat to see watchers on the wall, and indeed they had sent out a score of horse warriors to contest his crossing the broad stone bridge spanning the river – riders who should have reached it long before he did.

But Havok had understood what was needed, and canter stretched out into gallop, neck reaching forward, and they arrived fifty strides ahead of the pursuing warriors. Foot traffic on the bridge scattered from their path, and its span was wide enough to permit easy passage around the carts and wagons. Broad as the Ugarat River was, they reached the other side within a dozen heartbeats, the thunder of Havok’s hoofs changing in timbre from stone to hard-packed earth as they rode out into the Ugarat Odhan.

Distance seemed to lose relevance to Karsa Orlong. Havok carried him effortlessly. There was no need for a saddle, and the single rein looped around the stallion’s neck was all he needed to guide the beast. Nor did the Teblor hobble the horse for the night, instead leaving him free to graze on the vast sweeps of grass stretching out on all sides.

The northern part of the Ugarat Odhan had narrowed between the inward curl of the two major rivers – the Ugarat and the other Karsa recalled as being named either Mersin or Thalas. A spine of hills had run north–south, dividing the two rivers, their summits and slopes hard-packed by the seasonal migration of bhederin over thousands of years. Those herds were gone, though their bones remained where predators and hunters had felled them, and the land was used now as occasional pasture, sparsely populated and that only in the wet season.

In the week it took to cross those hills, Karsa saw naught but signs of shepherd camps and boundary cairns, and the only grazing creatures were antelope and a species of large deer that fed only at night, spending days bedded down in low areas thick with tall, yellow grasses. Easily flushed then run down to provide Karsa with an occasional feast.
The Mersin River was shallow, almost dried up this late in the dry season. Fording it, he had then ridden northeast, coming along the trails skirting the south flanks of the Thalas Mountains, then eastward, to the city of Lato Revae, on the very edge of the Holy Desert.

He traversed the road south of the city's wall at night, avoiding all contact, and reached the pass that led into Raraku at dawn the following day.

A pervasive urgency was driving him on. He was unable to explain the desire in his own mind, yet did not question it. He had been gone a long time, and though he did not believe the battle in Raraku had occurred, he sensed it was imminent.

And Karsa wanted to be there. Not to kill Malazans, but to guard Leomar's back. But there was a darker truth, he well knew. The battle would be a day of chaos, and Karsa Orlong meant to add to it. Shaik or no Shaik, there are those in her camp who deserve only death. And I shall deliver it. He did not bother conjuring a list of reasons, of insults delivered, contempt unveiled, crimes committed. He had been indifferent for long enough, indifferent to so many things. He had reined in his spirit's greatest strengths, among them his need to make judgements, and act decisively upon them in true Teblor fashion.

I have tolerated the deceitful and the malicious for long enough. My sword shall now answer them.

The Toblakai warrior was even less interested in creating a list of names, since names invited vows, and he had had enough of vows. No, he would kill as the mood took him.

He looked forward to his homecoming.

Provided he arrived in time.

Descending the slopes leading down into the Holy Desert, he was relieved to see, far to the north and east, the red crest of fury that was the Whirlwind Wall. Only days away, now.

He smiled at that distant anger, for he understood it. Constrained – chained – for so long, the goddess would soon unleash her wrath. He sensed her hunger, as palpable as that of the twin souls within his sword. The blood of deer was too thin.

He reined in Havok at an old camp near the edge of a salt flat. The slopes behind him would provide the last forage and water for the horse until just this side of the Whirlwind Wall, so he would spend time here bundling grasses for the journey, as well as refilling the waterskins from the spring ten paces from the camp.

He built a fire using the last of the bhederin dung from the Jhag Odhan – something he did only rarely – and, following a meal, opened the pack containing the ruined T'lan Imass and dragged the remnants out for the first time.

'You are impatient to get rid of me?' Siballe asked in a dry, rasping voice.

He grunted, staring down at the creature. 'We've travelled far, Unfound. It has been a long time since I last looked upon you.'

'Then why do you choose to look upon me now, Karsa Orlong?'

'I do not know. I regret it already.'

'I have seen the sun's light through the weave of the fabric. Preferable to darkness.'

'Why should what you prefer interest me?'

'Because, Karsa Orlong, we are within the same House. The House of Chains. Our master—'

'I have no master,' the Teblor growled.

'As he would have it,' Siballe replied. 'The Crippled God does not expect you to kneel. He issues no commands to his Mortal Sword, his Knight of Chains – for that is what you are, the role for which you have
been shaped from the very beginning.'

'I am not in this House of Chains, T'lan Imass. Nor will I accept another false god.'

'He is not false, Karsa Orlong.'

'As false as you,' the warrior said, baring his teeth. 'Let him rise before me and my sword will speak for me. You say I have been shaped. Then there is much to which he must give answer.'

'The gods chained him.'

'What do you mean?'

'They chained him, Karsa Orlong, to dead ground. He is broken. In eternal pain. He has been twisted by captivity and now knows only suffering.'

'Then I shall break his chains—'

'I am pleased—'

'And then kill him.'

Karsa grabbed the shattered T'lan Imass by its lone arm and stuffed it back into the pack. Then rose.

Great tasks lay ahead. The notion was satisfying.

A House is just another prison. And I have had enough of prisons. Raise walls around me, and I will knock them down.

Doubt my words, Crippled God, to your regret...
Otataral, I believe, was born of sorcery. If we hold that magic feeds on hidden energies, then it follows that there are limits to those energies. Sufficient unveiling of power that subsequently cascades out of control could well drain those life-forces dry.

Further, it is said that the Elder warrens resist the deadening effect of otataral, suggesting that the world's levels of energy are profoundly multilayered. One need only contemplate the life energy of corporeal flesh, compared to the undeniable energy within an inanimate object, such as rock. Careless examination might suggest that the former is alive, whilst the latter is not. In this manner, perhaps otataral is not quite as negating as it would first appear ...

Musings on the Physical Properties of the World
Tryssan of Mott

The 9th, 11th and 12th squads, medium infantry, had been attached to the marines of the 9th Company. There were rumours, as well, that the 1st, 2nd and 3rd squads – the heavy infantry with their oversize muscles and sloping brows – would soon join them to form a discrete fighting unit.

None from the newly arrived squads were entirely strangers to Strings. He had made a point of learning names and memorising faces throughout the 9th Company.

Footsore and weary from interrupted nights, the sergeant and his squad were sprawled around a cookfire, lulled by the incessant roar of the Whirlwind Wall a thousand paces north of the encamped army. Even rage could numb, it seemed.

Sergeant Balm of the 9th squad strode over after directing his soldiers into their new camp. Tall and wide-shouldered, the Dal Honese had impressed Strings with his cool indifference to pressure. Balm's squad had already done its share of fighting, and the names of Corporal Deadsmell, Throatslitter, Widdershins, Galt and Lobe were already among the tales travelling through the legion. The same was true of some from the other two squads. Moak, Burnt and Stacker. Thom Tissy, Tulip, Ramp and Able.

The heavy infantry were yet to wet their swords, but Strings had been impressed with their discipline – easier with slope-brows, of course. Tell 'em to stand firm and they take root down to the bedrock. A few of them were wandering in, he noted. Flashwit, Bowl, Shortnose and Uru Hela. Mean-looking one and all.

Sergeant Balm squatted down. 'You're the one named Strings, aren't you? Heard it's not your real name.'

Strings raised his brows. 'And "Balm" is?'

The dark-skinned young man frowned, his heavy eyebrows meeting as he did so. 'Why, yes, it is.'

Strings glanced over at another soldier from the 9th squad, a man standing nearby looking as if he wanted to kill something. 'And what about him? What's his name again, Throatslitter? Did his ma decide on that for her little one, do you think?'

'Can't say,' Balm replied. 'Give a toddler a knife and who knows what'll happen.'

Strings studied the man for a moment, then grunted. 'You wanted to see me about something?'

Balm shrugged. 'Not really. Sort of. What do you think of the captain's new units? Seems a little late to make changes like this ...'

'It's not that new, actually. Greymane's legions are sometimes set up in the same manner. In any case, our new Fist has approved it.'
'Keneb. Not sure about him.'

'And you are about our fresh-faced captain?'

'Aye, I am. He's noble-born, is Ranal. Enough said.'

'Meaning?'

Balm looked away, started tracking a distant bird in flight. 'Oh, only that he's likely to get us all killed.'

Ah. 'Speak louder, not everyone heard that opinion.'

'Don't need to, Strings. They share it.'

'Sharing it ain't the same as saying it.'

Gesler, Borduke and the sergeants from the 11th and 12th squads came over and muttered introductions went round the group. Moak, of the 11th, was Falari, copper-haired and bearded like Strings. He'd taken a lance down his back, from shoulder to tailbone, and, despite the healer's efforts, was clearly struggling with badly knitted muscles. The 12th's sergeant, Thorn Tissy, was squat, with a face that might be handsome to a female toad, his cheeks pocked and the backs of his hands covered in warts. He was, the others saw when he removed his helm, virtually hairless.

Moak squinted at Strings for a long moment, as if seeking to conjure recognition, then he drew out a fish spine from his belt pouch and began picking his teeth. 'Anybody else hear about that killer soldier? Heavy infantry, not sure what company, not even sure what legion. Named Neffarias Bredd. I heard he killed eighteen raiders all in one night.'

Strings lifted his gaze to meet Gesler's, but neither man's expression changed.

'I heard it was eighteen one night, thirteen the next,' Thorn Tissy said. 'We'll have to ask the slope-brows when they show.'

'Well,' Strings pointed out, 'there's one over there.' He raised his voice. 'Flashwit! Come join us for a moment, if you please.'

The ground seemed to tremble with the woman's approach. She was Napan and Strings wondered if she knew she was female. The muscles of her arms were larger than his thighs. She had cut all her hair off, her round face devoid of ornament barring a bronze nose-ring. Yet her eyes were startlingly beautiful, emerald green.

'Have you heard of another heavy, Flashwit? Neffarias Bredd?'

Those extraordinary eyes widened. 'Killed fifty raiders, they say.'

'Which legion?' Moak asked.

She shrugged. 'Don't know.'

'Not ours, though.'

'Not sure.'

'Well,' Moak snapped, 'what do you know?'

'He killed fifty raiders. Can I go now? I have to pee.'

They watched her walk away.

'Standing up, do you think?' Thorn Tissy asked the others in general.

Moak snorted. 'Why don't you go ask her.'
'Ain't that eager to get killed. Why don't you, Moak?'

'Here come the heavy's sergeants,' Balm observed.

Mosel, Sobelone and Tugg could have been siblings. They all hailed from Malaz City, typical of the mixed breed prevalent on the island, and the air of threat around them had less to do with size than attitude. Sobelone was the oldest of the three, a severe-looking woman with streaks of grey in her shoulder-length black hair, her eyes the colour of the sky. Mosel was lean, the epicanthic folds of his eyes marking Kanese blood somewhere in his family line. His hair was braided and cut finger-length in the fashion of Jakatakana pirates. Tugg was the biggest of the three, armed with a short single-bladed axe. The shield strapped on his back was enormous, hardwood, sheathed in tin and rimmed in bronze.

'Which one of you is Strings?' Mosel asked.

'Me. Why?'

The man shrugged. 'Nothing. I was just wondering. And you' – he nodded at Gesler – 'you're that coastal guard, Gesler.'

'So I am. What of it?'

'Nothing.'

There was a moment of awkward silence, then Tugg spoke, his voice thin, emerging from, Strings suspected, a damaged larynx. 'We heard the Adjunct was going to the wall tomorrow. With that sword. Then what? She stabs it? It's a storm of sand, there's nothing to stab. And aren't we already in Raraku? The Holy Desert? It don't feel any different, don't look any different, neither. Why didn't we just wait for 'em? Or let 'em stay and rot here in this damned wasteland? Sha'ik wants an empire of sand, let her have it.'

That fractured voice was excruciating to listen to, and it seemed to Strings that Tugg would never stop. 'Plenty of questions there,' he said as soon as the man paused to draw a wheezing breath. 'This empire of sand can't be left here, Tugg, because it's a rot, and it will spread – we'd lose Seven Cities, and far too much blood was spilled conquering it in the first place to just let it go. And, while we're in Raraku, we're on its very edge. It may be a Holy Desert, but it looks like any other. If it possesses a power, then that lies in what it does to you, after a while. Maybe not what it does, but what it gives. Not an easy thing to explain.' He then shrugged, and coughed.

Gesler cleared his throat. 'The Whirlwind Wall is sorcery, Tugg. The Adjunct's sword is otataral. There will be a clash between the two. If the Adjunct's sword fails, then we all go home ... or back to Aren—'

'Not what I heard,' Moak said, pausing to spit before continuing. 'We swing east then north if we can't breach the wall. To G'danisban, or maybe Ehrlitan. To wait for Dujek Onearm and High Mage Tayschrenn. I've even heard that Greymane might be recalled from the Koreli campaign.'

Strings stared at the man. 'Whose shadow have you been standing in, Moak?'

'Well, it makes sense, don't it?'

Sighing, Strings straightened. 'It's all a waste of breath, soldiers. Sooner or later, we're all marching in wide-eyed stupid.' He strode over to where his squad had set up the tents.

His soldiers, Cuttle included, were gathered around Bottle, who sat cross-legged and seemed to be playing with twigs and sticks.

Strings halted in his tracks, an uncanny chill creeping through him. Gods below, for a moment there I thought I was seeing Quick Ben, with Whiskeyjack's squad crowding round some damned risky ritual... He could hear faint singing from somewhere in the desert beyond the camp, singing that sliced like a sword's edge through the roar of the Whirlwind Wall. The sergeant shook his head and approached.

'What are you doing, Bottle?'
The young man looked up guiltily. 'Uh, not much, Sergeant—'

'Trying a divination,' Cuttle growled, 'and as far as I can tell, getting nowhere.'

Strings slowly crouched down in the circle, opposite Bottle. 'Interesting style there, lad. Sticks and twigs. Where did you pick that up?'

'Grandmother,' he muttered.

'She was a witch?'

'More or less. So was my mother.'

'And your father? What was he?'

'Don't know. There were rumours ...' He ducked his head, clearly uncomfortable.

'Never mind,' Strings said. 'That's earth-aspected, the pattern you have there. You need more than just what anchors the power ...'

All the others were staring at Strings now.

Bottle nodded, then drew out a small doll made of woven grasses, a dark, purple-bladed variety. Strips of black cloth were wrapped about it.

The sergeant's eyes widened. 'Who in Hood's name is that supposed to be?'

'Well, the hand of death, sort of, or so I wanted it to be. You know, where it's going. But it's not co-operating.'

'You drawing from Hood's warren?'

'A little ...'

**Well, there's more to this lad than I'd first thought.** 'Never mind Hood. He may hover, but won't stride forward until after the fact, and even then, he's an indiscriminate bastard. For that figure you've made, try the Patron of Assassins.'

Bottle flinched. 'The Rope? That's too, uh, close ...'

'What do you mean by that?' Smiles demanded. 'You said you knew Meanas. And now it turns out you know Hood, too. And witchery. I'm starting to think you're just making it all up.'

The mage scowled. 'Fine, then. Now stop flapping your lips. I've got to concentrate.'

The squad settled down once more. Strings fixed his gaze on the various sticks and twigs that had been thrust into the sand before Bottle. After a long moment, the mage slowly set the doll down in their midst, pushing the legs into the sand until the doll stood on its own, then carefully withdrew his hand.

The pattern of sticks on one side ran in a row. Strings assumed that was the Whirlwind Wall, since those sticks began waving, like reeds in the wind.

Bottle was mumbling under his breath, with a growing note of urgency, then frustration. After a moment the breath gusted from him and he sat back, eyes blinking open. 'It's no use—'

The sticks had ceased moving.

'Is it safe to reach in there?' Strings asked.

'Aye, Sergeant.'

Strings reached out and picked up the doll. Then he set it back down ... on the other side of the Whirlwind
Bottle stared across at him for a moment, then leaned forward and closed his eyes once more.

The Whirlwind Wall began wavering again. Then a number of the sticks along that row topped.

A gasp from the circle, but Bottle's scowl deepened. 'It's not moving. The doll. I can feel the Rope ... close, way too close. There's power, pouring into or maybe out of that doll, only it's not moving—'

'You're right,' Strings said, a grin slowly spreading across his features. 'It's not moving. But its shadow is ...'

Cuttle grunted. 'Queen take me, he's right. That's a damn strange thing – I've seen enough.' He rose suddenly, looking nervous and shaken. 'Magic's creepy. I'm going to bed.'

The divination ended abruptly. Bottle opened his eyes and looked around at the others, his face glistening with sweat. 'Why didn't he move? Why only his shadow?'

Strings stood. 'Because, lad, he isn't ready yet.'

Smiles glared up at the sergeant. 'So, who is he? The Rope himself?'

'No,' Bottle answered. 'No, I'm sure of that.'

Saying nothing, Strings strode from the circle. \textit{No, not the Rope. Someone even better, as far as I am concerned. As far as every Malazan is concerned, for that matter. He's here. And he's on the other side of the Whirlwind Wall. And I know precisely who he's sharpened his knives for.}

\textit{Now, if only that damned singing would stop ...}

He stood in the darkness, under siege. Voices assaulted him from all sides, pounding at his skull. It wasn't enough that he had been responsible for the death of soldiers; now they would not leave him alone. Now their spirits screamed at him, ghostly hands reaching out through Hood's Gate, fingers clawing through his brain.

Gamet wanted to die. He had been worse than useless. He had been a liability, joined now to the multitude of incompetent commanders who had left a river of blood in their wake, another name in that sullied, degrading history that fuelled the worst fears of the common soldier.

And it had driven him mad. He understood that now. The voices, the paralysing uncertainty, the way he was always cold, shivering, no matter how hot the daytime sun or how highly banked the nightly hearths. And the weakness, stealing through his limbs, thinning the blood in his veins, until it felt as if his heart was pumping muddy water. \textit{I have been broken. I failed the Adjunct with my very first test of mettle.}

Keneb would be all right. Keneb was a good choice as the legion's new Fist. He was not too old, and he had a family – people to fight for, to return to, people that mattered in his life. Those were important things. A necessary pressure, fire for the blood. None of which existed in Gamet's life.

\textit{She has certainly never needed me, has she? The family tore itself apart, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was only a castellan, a glorified house guard. Taking orders. Even when a word from me could have changed Felisin's fate, I just saluted and said, 'Yes, mistress.'}

But he had always known his own weakness of spirit. And there had been no shortage of opportunities in which he could demonstrate his flaws, his failures. No shortage at all, even if she saw those moments as ones displaying loyalty, as disciplined acceptance of orders no matter how horrendous their outcome.

'Loud.'

A new voice. Blinking, he looked around, then down, to see Keneb's adopted whelp, Grub. Half naked, sun-darkened skin smeared with dirt, his hair a wild tangle, his eyes glittering in the starlight.

'Loud.'
'Yes, they are.' The child was feral. It was late, maybe even nearing dawn. What was he doing up? What was he doing out here, beyond the camp's pickets, inviting butchery by a desert raider?

'Not they. It.'

Gamet frowned down at him. 'What are you talking about? What's loud? *All I hear is voices – you can't hear them. Of course you can't.*

'The sandstorm. Roars. Very ... very ... very very very LOUD!'  

_The storm?_ Gamet wiped grit from his eyes and looked around – to find himself not fifty paces from the Whirlwind Wall. And the sound of sand, racing between rocks on the ground, hissing skyward in wild, cavorting loops, the pebbles clattering here and there, the wind itself whirling through sculpted folds in the limestone – the sound was like ... _like voices. Screaming, angry voices._ 'I am not mad.'

'Me neither. I'm happy. Father has a new shiny ring. Around his arm. It's all carved. He's supposed to give more orders, but he gives less. But I'm still happy. It's very shiny. Do you like shiny things? I do, even though they hurt my eyes. Maybe it's _because_ they hurt my eyes. What do you think?'

'I don't think much of anything any more, lad.'

'I think you do too much.'

'Oh, really?'

'Father thinks the same. You think about things there's no point in thinking about. It makes no difference. But I know why you do.'

'You do?'

The lad nodded. 'The same reason I like shiny things. Father's looking for you. I'm going to go tell him I found you.'

Grub ambled away, quickly vanishing in the darkness.

Gamet turned and stared up at the Whirlwind Wall. Its rage buffeted him. The whirling sand tore at his eyes, snatched at his breath. It was hungry, had always been hungry, but something new had arrived, altering its shrill timbre. _What is it?_ An urgency, a tone fraught with ... something.

_What am I doing here?_  

Now he remembered. He had come looking for death. A raider's blade across his throat. Quick and sudden, if not entirely random.

_An end to thinking all those thoughts . . . that so hurt my eyes._

The growing thunder of horse hoofs roused him once more, and he turned to see two riders emerge from the gloom, leading a third horse.

'We've been searching half the night,' Fist Keneb said as they reined in. 'Temul has a third of his Wickans out – all looking for you, sir.'

_Sir?_ That's _inappropriate_. 'Your child had no difficulty in finding me.'

Keneb frowned beneath the rim of his helm. 'Grub? He came here?'

'He said he was off to tell you he'd found me.'

The man snorted. 'Unlikely. He's yet to say a word to me. Not even in Aren. I've heard he talks to others, when the mood takes him, and that's rare enough. But not me. And no, I don't know why. In any case, we've
brought your horse. The Adjunct is ready.'

'Ready for what?'

'To unsheathe her sword, sir. To breach the Whirlwind Wall.'

'She need not wait for me, Fist.'

'True, but she chooses to none the less.'

*I don't want to.*

'She has commanded it, sir.'

Gamet sighed, walked over to the horse. He was so weak, he had trouble pulling himself onto the saddle. The others waited with maddening patience. Face burning with both effort and shame, Gamet finally clambered onto the horse, spent a moment searching for the stirrups, then took the reins from Temul. 'Lead on,' he growled to Keneb.

They rode parallel to the wall of roaring sand, eastward, maintaining a respectable distance. Two hundred paces along they rode up to a party of five sitting motionless on their horses. The Adjunct, Tene Baralta, Blistig, Nil and Nether.

Sudden fear gripped Gamet. 'Adjunct! A thousand warriors could be waiting on the other side! We need the army drawn up. We need heavy infantry on the flanks. Outriders – archers – marines——'

'That will be enough, Gamet. We ride forward now – the sun already lights the wall. Besides, can you not hear it? Its shriek is filled with fear. A new sound. A pleasing sound.'

He stared up at the swirling barrier of sand.

Yes, that is what I could sense earlier. 'Then it knows its barrier shall fail.'

'The goddess knows,' Nether agreed.

Gamet glanced at the two Wickans. They looked miserable, a state that seemed more or less permanent with them these days. 'What will happen when the Whirlwind falls?'

The young woman shook her head, but it was her brother who answered, 'The Whirlwind Wall encloses a warren. Destroy the wall, and the warren is breached. Making the goddess vulnerable – had we a battalion of Claw and a half-dozen High Mages, we could hunt her down and kill her. But we can achieve no such thing.'

He threw up his hands in an odd gesture. 'The Army of the Apocalypse will remain strengthened by her power. Those soldiers will never break, will fight on to the bitter end. Especially given the likelihood that that end will be ours, not theirs.'

'Your predictions of disaster are unhelpful, Nil,' the Adjunct murmured. 'Accompany me, all of you, until I say otherwise.'

They rode closer to the Whirlwind Wall, leaning in the face of the fierce, battering wind and sand. Fifteen paces from its edge, the Adjunct raised a hand. Then she dismounted, one gloved hand closing on the grip of her sword as she strode forward.

The rust-hued otataral blade was halfway out of its scabbard when a sudden silence descended, and before them the Whirlwind Wall's stentorian violence died, in tumbling clouds of sand and dust. The hiss of sifting rose into the storm's mute wake. A whisper. Burgeoning light. And, then, silence.

The Adjunct wheeled, shock writ on her features.

'She withdrew!' Nil shouted, stumbling forward. 'Our path is clear!'

Tavore threw up a hand to halt the Wickan. 'In answer to my sword, Warlock? Or is this some strategic ploy?'
'Both, I think. She would not willingly take such a wounding, I think. Now, she will rely upon her mortal army.'

The dust was falling like rain, in waves lit gold by the rising sun. And the Holy Desert's heartland was gradually becoming visible through gaps in the dying storm. There was no waiting horde, Gamet saw with a flood of relief. Naught but more wastes, with something like an escarpment on the northeast horizon, falling away as it proceeded west, where strangely broken hills ran in a natural barrier.

The Adjunct climbed back onto her horse. 'Temul. I want scouts out far ahead. I do not believe there will be any more raids. Now, they wait for us, at a place of their own choosing. It falls to us to find it.'

And then will come the battle. The death, of hundreds, perhaps thousands of soldiers. The Adjunct, as the fist of the Empress. And Sha'ik, Chosen servant of the goddess. A clash of wills, nothing more. Yet it will decide the fate of hundreds of thousands.

I want nothing to do with this.

Tene Baralta had drawn his horse alongside Gamet. 'We need you now more than ever,' the Red Blade murmured as the Adjunct, with renewed energy, continued conveying orders to the officers now riding up from the main camp.

'You do not need me at all,' Gamet replied.

'You are wrong. She needs a cautious voice—'

'A coward's voice, is the truth of it, and no, she does not need that.'

'There is a fog that comes in battle—'

'I know. I was a soldier, once. And I did well enough at that. Taking orders, commanding no-one but myself. Occasionally a handful, but not thousands. I was at my level of competence, all those years ago.'

'Very well then, Gamet. Become a soldier once more. One who just happens to be attached to the Adjunct's retinue. Give her the perspective of the common soldier. Whatever weakness you feel is not unique – realize that it is shared, by hundreds or even thousands, there in our legions.'

Blistig had come up on the other side, and he now added, 'She remains too remote from us, Gamet. She is without our advice because we have no chance to give it. Worse, we don't know her strategy—'

'Assuming she has one,' Tene Baralta muttered.

'Nor her tactics for this upcoming battle,' Blistig continued. 'It's dangerous, against Malazan military doctrine. She's made this war personal, Gamet.'

Gamet studied the Adjunct, who had now ridden ahead, flanked by Nil and Nether, and seemed to be studying the broken hills beyond which, they all knew, waited Sha'ik and her Army of the Apocalypse. Personal? Yes, she would do that. Because it is what she has always done. It is how she is. The Empress would not have been ignorant of her character.'

'We will be walking into a carefully constructed trap.' Tene Baralta growled. 'Korbolo Dom will see to that. He'll hold every piece of high ground, he'll command every approach. He might as well paint a big red spot on the ground where he wants us to stand while he kills us.'

'She is not unaware of those possibilities,' Gamet said. 'Leave me alone, Tene Baralta. You as well, Blistig. We are not three any more. We are two and one. Talk to Keneb, not me. He can shoulder your expectations. I cannot. 'We must march to meet them. What else would you have her do?'

'Listen to us, that's what,' Blistig answered. 'We need to find another approach. Come up from the south, perhaps—'

'And spend more weeks on this march? Don't you think Korbolo would have thought the same? Every
waterhole and spring will be fouled. We would wander until Raraku killed us all, with not a single sword raised against us.'

He caught the momentary locking of gazes between Blistig and Tene Baralta. Gamet scowled. 'Conversations like this one will not mend what is broken, sirs. Save your breaths. I have no doubt the Adjunct will call a council of war at the appropriate time.'

'She'd better,' Tene Baralta snapped, gathering his reins and wheeling his horse round.

As he cantered off, Blistig leaned forward and spat. 'Gamet, when that council is called, be there.'

'And if I'm not?'

'We have enough baggage on this train, with all those noble-born officers and their endless lists of grievances. Soldiers up from the ranks are rare enough in this army – too rare to see even one throw himself away. Granted, I didn't think much of you at first. You were the Adjunct's pet. But you managed your legion well enough—'

'Until the first night we fought the enemy.'

'Where a cusser killed your horse and nearly took your head off.'

'I was addled before then, Blistig.'

'Only because you rode into the skirmish. A Fist should not do that. You stay back, surrounded by messengers and guards. You may find yourself not issuing a single order, but you are the core position none the less, the immovable core. Just being there is enough. They can get word to you, you can get word to them. You can shore up, relieve units, and respond to developments. It's what an officer of high rank does. If you find yourself in the midst of a fight, you are useless, a liability to the soldiers around you, because they're obliged to save your skin. Even worse, you can see nothing, your messengers can't find you. You've lost perspective. If the core wavers or vanishes, the legion falls.'

Gamet considered Blistig's words for a long moment, then he sighed and shrugged. 'None of that matters any more. I am no longer a Fist. Keneb is, and he knows what to do—'

'He's acting Fist. The Adjunct made that clear. It's temporary. And it now falls to you to resume your title, and your command.'

'I will not.'

'You have to, you stubborn bastard. Keneb's a damned good captain. Now, there's a noble-born in that role, replacing him. The man's a damned fool. So long as he was under Keneb's heel he wasn't a problem. You need to return things to their proper order, Gamet. And you need to do it today.'

'How do you know about this new captain? It's not even your legion.'

'Keneb told me. He would rather have promoted one of the sergeants – there's a few with more experience than anyone else in the entire army. They're lying low, but it shows anyway. But the officer corps the Adjunct had to draw from was filled with noble-born – the whole system was its own private enterprise, exclusionary and corrupt. Despite the Cull, it persists, right here in this army.'

'Besides,' Gamet nodded, 'those sergeants are most useful right where they are.'

'Aye. So cease your selfish sulking, old man, and step back in line.'

The back of Gamet's gloved hand struck Blistig's face hard enough to break his nose and send him pitching backward off the rump of his horse.

He heard another horse reining in nearby and turned to see the Adjunct, a cloud of dust rolling out from under her mount's stamping hoofs. She was staring at him.
Spitting blood, Blistig slowly climbed to his feet.

Grimacing, Gamet walked his horse over to where the Adjunct waited. 'I am ready,' he said, 'to return to
duty, Adjunct.'

One brow arched slightly. 'Very good. I feel the need to advise you, however, to give vent to your
disagreements with your fellow Fists in more private locations in the future.'

Gamet glanced back. Blistig was busy dusting himself off, but there was a grim smile on his bloodied face.

_The bastard. Even so, I owe him a free shot at me, don't I?_

'Inform Keneb,' the Adjunct said.

Gamet nodded. 'With your leave, Adjunct, I'd like another word with Fist Blistig.'

'Less dramatic than the last one, I would hope, Fist Gamet.'

'We'll see, Adjunct.'

'Oh?'

'Depends on how patient he is, I suppose.'

'Be on your way then, Fist.'

'Aye, Adjunct.'

Strings and a few other sergeants had climbed up onto a hill – everyone else being busy with breaking camp
and preparing for the march – for a clearer view of the collapsed Whirlwind Wall. Sheets of dust were still
cascading down, though the freshening wind was quickly tearing through them.

'Not even a whimper,' Gesler sighed behind him.

'The goddess withdrew, is my guess,' Strings said. 'I would bet the Adjunct didn't even draw her sword.'

'Then why raise the wall in the first place?' Borduke wondered.

Strings shrugged. 'Who can say? There are other things going on here in Raraku, things we know nothing
about. The world didn't sit still during the months we spent marching here.'

'It was there to keep the Claw out,' Gesler pronounced. 'Both Sha'ik and her goddess want this battle. They
want it clean. Soldier against soldier, mage against mage, commander against commander.'

'Too bad for them,' Strings muttered.

'So you've been hinting at. Out with it, Fid.'

'Just a hunch, Gesler. I get those sometimes. They've been infiltrated. That's what I saw from Bottle's
divination. The night before the battle, that oasis will get hairy. Wish I could be there to see it. Damn, wish I
could be there to help.'

'We'll have our turn being busy, I think,' Gesler muttered.

The last sergeant who had accompanied them sighed, then said in a rasp, 'Moak thinks we won't be busy.
Unless the new captain does something stupid. The Adjunct's going to do something unexpected. We may not
get a fight at all.'

Strings coughed. 'Where does Moak get all this, Tugg?'

'Squatting over the latrine, is my guess,' Borduke grunted, then spat.
The heavy infantry sergeant shrugged. 'Moak knows things, that's all.'

'And how many times does he get it wrong?' Gesler asked, clearing his throat.

'Hard to say. He says so many things I can't remember them all. He's been right plenty of times, I think. I'm sure of it, in fact. Almost sure.' Tugg faced Strings. 'He says you were in Onearm's Host. And the Empress wants your head on a spike, because you've been outlawed.' The man then turned to Gesler. 'And he says you and your corporal, Stormy, are Old Guard. Underage marines serving Dassem Ultor, or maybe Cartheron Crust or his brother Urko. That you were the ones who brought that old Quon dromon into Aren Harbour with all the wounded from the Chain of Dogs. And you, Borduke, you once threw a noble-born officer off a cliff, near Karashimesh, only they couldn't prove it, of course.'

The three other men stared at Tugg, saying nothing.

Tugg rubbed his neck. 'Well, that's what he says, anyway.'

'Amazing how wrong he got it all,' Gesler said drily.

'And I take it he's been spreading these tales around?' Strings asked.

'Oh no. Just me and Sobelone. He told us to keep our mouths shut.' Tugg blinked, then added, 'But not with you, obviously, since you already know. I was just making conversation. Just being friendly. Amazing how that Whirlwind Wall just collapsed like that, isn't it?'

Horns sounded in the distance.

'Time to march,' Gesler muttered, 'praise Hood and all...'

Keneb rode up alongside Gamet. Their legion had been positioned as rearguard for this day of travel and the dust was thick in the hot air.

'I'm starting to doubt the Whirlwind Wall ever vanished,' Keneb said.

'Aye, there's less we're kicking up than is still coming down,' Gamet replied. He hesitated, then said, 'My apologies, Captain—'

'No need, sir. I am in fact relieved – if you'll excuse the pun. Not just from the pressure of being a Fist, but also because Ranal's promotion was rescinded. It was a pleasure informing him of that. Were you aware he had restructured the units? Using Greymane's arrangements? Of course, Greymane was fighting a protracted war over a huge territory with no defined front. He needed self-contained fighting units, ready for any contingency. Even more irritating, he neglected to inform anyone else.'

'Are you returning the squads to their original placement, Captain?'

'Not yet, sir. Waiting for your word.'

Gamet thought about it for a time. 'I will inform the Adjunct of our legion's new structure.'

'Sir?'

'It might prove useful. We are to hold the rear at the battle, on a broken landscape. Ranal's decision, no doubt made in ignorance, is none the less suitable.'

Keneb sighed, but said nothing, and Gamet well understood. I may have returned as Fist with the Adjunct's confirmation, but her decision on our positioning has made it clear she's lost confidence in me.

They rode on in silence, but it was not a comfortable one.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Who among the pantheon would the Fallen One despise and fear the most? Consider the last chaining, in which Hood, Fener, the Queen of Dreams, Osserc and Oponn all participated, in addition to Anomander Rake, Caladan Brood and a host of other ascendants. It is not so surprising, then, that the Crippled God could not have anticipated that his deadliest enemy was not found among those mentioned . . .

The Chainings
Istan Hela

‘Just because I’m a woman – all woman – it doesn’t mean I can cook.’

Cutter glanced across at Apsalar, then said, ‘No, no, it’s very good, really—’

But Mogora wasn’t finished, waving a grass-snared wooden ladle about as she stomped back and forth. ‘There’s no larder, nothing at all! And guests! Endless guests! And is he around to go find us some food? Never! I think he’s dead—’

‘He’s not dead,’ Apsalar cut in, holding her spoon motionless above the bowl. ‘We saw him only a short while ago.’

‘So you say, with your shiny hair and pouty lips – and those breasts – just wait till you start dropping whelps, they’ll be at your ankles one day, big as they are – not the whelps, the breasts. The whelps will be in your hair – no, not that shiny hair on your head, well, yes, that hair, but only as a manner of speech. What was I talking about? Yes, I have to go out every day, climbing up and down that rope ladder, scrounging food – yes, that grass is edible, just chew it down. Chew and chew. Every day, armfuls of grasses, tubers, rhizan, cockroaches and bloodflies—’

Both Cutter and Apsalar put down their spoons.

‘—and me tripping over my tits. And then!’ She waved the ladle, flinging wet grass against a wall. ‘Those damned bhok’arala get into my hoard and steal all the yummy bits – every single cockroach and bloodfly! Haven’t you noticed? There’s no vermin in this ruin anywhere! Not a mouse, not a bug – what’s a thousand spiders to do?’

Cautiously, the two guests resumed eating, their sips preceded by close examination of the murky liquid in their spoons.

‘And how long do you plan to stay here? What is this, a hostel? How do you expect my husband and me to return to domestic normality? If it’s not you it’s gods and demons and assassins messing up the bedrooms! Will I ever get peace?’ With that she stomped from the room.

After a moment, Cutter blinked and sat straighter. ‘Assassins?’

‘Kalam Mekhar,’ Apsalar replied. ‘He left marks, an old Bridgeburner habit.’

‘He’s back? What happened?’

She shrugged. ‘Shadowthrone and Cotillion have, it seems, found use for us all. If I were to guess, Kalam plans on killing as many of Sha’ik’s officers as he can.’

‘Well, Mogora did raise an interesting question. Cotillion wanted us here, but why? Now what?’

‘I have no answers for you, Crokus. It would seem Cotillion’s interests lie more with you than with me. Which is not surprising.’
'It isn't? It is to me. Why would you say otherwise?'

She studied him for a moment, then her eyes shifted away. 'Because I am not interested in becoming his servant. I possess too many of his memories, including his mortal life as Dancer, to be entirely trustworthy.'

'That's not an encouraging statement, Apsalar—'

A new voice hissed from the shadows, 'Encouragement is needed? Simple, easy, unworthy of concern – why can't I think of a solution! Something stupid to say, that should be effortless for me. Shouldn't it?' After a moment, Iskaral Pust edged out from the gloom, sniffing the air. 'She's been ... cooking!' His eyes then lit on the bowls on the table. 'And you've been eating it! Are you mad? Why do you think I've been hiding all these months? Why do you think I have my bhok'arala sift through her hoard for the edible stuff? Gods, you fools! Oh yes, fine food ... if you're an antelope!'

'We're managing,' Cutter said. 'Is there something you want with us? If not, I'm with Mogora on one thing – the less I see of you the better—'

'She wants to see me, you Daru idiot! Why do you think she's always trying to hunt me down?'

'Yes, it's a good act, isn't it? But let's be realistic, Pust, she's happier without you constantly in her face. You're not wanted. Not necessary. In fact, Pust, you are completely useless.'

The High Priest's eyes widened, then he snarled and bolted back into the corner of the room, vanishing into its shadows.

Cutter smiled and leaned back in his chair. 'That worked better than I could have hoped.'

'You have stepped between husband and wife, Crokus. Not a wise decision.'

He narrowed his gaze on her. 'Where do you want to go from here, Apsalar?'

She would not meet his eyes. 'I have not yet made up my mind.'

And Cutter knew that she had.

The spear was a heavy wood, yet surprisingly flexible for its solid feel. Upright, its fluted chalcedony point reached to Trull Sengar's palm when he stood with one arm stretched upward. 'Rather short for my fighting style, but I will make do. I thank you, Ibra Gholan.'

The T'lan Imass swung round and strode to where Monok Ochem waited.

Onrack watched Trull Sengar blow on his hands, then rub them on his tattered buckskin leggings. He flexed the spear shaft once more, then leaned it on one shoulder and faced Onrack. 'I am ready. Although I could do with some furs – this warren is cold, and the wind stinks of ice – we'll have snow by nightfall.'

'We shall be travelling south,' Onrack said. 'Before long, we shall reach the tree line, and the snow will turn to rain.'

'That sounds even more miserable.'

'Our journey, Trull Sengar, shall be less than a handful of days and nights. And in that time we shall travel from tundra to savanna and jungle.'

'Do you believe we will reach the First Throne before the renegades?'

Onrack shrugged. 'It is likely. The path of Tellann will present to us no obstacles, whilst that of chaos shall slow our enemies, for its path is never straight.'

'Never straight, aye. That notion makes me nervous.'
Ah. *That is what I am feeling.* 'A cause for unease, granted, Trull Sengar. None the less, we are faced with a more dire concern, for when we reach the First Throne we must then defend it.'

Ibra Gholan led the way, Monok Ochem waiting until Onrack and the Tiste Edur passed by before falling in step.

'We are not trusted,' Trull Sengar muttered.

'That is true,' Onrack agreed. 'None the less, we are needed.'

'The least satisfying of alliances.'

'Yet perhaps the surest, until such time as the need passes. We must remain mindful, Trull Sengar.'

The Tiste Edur grunted in acknowledgement.

They fell silent then, as each stride took them further south.

As with so many tracts within Tellann, the scars of Omtose Phellack remained both visible and palpable to Onrack's senses. Rivers of ice had gouged this landscape, tracing the history of advance and, finally, retreat, leaving behind fluvial spans of silts, rocks and boulders in scree, fans and slides, and broad valleys with basins worn down to smooth-humped bedrock. Eventually, permafrost gave way to sodden peat and marshland, wherein stunted black spruce rose in knotted stands on islands formed by the rotted remains of ancestral trees. Pools of black water surrounded these islands, layered with mists and bubbling with the gases of decay.

Insects swarmed the air, finding nothing to their liking among the T'lan Imass and the lone mortal, though they circled in thick, buzzing clouds none the less. Before long, the marshes gave way to upthrust domes of bedrock, the low ground between them steep-sided and tangled with brush and dead pines. The domes then merged, creating a winding bridge of high ground along which the four travelled with greater ease than before.

It began to rain, a steady drizzle that blackened the basaltic bedrock and made it slick.

Onrack could hear Trull Sengar's harsh breathing and sensed his companion's weariness. But no entreaties to rest came from the Tiste Edur, even as he increasingly used his spear as a staff as they trudged onward.

Forest soon replaced the exposed bedrock, slowly shifting from coniferous to deciduous, the hills giving way to flatter ground. The trees then thinned, and suddenly, beyond a line of tangled deadfall, plains stretched before them, and the rain was gone. Onrack raised a hand. 'We shall halt here.'

Ibra Gholan, ten paces ahead, stopped and swung round. 'Why?'

'Food and rest, Ibra Gholan. You may have forgotten that these number among the needs of mortals.'

'I have not forgotten, Onrack the Broken.'

Trull Sengar settled onto the grasses, a wry smile on his lips as he said, 'It's called indifference, Onrack. I am, after all, the least valuable member of this war party.'

'The renegades will not pause in their march,' Ibra Gholan said. 'Nor should we.'

'Then journey ahead,' Onrack suggested.

'No,' Monok Ochem commanded. 'We walk together. Ibra Gholan, a short period of rest will not prove a great inconvenience. Indeed, I would the Tiste Edur speak to us.'

'About what, Bonecaster?'

'Your people, Trull Sengar. What has made them kneel before the Chained One?'

'No easy answer to that question, Monok Ochem.'

Ibra Gholan strode back to the others. 'I shall hunt game,' the warrior said, then vanished in a swirl of dust.
The Tiste Edur studied the fluted spearhead of his new weapon for a moment, then, setting the spear down, he sighed. 'It is a long tale, alas. And indeed, I am no longer the best choice to weave it in a manner you might find useful—'

'Why?'

'Because, Monok Ochem, I am Shorn. I no longer exist. To my brothers, and my people, I never existed.'

'Such assertions are meaningless in the face of truth,' Onrack said. 'You are here before us. You exist. As do your memories.'

'There have been Imass who have suffered exile,' Monok Ochem rasped. 'Yet still we speak of them. We must speak of them, to give warning to others. What value a tale if it is not instructive?'

'A very enlightened view, Bonecaster. But mine are not an enlightened people. We care nothing for instruction. Nor, indeed, for truth. Our tales exist to give grandeur to the mundane. Or to give moments of great drama and significance an air of inevitability. Perhaps one might call that "instruction" but that is not their purpose. Every defeat justifies future victory. Every victory is propitious. The Tiste Edur make no misstep, for our dance is one of destiny.'

'And you are no longer in that dance.'

'Precisely, Onrack. Indeed, I never was.'

'Your exile forces you to lie even to yourself, then,' Onrack observed.

'In a manner of speaking, that is true. I am therefore forced to reshape the tale, and that is a difficult thing. There was much of that time that I did not understand at first – certainly not when it occurred. Much of my knowledge did not come to me until much later—'

'Following your Shorning.'

Trull Sengar's almond-shaped eyes narrowed on Onrack, then he nodded. 'Yes.'

As knowledge flowered before my mind's eye in the wake of the Ritual of Tellann's shattering. Very well, this I understand. 'Prepare for the telling of your tale, Trull Sengar. If instruction can be found within it, recognition is the responsibility of those to whom the tale is told. You are absolved of the necessity.'

Monok Ochem grunted, then said, 'These words are spurious. Every story instructs. The teller ignores this truth at peril. Excise yourself from the history you would convey if you must, Trull Sengar. The only lesson therein is one of humility.'

Trull Sengar grinned up at the bonecaster. 'Fear not, I was never pivotal among the players. As for excision, well, that has already occurred, and so I would tell the tale of the Tiste Edur who dwelt north of Lether as would they themselves tell it. With one exception – which has, I admit, proved most problematic in my mind – and that is, there will be no aggrandizement in my telling. No revelling in glory, no claims of destiny or inevitability. I shall endeavour, then, to be other than the Tiste Edur I appear to be, to tear away my cultural identity and so cleanse the tale—'

'Flesh does not lie,' Monok Ochem said. 'Thus, we are not deceived.'

'Flesh may not lie, but the spirit can, Bonecaster. Instruct yourself in blindness and indifference – I in turn intend to attempt the same.'

'When will you begin your tale?'

'At the First Throne, Monok Ochem. Whilst we await the coming of the renegades ... and their Tiste Edur allies.'

Ibra Gholan reappeared with a broken-necked hare, which he skinned in a single gesture, then flung the blood-smeared body to the ground beside Trull Sengar. 'Eat,' the warrior instructed, tossing the skin aside.
Onrack moved off while the Tiste Edur made preparations for a fire. He was, he reflected, disturbed by Trull Sengar's words. The Shorning had made much of excising the physical traits that would identify Trull Sengar as Tiste Edur. The bald pate, the scarred brow. But these physical alterations were as nothing, it appeared, when compared to those forced upon the man's spirit. Onrack realized that he had grown comfortable in Trull Sengar's company, lulled, perhaps, by the Edur's steady manner, his ease with hardship and extremity. Such comfort was deceiving, it now seemed. Trull Sengar's calm was born of scars, of healing that left one insensate. His heart was incomplete. He is as a T'lan Imass, yet clothed in mortal flesh. We ask that he resurrect his memories of life, then wonder at his struggle to satisfy our demands. The failure is ours, not his.

We speak of those we have exiled, yet not to warn — as Monok Ochem claims. No, nothing so noble. We speak of them in reaffirmation of our judgement. But it is our intransigence that finds itself fighting the fiercest war — with time itself, with the changing world around us.

'I will preface my tale,' Trull Sengar was saying as he roasted the skinned hare, 'with an admittedly cautionary observation.'

'Tell me this observation,' Monok Ochem said.

'I shall, Bonecaster. It concerns nature . . . and the exigency of maintaining a balance.'

Had he possessed a soul, Onrack would have felt it grow cold as ice. As it was, the warrior slowly turned in the wake of Trull Sengar's words.

'Pressures and forces are ever in opposition,' the Edur was saying as he rotated the spitted hare over the flames. 'And the striving is ever towards a balance. This is beyond the gods, of course — it is the current of existence — but no, beyond even that, for existence itself is opposed by oblivion. It is a struggle that encompasses all, that defines every island in the Abyss. Or so I now believe. Life is answered by death. Dark by light. Overwhelming success by catastrophic failure. Horrific curse by breathtaking blessing. It seems the inclination of all people to lose sight of that truth, particularly when blinded by triumph upon triumph. See before me, if you will, this small fire. A modest victory . . . but if I feed it, my own eager delight is answered, until this entire plain is aflame, then the forest, then the world itself. Thus, an assertion of wisdom here . . . in the quenching of these flames once this meat is cooked. After all, igniting this entire world will also kill everything in it, if not in flames then in subsequent starvation. Do you see my point, Monok Ochem?'

'I do not, Trull Sengar. This prefaces nothing.'

Onrack spoke. 'You are wrong, Monok Ochem. It prefaces ... everything.'

Trull Sengar glanced over, and answered with a smile.

Of sadness overwhelming. Of utter ... despair.

And the undead warrior was shaken.

A succession of ridges ribboned the landscape, seeming to slowly melt as sand drifted down from the sky.

'Soon,' Pearl murmured, 'those beach ridges will vanish once more beneath dunes.'

Lostara shrugged. 'We're wasting time,' she pronounced, then set off towards the first ridge. The air was thick with settling dust and sand, stinging the eyes and parching the throat. Yet the haze served to draw the horizons closer, to make their discovery increasingly unlikely. The sudden demise of the Whirlwind Wall suggested that the Adjunct and her army had reached Raraku, were even now marching upon the oasis. She suspected that there would be few, if any, scouts patrolling the northeast approaches.

Pearl had announced that it was safe now to travel during the day. The goddess had drawn inward, concentrating her power for, perhaps, one final, explosive release. For the clash with the Adjunct. A singularity of purpose locked in rage, a flaw that could be exploited.

She allowed herself a private smile at that. Flaws. No shortage of those hereabouts, is there? Their moment
of wild passion had passed, as far as she was concerned. The loosening of long pent-up energies – now that it was done, they could concentrate on other things. More important things. It seemed, however, that Pearl saw it differently. He’d even tried to take her hand this morning, a gesture that she decisively rebuffed despite its pathos. The deadly assassin was on the verge of transforming into a squirming pup – disgust threatened to overwhelm her, so she shifted her thoughts onto another track.

They were running short on time, not to mention food and water. Raraku was a hostile land, resentful of whatever life dared exploit it. Not holy at all, but cursed. Devourer of dreams, destroyer of ambitions. And why not? It’s a damned desert.

Clambering over the cobbles and stones, they reached the first ridge.

‘We’re close,’ Pearl said, squinting ahead. ‘Beyond that higher terrace, we should come within sight of the oasis.’

‘And then what?’ she asked, brushing dust from her tattered clothes.

‘Well, it would be remiss of me not to take advantage of our position – I should be able to infiltrate the camp and stir up some trouble. Besides,’ he added, ‘one of the trails I am on leads into the heart of that rebel army.’

_The Talons. The master of that revived cult._ ‘Are you so certain of that?’

He nodded, then half shrugged. ‘Reasonably. I have come to believe that the rebellion was compromised long ago, perhaps from the very start. That the aim of winning independence for Seven Cities was not quite as central to some as it should have been, and indeed, that those hidden motives are about to be unveiled.’

‘And it is inconceivable to you that such unveilings should occur without your hand in their midst.’

He glanced at her. ‘My dear, you forget, I am an agent of the Malazan Empire. I have certain responsibilities...

Her eyes lit on an object lying among the cobbles – a momentary recognition, then her gaze quickly shifted away. She studied the murky sky. ‘Has it not occurred to you that your arrival might well jeopardize missions already under way in the rebel camp? The Empress does not know you’re here. In fact, even the Adjunct likely believes we are far away from this place.’

‘I am not uncomfortable with a supporting role—’

Lostara snorted.

‘Well,’ he amended, ‘such a role is not entirely reprehensible. I can live with it.’

_Liar._ She settled down on one knee to adjust the greaves lashed to her leather-clad shins. ‘We should be able to make that terrace before the sun sets.’

‘Agreed.’

She straightened.

They made their way down the rock-studded slope. The ground was littered with the tiny, shrivelled bodies of countless desert creatures that had been swept up into the Whirlwind, dying within that interminable storm yet remaining suspended within it until, with the wind’s sudden death, falling to earth once more. They had rained down for a full day, husks clattering and crunching on all sides, pattering on her helm and skidding from her shoulders. Rhizan, capemoths and other minuscule creatures, for the most part, although occasionally something larger had thumped to the ground. Lostara was thankful that the downpour had ended.

‘The Whirlwind has not been friendly to Raraku,’ Pearl commented, kicking aside the corpse of an infant bhok’aral.

‘Assuming the desert cares one way or another, which it doesn’t, I doubt it will make much difference in the long run. A land’s lifetime is far vaster than anything with which we are familiar, vaster, by far, than the spans
of these hapless creatures. Besides, Raraku is already mostly dead.'

'Appearances deceive. There are deep spirits in this Holy Desert, lass. Buried in the rock—'

'And the life upon that rock, like the sands,' Lostara asserted, 'means nothing to those spirits. You are a fool to think otherwise, Pearl.'

'I am a fool to think many things,' he muttered.

'Do not expect me to object to that observation.'

'It never crossed my mind that you might, Lostara Yil. In any case, I would none the less advise that you cultivate a healthy respect for the mysteries of Raraku. It is far too easy to be blindsided in this seemingly empty and lifeless desert.'

'As we’ve already discovered.'

He frowned, then sighed. 'I regret that you view ... things that way, and can only conclude that you derive a peculiar satisfaction from discord, and when it does not exist – or, rather, has no reason to exist – you seek to invent it.'

'You think too much, Pearl. It's your most irritating flaw, and, let us be honest, given the severity and sheer volume of your flaws, that is saying something. Since this seems to be a time for advice, I suggest you stop thinking entirely.'

'And how might I achieve that? Follow your lead, perhaps?’

'I think neither too much nor too little. I am perfectly balanced – this is what you find so attractive. As a cape-moth is drawn to fire.'

'So I am in danger of being burned up?’

'To a blackened, shrivelled crust.'

'So, you're pushing me away for my own good. A gesture of compassion, then.'

'Fires neither push nor pull. They simply exist, com-passionless, indifferent to the suicidal urges of flitting bugs. That is another one of your flaws, Pearl. Attributing emotion where none exists.'

'I could have sworn there was emotion, two nights past—'

'Oh, fire burns eagerly when there's fuel—'

'And in the morning there's naught but cold ashes.'

'Now you are beginning to understand. Of course, you will see that as encouragement, and so endeavour to take your understanding further. But that would be a waste of time, so I suggest you abandon the effort. Be content with the glimmer, Pearl.'

'I see ... murkily. Very well, I will accept your list of advisements.'

'You will? Gullibility is a most unattractive flaw, Pearl.'

She thought he would scream, was impressed by his sudden clamping of control, releasing his breath like steam beneath a cauldron's lid, until the pressure died away.

They approached the ascent to the last ridge, Lostara at her most contented thus far this day, Pearl likely to be feeling otherwise.

As they reached the crest the Claw spoke again. 'What was that you picked up on the last ridge, lass?'

Saw that, did you? 'A shiny rock. Caught my eye. I've since discarded it.'
'Oh? So it no longer hides in that pouch on your belt?'

Snarling, she plucked the leather bag from her belt and flung it to the ground, then drew out her chain-backed gauntlets. 'See for yourself, then.'

He gave her a startled glance, then bent down to collect the pouch.

As he straightened, Lostara stepped forward.

Her gauntlets cracked hard against Pearl's temple.

Groaning, he collapsed unconscious.

'Idiot,' she muttered, retrieving the pouch.

She donned the gauntlets, then, with a grunt, lifted the man and settled him over one shoulder.

Less than two thousand paces ahead lay the oasis, the air above it thick with dust and the smoke of countless fires. Herds of goats were visible along the fringes, in the shade of trees. The remnants of a surrounding wall curved roughly away in both directions.

Carrying Pearl, Lostara made her way down the slope.

She was nearing the base when she heard horses off to her right. Crouching down and thumping Pearl to the ground beside her, she watched as a dozen desert warriors rode into view, coming from the northwest. Their animals looked half starved, heads hanging low, and she saw, among them, two prisoners.

Despite the dust covering them, and the gloom of approaching dusk, Lostara recognized the remnants of uniforms on the two prisoners. Malazans. *Ashok Regiment. Thought they'd been wiped out.*

The warriors rode without outriders, and did not pause in their steady canter until they reached the oasis, whereupon they vanished beneath the leather-leaved branches of the trees.

Lostara looked around and decided that her present surroundings were ideal for staying put for the night. A shallow basin in the lee of the slope. By lying flat they would not be visible from anywhere but the ridge itself, and even that was unlikely with night fast falling. She checked on Pearl, frowning at the purple-ringed bump on his temple. But his breathing was steady, the beat of his heart unhurried and even. She laid out his cloak and rolled him onto it, then bound and gagged him.

As gloom gathered in the basin, Lostara settled down to wait.

Some time later a figure emerged from the shadows and stood motionless for a moment before striding silently to halt directly over Pearl.

Lostara heard a muted grunt. 'You came close to cracking open his skull.'

'It's harder than you think,' she replied.

'Was it entirely necessary?'

'I judged it so. If you've no faith in that, then why recruit me in the first place?'

Cotillion sighed. 'He's not a bad man, you know. Loyal to the empire. You have sorely abused his equanimity.'

'He was about to interfere. Unpredictably. I assumed you wished the path clear.'

'Initially, yes. But I foresee a certain usefulness to his presence, once matters fully ... unfold. Be sure to awaken him some time tomorrow night, if he has not already done so on his own.'

'Very well, since you insist. Although I am already deeply fond of my newfound peace and solitude.'
Cotillion seemed to study her a moment, then the god said, 'I will leave you then, since I have other tasks to attend to this night.'

Lostara reached into the pouch and tossed a small object towards him.

He caught it in one hand and peered down to study it.

'I assumed that was yours,' she said.

'No, but I know to whom it belongs. And am pleased. May I keep it?'

She shrugged. 'It matters not to me.'

'Nor should it, Lostara Yil.'

She heard a dry amusement in those words, and concluded that she had made a mistake in letting him keep the object; that, indeed, it did matter to her, though for the present she knew not how. She shrugged again. Too late now, I suppose. 'You said you were leaving?'

She sensed him bridling, then in a swirl of shadows he vanished.

Lostara lay back on the stony ground and contentedly closed her eyes.

The night breeze was surprisingly warm. Apsalar stood before the small window overlooking the gully. Neither Mogora nor Iskaral Pust frequented these heights much, except when necessity forced them to undertake an excursion in search of food, and so her only company was a half-dozen elderly bhok'arala, grey-whiskered and grunting and snorting as they stiffly moved about on the chamber's littered floor. The scattering of bones suggested that this top level of the tower was where the small creatures came to die.

As the bhok'arala shuffled back and forth behind her, she stared out onto the wastes. The sand and outcrops of limestone were silver in the starlight. On the rough tower walls surrounding the window rhizan were landing with faint slaps, done with their feeding, and now, claws whispering, they began crawling into cracks to hide from the coming day.

Crokus slept somewhere below, whilst resident husband and wife stalked each other down the unlit corridors and in the musty chambers of the monastery. She had never felt so alone, nor, she realized, so comfortable with that solitude. Changes had come to her. Hardened layers sheathing her soul had softened, found new shape in response to unseen pressures from within.

Strangest of all, she had come, over time, to despise her competence, her deadly skills. They had been imposed upon her, forced into her bones and muscles. They had imprisoned her in blinding, gelid armour. And so, despite the god's absence, she still felt as if she was two women, not one.

Leading her to wonder with which woman Crokus had fallen in love.

But no, there was no mystery there. He had assumed the guise of a killer, hadn't he? The young wide-eyed thief from Darujhistan had fashioned of himself a dire reflection – not of Apsalar the fisher-girl, but of Apsalar the assassin, the cold murderer. In the belief that likeness would forge the deepest bond of all. Perhaps that would have succeeded, had she liked her profession, had she not found it sordid and reprehensible. Had it not felt like chains wrapped tight about her soul.

She was not comforted by company within her prison. His love was for the wrong woman, the wrong Apsalar. And hers was for Crokus, not Cutter. And so they were together, yet apart, intimate yet strangers, and it seemed there was nothing they could do about it.

The assassin within her preferred solitude, and the fisher-girl had, from an entirely different path, come into a similar comfort. The former could not afford to love. The latter knew she had never been loved. Like Crokus, she stood in a killer's shadow.
There was no point in railing against that. The fisher-girl had no life-skills of a breadth and stature to challenge the assassin's implacable will. Probably, Crokus had similarly succumbed to Cutter.

She sensed a presence close by her side, and murmured, 'Would that you had taken all with you when you departed.'

'You'd rather I left you bereft?'

'Bereft, Cotillion? No. Innocent.'

'Innocence is only a virtue, lass, when it is temporary. You must pass from it to look back and recognize its unsullied purity. To remain innocent is to twist beneath invisible and unfathomable forces all your life, until one day you realize that you no longer recognize yourself, and it comes to you that innocence was a curse that had shackled you, stunted you, defeated your every expression of living.'

She smiled in the darkness. 'But, Cotillion, it is knowledge that makes one aware of his or her own chains.'

'Knowledge only makes the eyes see what was there all along, Apsalar. You are in possession of formidable skills. They gift you with power, a truth there is little point in denying. You cannot unmake yourself.'

'But I can cease walking this singular path.'

'You can,' he acknowledged after a moment. 'You can choose others, but even the privilege of choice was won by virtue of what you were—'

'What you were.'

'Nor can that be changed. I walked in your bones, your flesh, Apsalar. The fisher-girl who became a woman—we stood in each other's shadow.'

'And did you enjoy that, Cotillion?'

'Not particularly. It was difficult to remain mindful of my purpose. We were in worthy company for most of that time—Whiskeyjack, Mallet, Fiddler, Kalam... a squad that, given the choice, would have welcomed you. But I prevented them from doing so. Necessary, but not fair to you or them.' He sighed, then continued, 'I could speak endlessly of regrets, lass, but I see dawn stealing the darkness, and I must have your decision.'

'My decision? Regarding what?'

'Cutter.'

She studied the desert, found herself blinking back tears. 'I would take him from you, Cotillion. I would prevent you doing to him what you did to me.'

'He is that important to you?'

'He is. Not to the assassin within me, but to the fisher-girl... whom he does not love.'

'Doesn't he?'

'He loves the assassin, and so chooses to be like her.'

'I understand now the struggle within you.'

'Indeed? Then you must understand why I will not let you have him.'

'But you are wrong, Apsalar. Cutter does not love the assassin within you. It attracts him, no doubt, because power does that... to us all. And you possess power, and that implicitly includes the option of not using it. All very enticing, alluring. He is drawn to emulate what he sees as your hard-won freedom. But his love? Resurrect our shared memories, lass. Of Darujhistan, of our first brush with the thief, Crokus. He saw that we had committed murder, and knew that discovery made his life forfeit in our eyes. Did he love you then? No, that
came later, in the hills east of the city – when I no longer possessed you.'

'Love changes with time—'

'Aye, it does, but not like a capemoth flitting from corpse to corpse on a battlefield.' He cleared his throat. 'Very well, a poor choice of analogy. Love changes, aye, in the manner of growing to encompass as much of its subject as possible. Virtues, flaws, limitations, everything – love will fondle them all, with child-like fascination.'

She had drawn her arms tight about herself with his words. 'There are two women within me—'

'Two? There are multitudes, lass, and Cutter loves them all.'

'I don't want him to die!'

'Is that your decision?'

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The sky was lightening, transforming into a vast, empty space above a dead, battered landscape. She saw birds climb the winds into its expanse.

Cotillion persisted, 'Do you know, then, what you must do?'

Once again, Apsalar nodded.

'I am ... pleased.'

Her head snapped round, and she stared into his face, seeing it fully, she realized, for the first time. The lines bracketing the calm, soft eyes, the even features, the strange hatch pattern of scars beneath his right eye. 'Pleased,' she whispered, studying him. 'Why?'

'Because,' he answered with a faint smile, 'I like the lad, too.'

'How brave do you think I am?'

'As brave as is necessary.'

'Again.'

'Aye. Again.'

'You don't seem much like a god at all, Cotillion.'

'I'm not a god in the traditional fashion, I am a patron. Patrons have responsibilities. Granted, I rarely have the opportunity to exercise them.'

'Meaning they are not yet burdensome.'

His smile broadened, and it was a lovely smile. 'You are worth far more for your lack of innocence, Apsalar. I will see you again soon.' He stepped back into the shadows of the chamber.

'Cotillion.'

He paused, arms half raised. 'Yes.'

'Thank you. And take care of Cutter. Please.'

'I will, as if he were my own son, Apsalar. I will.'

She nodded, and then he was gone.

And, a short while later, so was she.
There were snakes in this forest of stone. Fortunately for Kalam Mekhar, they seemed to lack the natural
belligerence of their kind. He was lying in shadows amidst the dusty, shattered fragments of a toppled tree,
motionless as serpents slithered around him and over him. The stone was losing its chill from the night just
past, a hot wind drifting in from the desert beyond.

He had seen no sign of patrols, and little in the way of well-trod trails. None the less, he sensed a presence in
this petrified forest, hinting of power that did not belong on this world. Though he could not be certain, he
sensed something demonic about that power.

Sufficient cause for unease. Sha'ik might well have placed guardians, and he would have to get past those.

The assassin lifted a flare-neck to one side then drew his two long-knives. He examined the grips, ensuring
that the leather bindings were tight. He checked the fittings of the hilts and pommels. The edge of the otataral
long-knife's blade was slightly rough – otataral was not an ideal metal for weapons. It cut ragged and needed
constant sharpening, even when it had seen no use, and the iron had a tendency to grow brittle over time.
Before the Malazan conquest, otataral had been employed by the highborn of Seven Cities in their armour for
the most part. Its availability had been tightly regulated, although less so than when under imperial control.

Few knew the full extent of its properties. When absorbed through the skin or breathed into the lungs for
long periods, its effects were varied and unpredictable. It often failed in the face of Elder magic, and there was
another characteristic that Kalam suspected few were aware of – a discovery made entirely by accident during a
battle outside Y’Ghatan. Only a handful of witnesses survived the incident, Kalam and Quick Ben among them,
and all had agreed afterwards that their reports to their officers would be deliberately vague, questions
answered by shrugs and shakes of the head.

Otataral, it seemed, did not go well with Moranth munitions, particularly burners and flamers. Or, to put it
another way, it doesn't like getting hot. He knew that weapons were quenched in otataral dust at a late stage in
their forging. When the iron had lost its glow, in fact. Likely, blacksmiths had arrived at that conclusion the
hard way. But even that was not the whole secret. It's what happens to hot otataral. . . when you throw magic at
it.

He slowly resheathed the weapon, then focused his attention on the other. Here, the edge was smooth,
slightly wavy as often occurred with rolled, multi-layered blades. The water etching was barely visible on this
gleaming, black surface, the silver inlay fine as thread. Between the two long-knives, he favoured this one, for
its weight and balance.

Something struck the ground beside him, bouncing with a pinging sound off a fragment of tree trunk, then
rattling to a stop down beside his right knee.

Kalam stared at the small object for a moment. He then looked up at the tree looming over him. He smiled.
'Ah, an oak,' he murmured. 'Let it not be said I don't appreciate the humour of the gesture.' He sat up and
reached down to collect the acorn. Then leaned back once more. 'Just like old times ... glad, as always, that we
don't do this sort of thing any more . . .'

Plains to savanna, then, finally, jungle. They had arrived in the wet season, and the morning suffered beneath a
torrential deluge before, just past noon, the sun burned through to lade the air with steam as the three T'lan
Imass and one Tiste Edur trudged through the thick, verdant undergrowth.

Unseen animals fled their onward march, thrashing heavily through the brush on all sides. Eventually, they
stumbled onto a game trail that led in the direction they sought, and their pace increased.

'This is not your natural territory, is it, Onrack?' Trull Sengar asked between gasps of the humid, rank air.
'Given all the furs your kind wear . . .'

'True,' the T'lan Imass replied. 'We are a cold weather people. But this region exists within our memories.
Before the Imass, there was another people, older, wilder. They dwelt where it was warm, and they were tall,
their dark skins covered in fine hair. These we knew as the Eres. Enclaves survived into our time – the time
captured within this warren.'
'And they lived in jungles like this one?'

'Its verges, occasionally, but more often the surrounding savannas. They worked in stone, but with less skill than us.'

'Were there bonecasters among them?'

Monok Ochem answered from behind them. 'All Eres were bonecasters, Trull Sengar. For they were the first to carry the spark of awareness, the first so gifted by the spirits.'

'And are they now gone, Monok Ochem?'

'They are.'

Onrack added nothing to that. After all, if Monok Ochem found reasons to deceive, Onrack could find none to contradict the bonecaster. It did not matter in any case. No Eres had ever been discovered in the Warren of Tellann.

After a moment, Trull Sengar asked, 'Are we close, Onrack?'

'We are.'

'And will we then return to our own world?'

'We shall. The First Throne lies at the base of a crevasse, beneath a city—'

'The Tiste Edur,' Monok Ochem cut in, 'has no need for learning the name of that city, Onrack the Broken. He already knows too much of our people.'

'What I know of you T'lan Imass hardly qualifies as secrets,' Trull Sengar said. 'You prefer killing to negotiation. You do not hesitate to murder gods when the opportunity arises. And you prefer to clean up your own messes – laudable, this last one. Unfortunately, this particular mess is too big, though I suspect you are still too proud to admit to that. As for your First Throne, I am not interested in discovering its precise location. Besides, I'm not likely to survive the clash with your renegade kin.'

'That is true,' Monok Ochem agreed.

'You will likely make sure of it,' Trull Sengar added.

The bonecaster said nothing.

But I shall defend him. Perhaps Monok and Ibra understand this, and so they will strike at me first. It is what I would do, were I in their place. Which, oddly enough, I am.

The trail opened suddenly into a clearing filled with bones. Countless beasts of the jungle and savanna had been dragged here by, Onrack surmised, leopards or hyenas. The longbones he noted were all gnawed and split open by powerful jaws. The air reeked of rotted flesh and flies swarmed in the thousands.

'The Eres did not fashion holy sites of their own,' Monok Ochem said, 'but they understood that there were places where death gathered, where life was naught but memories, drifting lost and bemused. And, to such places, they would often bring their own dead. Power gathers in layers – this is the birthplace of the sacred.'

'And so you have transformed it into a gate,' Trull Sengar said.

'Yes,' the bonecaster replied.

'You are too eager to credit the Imass, Monok Ochem,' Onrack said. He faced the Tiste Edur. 'Eres holy sites burned through the barriers of Tellann. They are too old to be resisted.'

'You said their sanctity was born of death. Are they Hood's, then?'

'No. Hood did not exist when these were fashioned, Trull Sengar. Nor are they strictly death-aspected. Their
power comes, as Monok Ochem said, from layers. Stone shaped into tools and weapons. Air shaped by throats. Minds that discovered, faint as flickering fires in the sky, the recognition of oblivion, of an end ... to life, to love. Eyes that witnessed the struggle to survive, and saw with wonder its inevitable failure. To know and to understand that we must all die, Trull Sengar, is not to worship death. To know and to understand is itself magic, for it made us stand tall.

'It seems, then,' Trull Sengar muttered, 'that you Imass have broken the oldest laws of all, with your Vow.'

'Neither Monok Ochem nor Ibra Gholan will speak in answer to that truth,' Onrack said. 'You are right, however. We are the first lawbreakers, and that we have survived this long is fit punishment. And so, it remains our hope that the Summoner will grant us absolution.'

'Faith is a dangerous thing,' Trull Sengar sighed. 'Well, shall we make use of this gate?'

Monok Ochem gestured, and the scene around them blurred, the light fading.

A moment before the darkness became absolute, a faint shout from the Tiste Edur drew Onrack's attention. The warrior turned, in time to see a figure standing a dozen paces away. Tall, lithely muscled, with a fine umber-hued pelt and long, shaggy hair reaching down past the shoulders. A woman. Her breasts were large and pendulous, her hips wide and full. Prominent, flaring cheekbones, a broad, full-lipped mouth. All this registered in an instant, even as the woman's dark brown eyes, shadowed beneath a solid brow, scanned across the three T'lan Imass before fixing on Trull Sengar.

She took a step towards the Tiste Edur, the movement graceful as a deer's—

Then the light vanished entirely.

Onrack heard another surprised shout from Trull Sengar. The T'lan Imass strode towards the sound, then halted, thoughts suddenly scattering, a flash of images cascading through the warrior's mind. Time folding in on itself, sinking away, then rising once more—

Sparks danced low to the ground, tinder caught, flames flickering.

They were in the crevasse, standing on its littered floor. Onrack looked for Trull Sengar, found the Tiste Edur lying prone on the damp rock a half-dozen paces away.

The T'lan Imass approached.

The mortal was unconscious. There was blood smearing his lap, pooling beneath his crotch, and Onrack could see it cooling, suggesting that it did not belong to Trull Sengar, but to the Eres woman who had ... taken his seed.

_His first seed._ But there had been nothing to her appearance suggesting virginity. Her breasts had swollen with milk in the past; her nipples had known the pressure of a pup's hunger. The blood, then, made no sense.

Onrack crouched beside Trull Sengar.

And saw the fresh wound of scarification beneath his belly button. Three parallel cuts, drawn across diagonally, and the stained imprints of three more – likely those the woman had cut across her own belly – running in the opposite direction.

'The Eres witch has stolen his seed,' Monok Ochem said from two paces away.

'Why?' Onrack asked.

'I do not know, Onrack the Broken. The Eres have the minds of beasts—'

'Not to the exclusion of all else,' Onrack replied, 'as you well know.'

'Perhaps.'
'Clearly, this one had intent.'

Monok Ochem nodded. 'So it would seem. Why does the Tiste Edur remain unconscious?'

'His mind is elsewhere—'

The bonecaster cocked its head. 'Yes, that is the definition of unconscious—'

'No, it is elsewhere. When I stepped close, I came into contact with sorcery. That which the Eres projected. For lack of any other term, it was a warren, barely formed, on the very edge of oblivion. It was,' Onrack paused, then continued, 'like the Eres themselves. A glimmer of light behind the eyes.'

Ibra Gholan suddenly drew his weapon.

Onrack straightened.

There were sounds, now, beyond the fire's light, and the T'lan Imass could see the glow of flesh and blood bodies, a dozen, then a score. Something else approached, the footfalls uneven and shambling.

A moment later, an aptorian demon loomed into the light, a shape unfolding like black silk. And riding its humped, singular shoulder, a youth. Its body was human, yet its face held the features of the aptorian – a massive, lone eye, glistening and patterned like honeycomb. A large mouth, now opening to reveal needle fangs that seemed capable of retracting, all but their tips vanishing from sight. The rider wore black leather armour, shaped like scales and overlapping. A chest harness bore at least a dozen weapons, ranging from long-knives to throwing darts. Affixed to the youth's belt were two single-hand crossbows, their grips fashioned from the base shafts of antlers.

The rider leaned forward over the spiny, humped shoulder. Then spoke in a low, rasping voice. 'Is this all that Logros can spare?'

'You,' Monok Ochem said, 'are not welcome.'

'Too bad, Bonecaster, for we are here. To guard the First Throne.'

Onrack asked, 'Who are you, and who has sent you here?'

'I am Panek, son of Apt. It is not for me to answer your other question, T'lan Imass. I but guard the outer ward. The chamber that is home to the First Throne possesses an inner warden – the one who commands us. Perhaps she can answer you. Perhaps, even, she will.'

Onrack picked up Trull Sengar. 'We would speak with her, then.'

Panek smiled, revealing the crowded row of fangs. 'As I said, the Throne Room. No doubt,' he added, smile broadening, 'you know the way.'
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In the oldest, most fragmentary of texts, will be found obscure mention of the Eres'al, a name that seems to refer to those most ancient of spirits that are the essence of the physical world. There is, of course, no empirical means of determining whether the attribution of meaning – the power inherent in making symbols of the inanimate – was causative, in essence the creative force behind the Eres'al; or if some other mysterious power was involved, inviting the accretion of meaning and significance by intelligent forms of life at some later date.

In either case, what cannot be refuted is the rarely acknowledged but formidable power that exists like subterranean layers in notable features of the land; nor that such power is manifested with subtle yet profound efficacy, even so much as to twist the stride of gods – indeed, occasionally sufficient to bring them down with finality...

Preface to the Compendium of Maps
Kellarstellis of Li Heng

The vast shelves and ridges of coral had been worn into flat-topped islands by millennia of drifting sand and wind. Their flanks were ragged and rotted, pitted and undercut, the low ground in between them narrow, twisting and filled with sharp-edged rubble. To Gamet's eye, the gods could not have chosen a less suitable place to encamp an army.

Yet there seemed little choice. Nowhere else offered an approach onto the field of battle, and, as quickly became evident, the position, once taken, was as defensible as the remotest mountain keep: a lone saving grace.

Tavore's headlong approach into the maw of the enemy, to the battleground of their choosing, was, the Fist suspected, the primary source of the unease and vague confusion afflicting the legions. He watched the soldiers proceeding, in units of a hundred, on their way to taking and holding various coral islands overlooking the basin. Once in place, they would then construct from the rubble defensive barriers and low walls, followed by ramps on the south sides.

Captain Keneb shifted nervously on his saddle beside the Fist as they watched the first squads of their own legion set out towards a large, bone-white island on the westernmost edge of the basin. 'They won't try to dislodge us from these islands,' he said. 'Why bother, since it's obvious the Adjunct intends to march us right into their laps?'

Gamet was not deaf to the criticisms and doubt hidden beneath Keneb's words, and he wished he could say something to encourage the man, to bolster faith in Tavore's ability to formulate and progress sound tactics. But even the Fist was unsure. There had been no sudden revelation of genius during the march from Aren. They had, in truth, walked straight as a lance northward. Suggesting what, exactly? A singlemindedness worthy of imitation, or a failure of imagination? Are the two so different, or merely alternate approaches to the same thing? And now they were being arrayed, as stolid as ever, to advance – probably at dawn the next day – towards the enemy and their entrenched fortifications. An enemy clever enough to create singular and difficult approaches to their positions.

'Those ramps will see the death of us all,' Keneb muttered. 'Korbolo Dom's prepared for this, as any competent, Malazan-trained commander would. He wants us crowded and struggling uphill, beneath an endless hail of arrows, quarrels and ballista, not to mention sorcery. Look at how smooth he's made those ramp surfaces, Fist. The cobbles, when slick with streaming blood, will be like grease underfoot. We'll find no purchase—'

'I am not blind,' Gamet growled. 'Nor, we must assume, is the Adjunct.'

Keneb shot the older man a look. 'It would help to have some reassurance of that, Fist.'
'There shall be a meeting of officers tonight,' Gamet replied. 'And again a bell before dawn.'

'She's already decided the disposition of our legion,' Keneb grated, leaning on his saddle and spitting in the local fashion.

'Aye, she has, Captain.' They were to guard avenues of retreat, not for their own forces, but those the enemy might employ. A premature assumption of victory that whispered of madness. They were outnumbered. Every advantage was with Sha'ik, yet almost one-third of the Adjunct's army would not participate in the battle. 'And the Adjunct expects us to comply with professional competence,' Gamet added.

'As she commands,' Keneb growled.

Dust was rising as the sappers and engineers worked on the fortifications and ramps. The day was blisteringly hot, the wind barely a desultory breath. The Khundryl, Seti and Wickan horse warriors remained south of the coral islands, awaiting the construction of a road that would give them egress to the basin. Even then, there would be scant room to manoeuvre. Gamet suspected that Tavore would hold most of them back – the basin was not large enough for massed cavalry charges, for either side. Sha'ik's own desert warriors would most likely be held in reserve, a fresh force to pursue the Malazans should they be broken. And, in turn, the Khundryl can cover such a retreat . . . or rout. A rather ignoble conclusion, the remnants of the Malazan army riding double on Khundryl horses – the Fist grimaced at the image and angrily swept it from his mind. 'The Adjunct knows what she is doing,' he asserted.

Keneb said nothing.

A messenger approached on foot. 'Fist Gamet,' the man called out, 'the Adjunct requests your presence.'

'I will keep an eye on the legion,' Keneb said.

Gamet nodded and wheeled his horse around. The motion made his head spin for a moment – he was still waking with headaches – then he steadied himself with a deep breath and nodded towards the messenger.

They made slow passage through the chaotic array of troops moving to and fro beneath the barked commands of the officers, towards a low hill closest to the basin. Gamet could see the Adjunct astride her horse on that hill, along with, on foot, Nil and Nether.

'I see them,' Gamet said to the messenger.

'Aye, sir, I'll leave you to it, then.'

Riding clear of the press, Gamet brought his horse into a canter and moments later reined in alongside the Adjunct.

The position afforded them a clear view of the enemy emplacements, and, just as they observed, so too in turn were they being watched by a small knot of figures atop the central ramp.

'How sharp are your eyes, Fist?' the Adjunct asked.

'Not sharp enough,' he replied.

'Korbolo Dom. Kamist Reloe. Six officers. Kamist has quested in our direction, seeking signs of mages. High Mages, specifically. Of course, given that Nil and Nether are with me, they cannot be found by Kamist Reloe's sorceries. Tell me, Fist Gamet, how confident do you imagine Korbolo Dom feels right now?'

He studied her a moment. She was in her armour, the visor of her helm lifted, her eyes half-lidded against the bright glare bouncing from the basin's hard-packed, crackled clay. 'I would think, Adjunct,' he replied slowly, 'that his measure of confidence is wilting.'

She glanced over. 'Wilting. Why?'

'Because it all looks too easy. Too overwhelmingly in his favour, Adjunct.'
She fell silent, returning her gaze to the distant enemy.

Is this what she wanted me for? To ask that one question?

Gamet switched his attention to the two Wickans. Nil had grown during the march, leading Gamet to suspect that he would be a tall man in a few years’ time. He wore only a loincloth and looked feral with his wild, unbraided hair and green and black body-paint.

Nether, he realized with some surprise, had filled out beneath her deer-skin hides, a chubbiness that was common to girls before they came of age. The severity of her expression was very nearly fixed now, transforming what should have been a pretty face into a mien forbidding and burdened. Her black hair was shorn close, betokening a vow of grief.

‘Kamist's questing is done,’ the Adjunct suddenly pronounced. ‘He will need to rest, now.’ She turned in her saddle and by some prearranged signal two Wickan warriors jogged up the slope. Tavore unhitched her sword-belt and passed it to them. They quickly retreated with the otataral weapon.

Reluctantly, Nil and Nether settled cross-legged onto the stony ground.

‘Fist Gamet,’ the Adjunct said, ‘if you would, draw your dagger and spill a few drops from your right palm.’

Without a word he tugged off his gauntlet, slid his dagger from its scabbard and scored the edge across the fleshy part of his hand. Blood welled from the cut. Gamet held it out, watched as the blood spilled down to the ground.

Dizziness struck him and he reeled in the saddle a moment before regaining his balance.

Nether voiced a hiss of surprise.

Gamet glanced down at her. Her eyes were closed, both hands pressed against the sandy ground. Nil had assumed the same posture and on his face flitted a wild sequence of emotions, fixing at last on fear.

The Fist was still feeling light-headed, a faint roaring sound filling his skull.

‘There are spirits here,’ Nil growled. ‘Rising with anger—’

‘A song,’ Nether cut in. ‘Of war, and warriors—’

‘New and old,’ her brother said. ‘So very new ... and so very old. Battle and death, again and again—’

‘The land remembers every struggle played out on its surface, on all its surfaces, from the very beginning.’ Nether grimaced, then shivered, her eyes squeezed shut. ‘The goddess is as nothing to this power — yet she would ... steal.’

The Adjunct’s voice was sharp. ‘Steal?’

‘The warren,’ Nil replied. ‘She would claim this fragment, and settle it upon this land like a parasite. Roots of shadow, slipping down to draw sustenance, to feed on the land's memories.’

‘And the spirits will not have it,’ Nether whispered.

‘They are resisting?’ the Adjunct asked.

Both Wickans nodded, then Nil bared his teeth and said, ‘Ghosts cast no shadows. You were right, Adjunct. Gods, you were right!’

Right? Gamet wondered. Right about what?

‘And will they suffice?’ Tavore demanded.

Nil shook his head. ‘I don't know. Only if the Talon Master does what you think he will do, Adjunct.’
'Assuming,' Nether added, 'Sha’ik is unaware of the viper in her midst.'

'Had she known,' Tavore said, 'she would have separated his head from his shoulders long ago.'

'Perhaps,' Nether replied, and Gamet heard the scepticism in her tone. 'Unless she and her goddess decided to wait until all their enemies were gathered.'

The Adjunct returned her gaze to the distant officers. 'Let us see, shall we?'

Both Wickans rose, then shared a glance unwitnessed by Tavore.

Gamet rubbed his uncut hand along his brow beneath the helm's rim, and his fingers came away dripping with sweat. Something had used him, he realized shakily. Through the medium of his blood. He could hear distant music, a song of voices and unrecognizable instruments. A pressure was building in his skull. 'If you are done with me, Adjunct,' he said roughly.

She nodded without looking over. 'Return to your legion, Fist. Convey to your officers, please, the following. Units may appear during the battle on the morrow which you will not recognize. They may seek orders, and you are to give them as if they were under your command.'

'Understood, Adjunct.'

'Have a cutter attend to your hand, Fist Gamet, and thank you. Also, ask the guards to return to me my sword.'

'Aye.' He wheeled his horse and walked it down the slope.

The headache was not fading, and the song itself seemed to have poisoned his veins, a music of flesh and bone that hinted of madness. Leave me in peace, damn you. A soldier ...

Strings sat on the boulder, his head in his hands. He had flung off the helm but had no memory of having done so, and it lay at his feet, blurry and wavering behind the waves of pain that rose and fell like a storm-tossed sea. Voices were speaking around him, seeking to reach him, but he could make no sense of what was being said. The song had burgeoned sudden and fierce in his skull, flowing through his limbs like fire.

A hand gripped his shoulder, and he felt a sorcerous questing seep into his veins, tentatively at first, then flinching away entirely, only to return with more force – and with it, a spreading silence. Blissful peace, cool and calm.

Finally, the sergeant was able to look up.

He found his squad gathered around him. The hand fixed onto his shoulder was Bottle's, and the lad's face was pale, beaded with sweat. Their eyes locked, then Bottle nodded and slowly withdrew his hand.

'Can you hear me, Sergeant?'

'Faint, as if you were thirty paces away.'

'Is the pain gone?'

'Aye – what did you do?'

Bottle glanced away.

Strings frowned, then said, 'Everyone else, back to work. Stay here, Bottle.'

Cuttle cuffed Tarr and the corporal straightened and mumbled, 'Let's go, soldiers. There's pits to dig.'

The sergeant and Bottle watched the others head off, retrieving their picks and shovels as they went. The squad was positioned on the southwesternmost island, overlooking dunes that reached out to the horizon. A
single, sufficiently wide corridor lay directly to the north, through which the enemy – if broken and fleeing – would come as they left the basin. Just beyond it lay a modest, flat-topped tel, on which a company of mounted desert warriors were ensconced, the crest dotted with scouts keeping a careful eye on the Malazans.

'All right, Bottle,' Strings said, 'out with it.'

'Spirits, Sergeant. They're ... awakening.'

'And what in Hood's name has that got to do with me?'

'Mortal blood, I think. It has its own song. They remember it. They came to you, Sergeant, eager to add their voices to it. To ... uh ... to you.'

'Why me?'

'I don't know.'

Strings studied the young mage for a moment, mulling on the taste of that lie, then grimaced and said, 'You think it's because I'm fated to die here – at this battle.'

Bottle looked away once more. 'I'm not sure, Sergeant. It's way beyond me . . . this land. And its spirits. And what it all has to do with you—'

'I'm a Bridgeburner, lad. The Bridgeburners were born here. In Raraku's crucible.'

Bottle's eyes thinned as he studied the desert to the west. 'But... they were wiped out.'

'Aye, they were.'

Neither spoke for a time. Koryk had broken his shovel on a rock and was stringing together an admirable list of Seti curses. The others had stopped to listen. On the northern edge of the island Gesler's squad was busy building a wall of rubble, which promptly toppled, the boulders tumbling down the far edge. Distant hoots and howls sounded from the tel across the way.

'It won't be your usual battle, will it?' Bottle asked.

Strings shrugged. 'There's no such thing, lad. There's nothing usual about killing and dying, about pain and terror.'

'That's not what I meant—'

'I know it ain't, Bottle. But wars these days are fraught with sorcery and munitions, so you come to expect surprises.'

Gesler's two dogs trotted past, the huge cattle dog trailing the Hengese Roach as if the hairy lapdog carried its own leash.

'This place is . . . complicated,' Bottle sighed. He reached down and picked up a large, disc-shaped rock. 'Eres'al,' he said. 'A hand-axe – the basin down there's littered with them. Smoothed by the lake that once filled it. Took days to make one of these, then they didn't even use them – they just flung them into the lake. Makes no sense, does it? Why make a tool then not use it?'

Strings stared at the mage. 'What are you talking about, Bottle? Who are the Eres'al?'

'Were, Sergeant. They're long gone.'

'The spirits?'

'No, those are from all times, from every age this land has known. My grandmother spoke of the Eres. The Dwellers who lived in the time before the Imass, the first makers of tools, the first shapers of their world.' He shook his head, fought down a shiver. 'I never expected to meet one – it was there, she was there, in that song
within you.'

'And she told you about these tools?'

'Not directly. More like I shared it – well, her mind. She was the one who gifted you the silence. It wasn't me – I don't have that power – but I asked, and she showed mercy. At least' – he glanced at Strings – 'I gather it was a mercy.'

'Aye, lad, it was. Can you still ... speak with that Eres?'

'No. All I wanted to do was get out of there – out of that blood—'

'My blood.'

'Well, most of it's your blood, Sergeant.'

'And the rest?'

'Belongs to that song. The, uh, Bridgeburners' song.'

Strings closed his eyes, settled his head against the boulder behind him. *Kimloc, that damned Tanno Spiritwalker in Ehrlitan. I said no, but he did it anyway. He stole my story — not just mine, but the Bridgeburners' — and he made of it a song. The bastard's gone and given us back to Raraku...* 

'Go help the others, Bottle.'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

'And ... thanks.'

'I'll pass that along, when next I meet the Eres witch.'

Strings stared after the mage. *So there'll be a next time, will there? Just how much didn't you tell me, lad? He wondered if the morrow would indeed be witness to his last battle. Hardly a welcome thought, but maybe it was necessary. Maybe he was being called to join the fallen Bridgeburners. Not so bad, then. Couldn't ask for more miserable company. Damn, but I miss them. I miss them all. Even Hedge.*

The sergeant opened his eyes and climbed to his feet, collecting then donning his helm. He turned to stare out over the basin to the northeast, to the enemy emplacements and the dust and smoke of the city hidden within the oasis. *You too, Kalam Mekhar. I wonder if you know why you're here ...*

The shaman was in a frenzy, twitching and hissing as he scuttled like a crab in dusty circles around the flat slab of bone that steadily blackened on the hearth. Corabb, his mouth filled with a half-dozen of the scarab shells strung round his neck to ward off evil, winced as his chattering teeth crunched down on one carapace, filling his mouth with a bitter taste. He plucked the necklace from his mouth and began spitting out pieces of shell.

Leoman strode up to the shaman and grabbed the scrawny man by his telaba, lifted him clear off the ground, then shook him. A flurry of cloth and hair and flying spittle, then Leoman set the shaman down once more and growled, 'What did you see?'

'Armies!' the old man shrieked, tugging at his nose as if it had just arrived on his face.

Leoman scowled. 'Aye, we can see those too, you damned fakir—'

'No! More armies!' He scrabbled past and ran to the southern crest of the tel, where he began hopping about and pointing at the Malazans entrenching on the island opposite the old drainage channel.

Leoman made no move to follow. He walked over to where Corabb and three other warriors crouched behind a low wall. 'Corabb, send another rider to Sha'ik — no, on second thought, you go yourself. Even if she will not bother acknowledging our arrival, I want to know how Mathok's tribes will be arrayed come the dawn. Find
out, once you have spoken with Sha'ik – and Corabb, be certain you speak with her in person. Then return here.'

'I shall do as you command,' Corabb announced, straightening.

Twenty paces away the shaman wheeled round and screamed, 'They are here! The dogs, Leoman! The dogs! *The Wickan dogs*.'

Leoman scowled. 'The fool's gone mad ...'

Corabb jogged over to his horse. He would waste no time saddling the beast, especially if it meant hearing more of the shaman's insane observations. He vaulted onto the animal, tightened the straps holding the lance crossways on his back, then collected the reins and spurred the animal into motion.

The route to the oasis was twisting and tortured, winding between deep sand and jagged outcrops, forcing him to slow his mount's pace and let it pick its own way along the trail.

The day was drawing to a close, shadows deepening where the path wound its way into high-walled gullies closer to the southwestern edge of the oasis. As his horse scrabbled over some rubble and walked round a sharp bend, the sudden stench of putrefaction reached both animal and man simultaneously.

The path was blocked. A dead horse and, just beyond it, a corpse.

Heart thudding, Corabb slipped down from his mount and moved cautiously forward.

Leoman's messenger, the one he had sent as soon as the troop had arrived. A crossbow quarrel had taken him on the temple, punching through bone then exploding out messily the other side.

Corabb scanned the jagged walls to either side. If there'd been assassins stationed there he would already be dead, he reasoned. Probably, then, they weren't expecting any more messengers.

He returned to his horse. It was a struggle coaxing the creature over the bodies, but eventually he led the beast clear of them and leapt onto its back once more. Eyes roving restlessly, he continued on.

Sixty paces later and the trail ahead opened out onto the sandy slope, beyond which could be seen the dusty mantles of gulindha trees.

Breathing a relieved sigh, Corabb urged his horse forward.

Two hammer blows against his back flung him forward. Without stirrups or saddlehorn to grab on to, Corabb threw his arms out around the horse's neck – even as the animal squealed in pain and bolted. The motion almost jolted loose his panicked grip, and the horse's right knee cracked hard, again and again, into his helm, until it fell away and the knobby joint repeatedly pounded against his head.

Corabb held on, even as he continued slipping down, then around, until his body was being pummelled by both front legs. The encumbrance proved sufficient to slow the animal as it reached the slope, and Corabb, one leg dangling, his heel bouncing over the hard ground, managed to pull himself up under his horse's head.

Another quarrel cracked into the ground and skittered away off to the left.

The horse halted halfway up the slope.

Corabb brought his other leg down, then pivoted around to the opposite side and vaulted onto the animal once more. He'd lost the reins, but closed both fingers in the horse's mane as he drove his heels into the beast's flanks.

Yet another quarrel caromed from the rocks, then hooves were thudding on sand, and sudden sunlight bathed them.

Directly ahead lay the oasis, and the cover of trees.

Corabb leaned onto the mount's neck and urged it ever faster.
They plunged onto a trail between the guldindhas. Glancing back, he saw a deep rip running down his horse's left flank, leaking blood. And then he caught sight of his lance, dangling loose now from his back. There were two quarrels embedded in the shaft. Each had struck at a different angle, and the impact must have been nearly simultaneous, since the splits had bound against each other, halting the momentum of both quarrels.

Corabb lifted the ruined weapon clear and flung it away.

He rode hard down the trail.

'A tiger's barbs,' she murmured, her eyes veiled behind rust-leaf smoke, 'painted onto a toad. Somehow, it makes you look even more dangerous.'

'Aye, lass, I'm pure poison,' Heboric muttered as he studied her in the gloom. There was life in her gaze once more, a sharpness that went beyond the occasional cutting remark, hinting at a mind finally cleared of durhang's dulling fog. She still coughed as if her lungs were filled with fluid, although the sage mixed in with the rust-leaf had eased that somewhat.

She was returning his regard with an inquisitive – if slightly hard – expression, drawing steadily on the hookah's mouthpiece, smoke tumbling down from her nostrils.

'If I could see you,' Heboric muttered, 'I'd conclude you've improved some.'

'I have, Destriant of Treach, though I would have thought those feline eyes of yours could pierce every veil.'

He grunted. 'It's more that you no longer slur your words, Scillara.'

'What do we do now?' she asked after a moment.

'Dusk will soon arrive. I would go out to find L'oric, and I would that you accompany me.'

'And then?'

'Then, I would lead you to Felisin Younger.'

'Sha'ik's adopted daughter.'

'Aye.'

Scillara glanced away, meditative as she drew deep on the rust-leaf.

'How old are you, lass?'

She shrugged, 'As old as I have to be. If I am to take Felisin Younger's orders, so be it. Resentment is pointless.'

An awkward conversation, progressing in leaps that left Heboric scrambling. Sha'ik was much the same. Perhaps, he reflected with a grimace, this talent for intuitive thinking was a woman's alone – he admittedly had little experience upon which he could draw, despite his advanced years. Fener's temple was predominantly male, when it came to the holy order itself, and Heboric's life as a thief had, of necessity, included only a handful of close associations. He was, once more, out of his depth. 'Felisin Younger has, I believe, little interest in commanding anyone. This is not an exchange of one cult for another, Scillara – not in the way you seem to think it is, at any rate. No-one will seek to manipulate you here.'

'As you have explained, Destriant.' She sighed heavily and sat straighter, setting down the hookah's mouthpiece. 'Very well, lead me into the darkness.'

His eyes narrowed on her. 'I shall ... as soon as it arrives . . .'

The shadows were drawing long, sufficient to swallow the entire basin below their position. Sha'ik stood at the
crest of the northernmost ramp, studying the distant masses of Malazan soldiery on the far rises as they continued digging in. Ever methodical, was her sister.

She glanced to her left and scanned Korbolo Dom's positions. All was in readiness for the morrow's battle, and she could see the Napan commander, surrounded by aides and guards, standing at the edge of the centre ramp, doing as she herself was doing: watching Tavore's army.

We are all in place. Suddenly, the whole thing seemed so pointless. This game of murderous tyrants, pushing their armies forward into an inevitable clash. Coldly disregarding of the lives that would be lost in the appeasement of their brutal desires. What value this mindless hunger to rule? What do you want with us, Empress Laseen? Seven Cities will never rest easy beneath your yoke. You shall have to enslave, and what is gained by that? And what of her own goddess? Was she any different from Laseen? Every claw was outstretched, eager to grasp, to rend, to soak the sand red with gore.

But Raraku does not belong to you, dear Dryjhna, no matter how ferocious your claims. I see that now. This desert is holy unto itself. And now it rails – feel it, goddess! It rails! Against one and all.

Standing beside her, Mathok had been studying the Malazan positions in silence. But now he spoke. 'The Adjunct has made an appearance, Chosen One.'

Sha'iik dragged her gaze from Korbolo Dom and looked to where the desert war chief pointed.

Astride a horse from the Paran stables. Of course. Two Wickans on foot nearby. Her sister was in full armour, her helm glinting crimson in the dying light.

Sha'iik's eyes snapped back to Korbolo's position. 'Kamist Reloe has arrived ... he's opened his warren and now quests towards the enemy. But Tavore's otataral sword defies him ... so he reaches around, into the army itself. Seeking High Mages ... unsuspected allies ...' After a moment she sighed. 'And finds none but a few shamans and squad mages.'

Mathok rumbled, 'Those two Wickans with the Adjunct. They are the ones known as Nil and Nether.'

'Yes. Said to be broken of spirit – they have none of the power that their clans once gave them, for those clans have been annihilated.'

'Even so, Chosen One,' Mathok muttered, 'that she holds them within the fog of otataral suggests they are not as weak as we would believe.'

'Or that Tavore does not want their weakness revealed.'

'Why bother if such failure is already known to us?'

'To deepen our doubt, Mathok,' she replied.

He curtly gestured, adding a frustrated growl. 'This mire has no surface, Chosen One——'

'Wait!' Sha'iik stared once again at Tavore. 'She has sent her weapon away – Kamist Reloe has withdrawn his questing – and now ... ah!' The last word was a startled cry, as she felt the muted unveiling of power from both Nil and Nether – a power far greater than it had any right to be.

Sha'iik then gasped, as the goddess within her flinched back – as if stung — and loosed a shriek that filled her skull.

For Raraku was answering the summons, a multitude of voices, rising in song, rising with raw, implacable desire – the sound, Sha'iik realized, of countless souls straining against the chains that bound them.

Chains of shadow. Chains like roots. From this torn, alien fragment of warren. This piece of shadow, that has risen to bind their souls and so feeds upon the life-force. 'Mathok, where is Leoman?' We need Leoman.

'I do not know, Chosen One.'
She turned once more and stared at Korbolo Dom. He stood foremost on the ramp, his stance squared, thumbs hitched into his sword-belt, studying the enemy with an air of supreme confidence that made Sha'ik want to scream.

Nothing – *nothing* was as it seemed.

To the west, the sun had turned the horizon into a crimson conflagration. The day was drowning in a sea of flame, and she watched shadows flowing across the land, her heart growing cold.

The alley outside Heboric's tent was empty in both directions. The sun's sudden descent seemed to bring a strange silence along with the gloom. Dust hung motionless in the air.

The Destriant of Treach paused in the aisle.

Behind him Scillara said, 'Where is everyone?'

He had been wondering the same thing. Then, slowly, the hairs rose on the back of his neck. 'Can you hear that, lass?'

'Only the wind ...'

But there was no wind.

'No, not wind,' Scillara murmured. 'A song. From far away – the Malazan army, do you think?'

He shook his head, but said nothing.

After a moment Heboric gestured Scillara to follow and he set out down the alley. The song seemed suspended in the very air, raising a haze of dust that seemed to shiver before his eyes. Sweat ran down his limbs. *Fear. Fear has driven this entire city from the streets. Those voices are the sound of war.*

'There should be children,' Scillara said. 'Girls ...'

'Why girls more than anyone else, lass?'

'Bidithal's spies. His chosen servants.'

He glanced back at her. 'Those he ... scars?'

'Yes. They should be ... everywhere. Without them—'

'Bidithal is blind. It may well be he has sent them elsewhere, or even withdrawn them entirely. There will be ... events this night, Scillara. Blood will be spilled. The players are, no doubt, even now drawing into position.'

'He spoke of this night,' she said. 'The hours of darkness before the battle. He said the world will change this night.'

Heboric bared his teeth. 'The fool has sunk to the bottom of the Abyss, and now stirs the black mud.'

'He dreams of true Darkness unfolding, Destriant. Shadow is but an upstart, a realm born of compromise and filled with impostors. The fragments must be returned to the First Mother.'

'Not just a fool, then, but mad. To speak of the most ancient of battles, as if he himself is a force worthy of it – Bidithal has lost his mind.'

'He says something is coming,' Scillara said, shrugging. 'Suspected by no-one, and only Bidithal himself has any hope of controlling it, for he alone remembers the Dark.'

Heboric halted. 'Hood take his soul. I must go to him. Now.'

'We will find him—'
'In his damned temple, aye. Come on.'

They swung about.

Even as two figures emerged from the gloom of an alley mouth, blades flickering out.

With a snarl, Heboric closed on them. One taloned hand shot out, tore under and into an assassin's neck, then snapped upward, lifting the man's head clean from his shoulders.

The other killer lunged, knife-point darting for Heboric's left eye. The Destriant caught the man's wrist and crushed both bones. A slash from his other hand spilled the assassin's entrails onto the dusty street.

Flinging the body away, Heboric glared about. Scillara stood a few paces back, her eyes wide. Ignoring her, the Destriant crouched down over the nearest corpse. 'Korbolo Dom's. Too impatient by far—'

Three quarrels struck him simultaneously. One deep into his right hip, shattering bone. Another plunging beneath his right shoulder blade to draw short a finger's breadth from his spine. The third, arriving from the opposite direction, took him high on his left shoulder with enough force to spin him round, so that he tumbled back-ward over the corpse.

Scillara scrabbled down beside him. 'Old man? Do you live?'

'Bastards,' he growled. 'That hurts.'

'They're coming—'

'To finish me off, aye. Flee, lass. To the stone forest. Go!'

He felt her leave his side, heard her light steps patter away.

Heboric sought to rise, but agony ripped up from his broken hip, left him gasping and blinded.

Approaching footsteps, three sets, moccasined, two from the right and one from the left. Knives whispered from sheaths. Closing . . . then silence.

Someone was standing over Heboric. Through his blurred vision, he could make out dust-smeared boots, and from them a stench, as of musty, dry death. Another set of boots scuffed the ground beyond the Destriant's feet.

'Begone, wraiths,' a voice hissed from a half-dozen paces away.

'Too late for that, assassin,' murmured the figure above Heboric. 'Besides, we've only just arrived.'

'In the name of Hood, Hoarder of Souls, I banish you from this realm.'

A soft laugh answered the killer's command. 'Kneel before Hood, do you? Oh yes, I felt the power in your words. Alas, Hood's out of his depth on this one. Ain't that right, lass?'

A deep, grunting assent from the one standing near Heboric's feet.

'Last warning,' the assassin growled. 'Our blades are sanctioned – they will bleed your souls—'

'No doubt. Assuming they ever reach us.'

'There are but two of you ... and three of us.'

'Two?'

Scuffing sounds, then, sharp and close, the spray of blood onto the ground. Bodies thumped, long breaths exhaled wetly.

'Should've left one alive,' said another woman's voice.
'Why?'

'So we could send him back to that fly-blown Napan bastard with a promise for the morrow.'

'Better this way, lass. No-one appreciates surprise any more – that's what's gone wrong with the world, if you ask me—'

'Well, we wasn't asking you. This old man going to make it, you think?'

A grunt. 'I doubt Treach will give up on his new Destriant with nary a meow. Besides, that sweet-lunged beauty is on her way back.'

'Time for us to leave, then.'

'Aye.'

'And from now on we don't surprise no-one, 'til come the dawn. Understood?'

'Temptation got the better of us. Won't happen again.'

Silence, then footsteps once more. A small hand settled on his brow.

'Scillara?'

'Yes, it's me. There were soldiers here, I think. They didn't look too good—'

'Never mind that. Pull the quarrels from me. Flesh wants to heal, bone to knit. Pull 'em out, lass.'

'And then?'

'Drag me back to my temple ... if you can.'

'All right.'

He felt a hand close on the quarrel buried in his left shoulder. A flash of pain, then nothing.

Elder Sha'ik's armour was laid out on the table. One of Mathok's warriors had replaced the worn straps and fittings, then polished the bronze plates and the full, visored helm. The longsword was oiled, its edges finely honed. The iron-rimmed hide-covered shield leaned against one table leg.

She stood, alone in the chamber, staring down at the accoutrements left by her predecessor. The old woman reputedly had skill with the blade. The helm seemed strangely oversized, its vented cheek guards flared and full length, hinged to the heavy brow-band. Fine blackened chain hung web-like across the eye-slits. A long, wide lobster-tail neck guard sprawled out from the back rim.

She walked over to the quilted under-padding. It was heavy, sweat-stained, the laces beneath the arms and running the length of the sides. Boiled leather plates covered her upper thighs, shoulders, arms and wrists. Working methodically, she tightened every lace and strap, shifting about to settle the weight evenly before turning to the armour itself.

Most of the night remained, stretching before her like infinity's dark road, but she wanted to feel the armour encasing her; she wanted its massive weight, and so she affixed the leg greaves, footplates and wrist vambraces, then shrugged her way into the breastplate. Sorcery had lightened the bronze, and its sound as it rustled was like thin tin. The design allowed her to cinch the straps herself, and moments later she picked up the sword and slid it into its scabbard, then drew the heavy belt about her waist, setting the hooks that held it to the cuirass so that its weight did not drag at her hips.

All that remained was the pair of gauntlets, and the under-helm and helm itself. She hesitated. Have I any choice in all this? The goddess remained a towering presence in her mind, rooted through every muscle and fibre, her voice whispering in the flow of blood in her veins and arteries. Ascendant power was in Sha'ik's
grasp, and she knew she would use it when the time came. Or, rather, it would use her.

*To kill my sister.*

She sensed the approach of someone and turned to face the entrance. 'You may enter, L'oric.'

The High Mage stepped into view.

Sha'ilk blinked. He was wearing armour. White, enamelled, scarred and stained with use. A long, narrow-bladed sword hung at his hip. After a moment, she sighed. 'And so we all make preparations ...'

'As you have observed before, Mathok has over three hundred warriors guarding this palace, Chosen One. Guarding ... you.'

'He exaggerates the risk. The Malazans are far too busy—'

'The danger he anticipates, Chosen One, lies not with the Malazans.'

She studied him. 'You look exhausted, L'oric. I suggest you return to your tent and get some rest. I shall have need for you on the morrow.'

'You will not heed my warning?'

'The goddess protects me. I have nothing to fear. Besides,' she smiled, 'Mathok has three hundred of his chosen warriors guarding this palace.'

'Sha'ilk, there will be a convergence this night. You have readers of the Deck among your advisers. Command they field their cards, and all that I say will be confirmed. Ascendant powers are gathering. The stench of treachery is in the air.'

She waved a hand. 'None of it matters, L'oric. I cannot be touched. Nor will the goddess be denied.'

He stepped closer, his eyes wide. 'Chosen One! Raraku is *awakening.*'

'What are you talking about?'

'Can you not hear it?'

'The rage of the goddess consumes all, L'oric. If you can hear the voice of the Holy Desert, then it is Raraku's death-cry. The Whirlwind shall devour this night. And any ascendant power foolish enough to approach will be annihilated. The goddess, L'oric, *will not be denied.*'

He stared at her a moment longer, then seemed to sag beneath his armour. He drew a hand across his eyes, as if seeking to claw some nightmarish vision from his sight. Then, with a nod, he swung about and strode towards the doorway.

'Wait!' Sha'ilk moved past him then halted.

Voices sounded from beyond the canvas walls.

'Let him pass!' she cried.

Two guards stumbled in, dragging a man between them. Smeared in dust and sweat, he was unable to even stand, so exhausted and battered was he. One of the guards barked, 'It is Corabb Bhan Thenu'allas. One of Leoman's officers.'

'Chosen One!' the man gasped. 'I am the third rider Leoman has sent to you! I found the bodies of the others – assassins pursued me almost to your very palace!'

Sha'ilk's face darkened with fury. 'Get Mathok,' she snapped to one of the guards. 'L'oric, gift this man some healing, to aid in his recovery.'
The High Mage stepped forward, settled a hand on Corabb's shoulder.

The desert warrior's breathing slowed, and he slowly straightened. 'Leoman sends his greetings, Chosen One. He wishes to know of Mathok's deployment—'

'Corabb,' Sha'ik cut in. 'You will return to Leoman – with an escort. My orders to him are as follows – are you listening?'

He nodded.

'Leoman is to ride immediately back to me. He is to take over command of my armies.'

Corabb blinked. 'Chosen One?'

'Leoman of the Flails is to assume command of my armies. Before the dawn. L'oric, go to Korbolo Dom and convey to him my summons. He is to attend me immediately.'

L'oric hesitated, then nodded. 'As you command, Chosen One. I will take my leave of you now.'

He exited the chamber, made his way through the intervening rooms and passageways, passing guard after guard, seeing weapons drawn and feeling hard eyes on him. Korbolo Dom would be a fool to attempt to reach her with his assassins. Even so, the night had begun, and in the oasis beyond starlight now played on drawn blades.

Emerging onto the concourse before the palace, L'oric paused. His warren was unveiled, and he made that fact visible through a spark-filled penumbra surrounding his person. He wanted no-one to make any fatal mistakes. Feeling strangely exposed none the less, he set out towards Korbolo Dom's command tent.

The Dogslayers were ready in their reserve trenches, a ceaseless rustling of weapons and armour and muted conversations that fell still further as he strode past, only to rise again in his wake. These soldiers, L'oric well knew, had by choice and by circumstance made of themselves a separate force. Marked by the butchery of their deeds. By the focus of Malazan outrage. They know that no quarter will be given them. Their bluster was betrayed by diffidence, their reputed savagery streaked now with glimmers of fear. And their lives were in Korbolo Dom's stained hands. Entirely. They will not sleep this night.

He wondered what would happen when Leoman wrested command from the Napan renegade. Would there be mutiny? It was very possible. Of course, Sha'ik possessed the sanction of the Whirlwind Goddess, and she would not hesitate to flex that power should Leoman's position be challenged. Still, this was not the way to ready an army on the night before battle.

She has waited too long. Then again, perhaps this was intended. Designed to knock Korbolo off balance, to give him no time to prepare any counter-moves. If so, then it is the boldest of risks, on this, the most jagged-edged of nights.

He made his way up the steep pathway to the Napan's command tent. Two sentries emerged from near the entrance to block his progress.

'Inform Korbolo Dom that I bring word from Sha'ik.'

He watched the two soldiers exchange a glance, then one nodded and entered the tent.

A few moments later the sorceress, Henaras, strode out from the entrance. Her face knotted in a scowl. 'High Mage L'oric, You shall have to relinquish your warren to seek audience with the Supreme Commander of the Apocalypse.'

One brow rose at that lofty title, but he shrugged and lowered his magical defences. 'I am under your protection, then,' he said.

She cocked her head. 'Against whom do you protect yourself, High Mage? The Malazans are on the other side of the basin.'
L'oric smiled.

Gesturing, Henaras swung about and entered the command tent. L'oric followed.

The spacious chamber within was dominated by a raised dais at the end opposite the doorway, on which sat a massive wooden chair. The high headrest was carved in arcane symbols that L'oric recognized – with a shock – as Hengese, from the ancient city of Li Heng in the heart of the Malazan Empire. Dominating the carvings was a stylized rendition of a raptor's talons, outstretched, that hovered directly over the head of the seated Napan, who sat slouched, his hooded gaze fixed on the High Mage.

'L'oric,' he drawled. 'You foolish man. You are about to discover what happens to souls who are far too trusting. Granted,' he added with a smile, 'you might have assumed we were allies. After all, we have shared the same oasis for some time now, have we not?'

'Sha'ik demands that you attend her, Korbolo Dom. Immediately.'

'To relieve me of my command, yes. With the ill-informed belief that my Dogslayers will accept Leoman of the Flails – did you peruse them on your way here, L'oric? Were you witness to their readiness? My army, High Mage, is surrounded by enemies. Do you understand? Leoman is welcome to attempt an approach, with all the desert warriors he and Mathok care to muster—'

'You would betray the Apocalypse? Turn on your allies and win the battle for the Adjunct, Korbolo Dom? All to preserve your precious position?'

'If Sha'ik insists.'

'Alas, Sha'ik is not the issue,' L'oric said. 'The Whirlwind Goddess, however, is, and I believe her toleration of you, Korbolo Dom, is about to end.'

'Do you think so, L'oric? Will she also accept the destruction of the Dogslayers? For destroy them she must, if she is to wrest control from me. The decimation of her vaunted Army of the Apocalypse. Truly, will the goddess choose this?'

L'oric slowly cocked his head, then he slowly sighed. 'Ah, I see now the flaw. You have approached this tactically, as would any soldier. But what you clearly do not understand is that the Whirlwind Goddess is indifferent to tactics, to grand strategies. You rely upon her common sense, but Korbolo, she has none. The battle tomorrow? Victory or defeat? The goddess cares neither way. She desires destruction. The Malazans butchered on the field, the Dogslayers slaughtered in their trenches, an enfilade of sorcery to transform the sands of Raraku into a red ruin. This is what the Whirlwind Goddess desires.'

'What of it?' the Napan rasped, and L'oric saw sweat beading the man's scarred brow. 'Even the goddess cannot reach me, not here, in this sanctified place—'

'And you call me the fool? The goddess will see you slain this night, but you are too insignificant for her to act directly in crushing you under thumb.'

Korbolo Dom bolted forward on the chair. 'Then who? he shrieked. 'You, L'oric?'

The High Mage spread his hands and shook his head. 'I am less than a messenger in this, Korbolo Dom. I am, if anything at all, merely the voice of ... common sense. It is not who she will send against you, Supreme Commander. It is, I believe, who she will allow through her defences. Don't you think?'

Korbolo stared down at the High Mage, then he snarled and gestured.

The knife plunging into his back had no chance of delivering a fatal wound. L'oric's tightly bound defences, his innermost layers of Kurald Thyrllan, defied the thirst of iron. Despite this, the blow drove the High Mage to his knees. Then he pitched forward onto the thick carpets, almost at the Napan's boots.

And already, he was ignored as he lay there, bleeding into the weave, as Korbolo rose and began bellowing orders. And none were close enough to hear the High Mage murmur, 'Blood is the path, you foolish man. And
“Grim statement. Greyfrog must leave your delicious company.”

Felisin glanced over at the demon. Its four eyes were suddenly glittering, avid with palpable hunger. “What has happened?”

“Ominous. An invitation from my brother.”

“Is L’oric in trouble?”

“There is darkness this night, yet the Mother’s face is turned away. What comes cannot be chained. Warning. Caution. Remain here, lovely child. My brother can come to no further harm, but my path is made clear. Glee. I shall eat humans this night.”

She drew her telaba closer about herself and fought off a shiver. “I am, uh, pleased for you, Greyfrog.”

“Uncertain admonition. The shadows are fraught – no path is entirely clear, even that of blood. I must needs bob and weave, hop this way and that, grow still under baleful glare, and hope for the best.”

“How long should I wait for you, Greyfrog?”

“Leave not this glade until the sun rises, dearest she whom I would marry, regardless of little chance for proper broods. Besotted. Suddenly eager to depart.”

“Go, then.”

“Someone approaches. Potential ally. Be kind.”

With that the demon scrambled into the shadows.

Potential ally? Who would that be?

She could hear the person on the trail now, bared feet that seemed to drag with exhaustion, and a moment later a woman stumbled into the glade, halting in the gloom to peer about.

“Here,” Felisin murmured, emerging from the shelter.

“Felisin Younger?”

“Ah, there is but one who calls me that. Heboric has sent you?”

“Yes.” The woman came closer, and Felisin saw that she was stained with blood, and a heavy bruise marred her jaw. “They tried to kill him. There were ghosts. Defending him against the assassins—”


She nodded. “He heals – in his temple. He heals—”

“Slow your breathing, please. Here, I have wine. Say nothing for now – when you are ready, tell me your tale.”

Shadow-filled hollows rippled the hills that marked the northwest approach to the oasis. A haze of dust dulled the starlight overhead. The night had come swiftly to Raraku, as it always did, and the day’s warmth was fast dissipating. On this night, there would be frost.

Four riders sat still on motionless horses in one such hollow, steam rising from their lathered beasts. Their armour gleamed pale as bone, the skin of their exposed faces a pallid, deathly grey.

They had seen the approaching horse warrior from a distance, sufficient to permit them this quiet withdrawal
unseen, for the lone rider was not their quarry, and though none said it out loud, they were all glad for that.

He was huge, that stranger. Astride a horse to match. And a thousand ravaged souls trailed him, bound by ethereal chains that he dragged as if indifferent to their weight. A sword of stone hung from his back, and it was possessed by twin spirits raging with bloodthirst.

In all, a nightmarish appariation.

They listened to the heavy hoofs thump past, waited until the drumming sound dwindled within the stone forest on the edge of the oasis.

Then Jorrude cleared his throat. 'Our path is now clear, brothers. The trespassers are camped nearby, among the army that has marched to do battle with the dwellers of this oasis. We shall strike them with the dawn.'

'Brother Jorrude,' Enias rumbled, 'what conjuration just crossed our trail?'

'I know not, Brother Enias, but it was a promise of death.'

'Agreed,' Malachar growled.

'Our horses are rested enough,' Jorrude pronounced.

The four Tiste Liosan rode up the slope until they reached the ridge, then swung their mounts southward. Jorrude spared a last glance back over his shoulder, to make certain the stranger had not reversed his route – had not spied them hiding there in that hollow. Hiding. Yes, that is the truth of it, ignoble as the truth often proves to be. He fought off a shiver, squinting into the darkness at the edge of the stone forest.

But the apparition did not emerge.

'In the name of Osric, Lord of the Sky,' Jorrude intoned under his breath as he led his brothers along the ridge, 'thank you for that...'

At the edge of the glade, Karsa Orlong stared back at the distant riders. He had seen them long before they had seen him, and had smiled at their cautious retreat from his path.

Well enough, there were enemies aplenty awaiting him in the oasis, and no night lasted for ever.

Alas.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Hear them rattle
These chains of living
Bound to every moment passed
Until the wreckage clamours
In deafening wake
And each stride trails
A dirge of the lost.

House of Chains
Fisher kel Tath

He sat cross-legged in the darkness, perched in his usual place on the easternmost ridge, his eyes closed, a small smile on his withered face. He had unveiled his warren in the most subtle pattern, an unseen web stretched out across the entire oasis. It would be torn soon, he well knew, but for the moment he could sense every footpad, every tremble. The powers were indeed converging, and the promise of blood and destruction whispered through the night.

Febryl was well pleased. Sha'ik had been isolated, utterly. The Napan's army of killers were even now streaming from their places of hiding, as panic closed hands around Korbolo Dom's throat. Kamist Reloe was returning from his secret sojourn through the warrens. And, across the basin, the Malazan army was entrenching, the Adjunct whetting her otataral sword in anticipation of the morning's battle.

There was but one troubling detail. A strange song, faint yet growing. The voice of Raraku itself. He wondered what it would bring to this fated night. Hood was close – aye, the god himself– and this did much to mask other ... presences. But the sands were stirring, awakened perhaps by the Lord of Death's arrival. Spirits and ghosts, no doubt come to witness the many deaths promised in the hours to come. A curious thing, but he was not unduly concerned.

There will be slaughter. Yet another apocalypse on Raraku's restless sands. It is as it should be.

To all outward appearances, L'oric was dead. He had been roughly dragged to one wall in the command tent and left; there. The knife had been yanked from his back, and he now lay with his face to the rough fabric of the wall, eyes open and seemingly sightless.

Behind him, the Supreme Commander of the Apocalypse was speaking.

'Unleash them all, Henaras, barring my bodyguards. I want every one of Bidithal's cute little spies hunted down and killed – and find Scillara. That bitch has played her last game.

'You, Duryl, take another and ride out to the Adjunct. Deliver my missive — and make certain you are not seen by anyone. Mathok has his warriors out. Fayelle will work sorcery to aid you. And impress upon Tavore the need to withdraw her killers, lest they do the Whirlwind Goddess's work for her.'

'Supreme Commander,' a voice spoke, 'what of Leoman of the Flails?'

'The 4th Company and Fayelle are to leave quietly with the next bell. Leoman will get nowhere near us, or the army. Corporal Ethume, I want you within crossbow range of Febryl – the bastard's hiding in the usual place. Now, have I missed anything?'

'My fear is deepening,' Henaras murmured. 'Something is happening ... in the holy desert. Worse, I feel the approach of terrible powers—'
'Which is why we need the Adjunct and her damned sword. Are we safe enough in here, Henaras?'

'I think so – the wards Kamist, Fayelle and I have woven about this tent would confound a god.'

'That claim might well be challenged,' Korbolo Dom growled.

He added something more, but a strange gurgling sound, from just beyond the tent wall in front of L'oric, overrode the Napan's voice. A wetness, spattering the opposite side, then a sigh – audible to L'oric only because he was so close. Talons then raked along the base of the wall, reducing the fabric to ribbons. A four-eyed, immeasurably ugly face peered in through the gap.

'Brother, you look unwell.'

Appearance deceive, Greyfrog. For example, you have never looked prettier.

The demon reached in and grasped L'oric by one arm. He then began dragging him by increments through the tear. 'Confident. They are too preoccupied. Disappointed. I have eaten but two guards, the wards sleep and our path of retreat is clear. Things are coming. Suitably ominous. Frankly. I admit to fear, and advise we . . . hide.'

For a time, yes, we do just that. Find us somewhere, Greyfrog.

'Assured. I shall.'

Then leave me there and return to Felisin. Assassins are out hunting . . .

'Delightful.'

Kasanal had been a Semk shaman once, but now he murdered at his new master's bidding. And he enjoyed it, although, admittedly, he preferred killing Malazans rather than natives. At least his victims this night would not be Semk – to slay those from his own tribe would be a difficult thing to accept. But that did not seem likely. Korbolo Dom had as much as adopted the last survivors of the clans that had fought for him and Kamist Reloe on the Chain of Dogs.

And these two were mere women, both servants of that butcher, Bidithal.

He was now lying motionless on the edge of the glade, watching the two. One was Scillara, and Kasanal knew his master would be pleased when he returned with her severed head. The other one was also familiar – he had seen her in Sha'ik's company, and Leoman's.

It was also clear that they were in hiding, and so likely to be principal agents in whatever Bidithal was planning.

He slowly raised his right hand, and two quick gestures sent his four followers out along the flanks, staying within the trees, to encircle the two women's position. Under his breath, he began murmuring an incantation, a weaving of ancient words that deadened sound, that squeezed lassitude into the victims, dulling their every sense. And he smiled as he saw their heads slowly settle in unison.

Kasanal rose from his place of concealment. The need for hiding had passed. He stepped into the glade. His four Semk kin followed suit.

They drew their knives, edged closer.

Kasanal never saw the enormous blade that cut him in half, from the left side of his neck and out just above his right hip. He had a momentary sense of falling in two directions, then oblivion swallowed him, so he did not hear the cries of his four cousins, as the wielder of the stone sword marched into their midst.

When Kasanal at last opened ethereal eyes to find himself striding towards Hood's Gate, he was pleased to find his four kinsmen with him.
Wiping the blood from his sword, Karsa Orlong swung to face the two women. ‘Felisin,’ he growled, ‘your scars burn bright on your soul. Bidithal chose to ignore my warning. So be it. Where is he?’

Still feeling the remnants of the strange dullness that had stolen her senses, Felisin could only shake her head.

Karsa scowled at her, then his gaze shifted to the other woman. ‘Has the night stolen your tongue as well?’

‘No. Yes. No, clearly it hasn’t. I believe we were under sorcerous attack. But we are now recovering, Toblakai. You have been gone long.’


‘An impressive list – you’ve a busy night ahead, I think. Find them where you will, Toblakai. The night awaits you.’

Felisin drew a shaky breath, wrapping her arms about herself as she stared up at the terrible warrior. He had just killed five assassins with five sweeping, almost poetic passes of that enormous sword. The very ease of it horrified her. True, the assassins had intended the same for her and Scillara.

Karsa loosened his shoulders with a shrug, then strode towards the path leading to the city. In moments he was gone.

Scillara moved closer to Felisin and laid a hand on her shoulder. ‘Death is always a shock,’ she said. ‘The numbness will pass. I promise.’

But Felisin shook her head. ‘Except for Leoman,’ she whispered.

‘What?’

‘Those he named. He is going to kill them all. Except for Leoman.’

Scillara slowly turned to face the trail, a cool, speculative look stealing across her face.

The last two had taken down four warriors and come within thirty paces of his tent before finally falling. Scowling, Mathok stared down at the arrow-studded, sword-slashed corpses. Six attempted assassinations this night alone, and the first bell had yet to sound.

_Enough._

‘T’morol, gather my clan.’

The burly warrior grunted assent and strode off. Mathok drew his furs tighter about himself and returned to his tent.

Within its modest confines, he paused for a long moment, deep in thought. Then he shook himself and walked over to a hide-covered chest near his cot. He crouched, swept aside the covering, and lifted the ornate lid.

_The Book of Dryjhna resided within._

Sha’ik had given it into his keeping.

_To safeguard._

He closed the lid and locked it, then picked up the chest and made his way outside. He could hear his warriors breaking camp in the darkness beyond. ‘T’morol.’

‘Warchief.’
'We ride to join Leoman of the Flails. The remaining clans are to guard Sha'ik, though I am confident she is not at risk – she may have need for them in the morning.'

T'morol's dark eyes were fixed on Mathok, cold and impervious to surprise. 'We are to ride from this battle, Warchief?'

'To preserve the Holy Book, such flight may be a necessity, old friend. Come the dawn, wehover ... on the very cusp.'

'To gauge the wind.'

'Yes, T'morol, to gauge the wind.'

The bearded warrior nodded. 'The horses are being saddled. I will hasten the preparations.'

Heboric listened to the silence. Only his bones could feel the tingling hum of a sorcerous web spanning the entire oasis and its ruined city, the taut vibrations rising and falling as disparate forces began to move across it, then, with savage disregard, tore through it.

He stirred from the cot, groaning with the stab of force-healed wounds, and climbed Shakily to his feet. The coals had died in their braziers. The gloom felt solid, reluctant to yield as he made his way to the doorway. Heboric bared his teeth. His taloned hands twitched.

Ghosts stalked the dead city. Even the gods felt close, drawn to witness all that was to come. Witness, or to seize the moment and act directly. A nudge here, a tug there, if only to appease their egos . . . if only to see what happens. These were the games he despised, source of his fiercest defiance all those years ago. The shape of his crime, if crime it was.

And so they took my hands.

Until another god gave them back.

He was, he realized, indifferent to Treach. A reluctant Destriant to the new god of war, despite the gifts. Nor had his desires changed. Otataral Island, and the giant of jade — that is what awaits me. The returning of power. Even as those last words tracked across his mind, he knew that a deceit rode among them. A secret he knew but to which he would fashion no shape. Not yet, perhaps not until he found himself standing in the wasteland, beneath the shadow of that crooked spire.

But first, I must meet a more immediate challenge – getting out of this camp alive.

He hesitated another moment at the doorway, reaching out into the darkness beyond with all his senses. Finding the path clear – his next twenty strides at least – he darted forward.

Rolling the acorn in his fingers one last time, he tucked it into a fold in his sash and eased snake-like from the crack.

'Oh, Hood's heartless hands . . .'

The song was a distant thunder trembling along his bones, and he didn't like it. Worse yet, there were powers awakened in the oasis ahead that even he, a non-practitioner of sorcery, could feel like fire in his blood.

Kalam Mekhar checked his long-knives yet again, then resheathed them. The temptation was great to keep the otataral weapon out, and so deny any magic sent his way. But that goes both ways, doesn't it?

He studied the way ahead. The starlight seemed strangely muted. He drew from memory as best he could, from what he had seen from his hiding place during the day. Palms, their boles spectral as they rose above tumbled mudbricks and cut stone. The remnants of corrals, pens and shepherds' huts. Stretches of sandy ground littered with brittle fronds and husks. There were no new silhouettes awaiting him.
Kalam set forth.

He could see the angular lines of buildings ahead, all low to the ground, suggesting little more than stretches of mud-brick foundations from which canvas, wicker and rattan walls rose. Occupied residences, then.

Far off to Kalam's right was the grey smudge of that strange forest of stone trees. He had considered making his approach through it, but there was something uncanny and unwelcoming about that place, and he suspected it was not as empty as it appeared.

Approaching what seemed to be a well-trodden avenue between huts, he caught a flash of movement, darting from left to right across the aisle. Kalam dropped lower and froze. A second figure followed, then a third, fourth and fifth.

A hand. Now, who in this camp would organize their assassins into hands? He waited another half-dozen heartbeats, then set off. He came opposite the route the killers had taken and slipped into their wake. The five were moving at seven paces apart, two paces more than would a Claw. Damn, did Cotillion suspect? Is this what he wanted me to confirm?

These are Talons.

Seven or five, it made little difference to Kalam.

He came within sight of the trailing assassin. The figure bore magically invested items, making his form blurry, wavering. He was wearing dark grey, tight-fitting clothes, moccasined, gloved and hooded. Blackened daggers gleamed in his hands.

Not just patrolling, then, but hunting.

Kalam padded to within five paces of the man, then darted forward.

His right hand reached around to clamp hard across the man's mouth and jaw, his left hand simultaneously closing on the head's opposite side. A savage twist snapped the killer's neck.

Vomit spurted against Kalam's leather-sheathed palm, but he held on to his grip, guiding the corpse to the ground. Straddling the body, he released his grip, wiped his hand dry against the grey shirt, then moved on.

Two hundred heartbeats later and there were but two left. Their route had taken them, via a twisting, roundabout path, towards a district marked by the ruins of what had once been grand temples. They were drawn up at the edge of a broad concourse, awaiting their comrades, no doubt.

Kalam approached them as would the third hunter in the line. Neither was paying attention, their gazes fixed on a building on the other side of the concourse. At the last moment Kalam drew both long-knives and thrust them into the backs of the two assassins.

Soft grunts, and both men sank to the dusty flagstones. The blow to the leader of the Talon's hand was instantly fatal, but Kalam had twisted the other thrust slightly to one side, and he now crouched down beside the dying man. 'If your masters are listening,' he murmured, 'and they should be. Compliments of the Claw. See you soon ...'

He tugged the two knives free, cleaned the blades and sheathed them.

The hunters' target was, he assumed, within the ruined building that had been the sole focus of their attention. Well enough – Kalam had no friends in this damned camp.

He set out along the edge of the concourse.

At the mouth of another alley he found three corpses, all young girls. The blood and knife-wounds indicated they had put up a fierce fight, and two spattered trails led away, in the direction of the temple.

Kalam tracked them until he was certain that they led through the half-ruined structure's gaping doorway, then he halted.
The bitter reek of sorcery wafted from the broad entrance. *Damn, this place has been newly sanctified.*

There was no sound from within. He edged forward until he came to one side of the doorway.

A body lay just inside, grey-swathed, fixed in a contortion of limbs, evincing that he had died beneath a wave of magic. Shadows were flowing in the darkness beyond.

Kalam drew his otataral long-knife, crept in through the doorway.

The shadowy wraiths flinched back.

The floor had collapsed long ago, leaving a vast pit. Five paces ahead, at the base of a rubble-strewn ramp, a young girl sat amidst the blood and entrails of three more corpses. She was streaked with gore, her eyes darkly luminous as she looked up at Kalam. 'Do you remember the dark?' she asked.

Ignoring her question, he stepped past at a safe distance. 'Make no move, lass, and you'll survive my visit.'

A thin voice chuckled from the gloom at the far end of the pit. 'Her mind is gone, Claw. No time, alas, to fully harden my subjects to the horrors of modern life, try though I might. In any case, you should know that I am not your enemy. Indeed, the one who seeks to kill me this night is none other than the Malazan renegade, Korbolo Dom. And, of course, Kamist Reloe. Shall I give you directions to their abode?'

'I'll find it in due course,' Kalam murmured.

'Do you think your otataral blade sufficient, Claw? Here, in my temple? Do you understand the nature of this place? I imagine you believe you do, but I am afraid you are in error. Slavemaster, offer our guest some wine from that jug.'

A misshapen figure squirmed wetly across the rubble from Kalam's left. No hands or feet. A mass of suppurating sores and the mangled rot of leprosy. With horrible absurdity, a silver tray had been strapped to the creature's back, on which sat a squat, fired clay jug.

'He is rather slow, I'm afraid. But I assure you, the wine is so exquisite that you will agree it is worth the wait. Assassin, you are in the presence of Bidithal, archpriest of all that is sundered, broken, wounded and suffering. My own ... awakening proved both long and torturous, I admit. I had fashioned, in my own mind, every detail of the cult I would lead. All the while unaware that the shaping was being ... guided.

'Blindness, wilful and, indeed, spiteful. Even when the fated new House was laid out before me, I did not realize the truth. This shattered fragment of Kurald Emurlahn, Claw, shall not be the plaything of a desert goddess. Nor of the Empress. None of you shall have it, for it shall become the heart of the new House of Chains. Tell your empress to stand aside, assassin. We are indifferent to who would rule the land beyond the Holy Desert. She can have it.'

'And Sha'ik?'

'You can have her as well. Marched back to Unta in chains – and that is far more poetic than you will ever know.'

The shadow-wraiths – torn souls from Kurald Emurlahn – were drawing closer round Kalam, and he realized, with a chill, that his otataral long-knife might well prove insufficient. 'An interesting offer,' he rumbled. 'But something tells me there are more lies than truths within it, Bidithal.'

'I suppose you are right,' the archpriest sighed. 'I need Sha'ik, for this night and the morrow at least. Febryl and Korbolo Dom must be thwarted, but I assure you, you and I can work together towards such an end, since it benefits us both. Korbolo Dom calls himself Master of the Talon. Yes, he would return to Laseen's embrace, more or less, and use Sha'ik to bargain for his own position. As for Febryl, well, I assure you, what he awaits no-one but he is mad enough to desire.'

'Why do you bother with all this, Bidithal? You've no intention of letting me leave here alive. And here's another thing. A pair of beasts are coming – hounds, not of Shadow, but something else. Did you summon
them, Bidithal? Do you, or your Crippled God, truly believe you can control them? If so, then it is you two who are mad.'

Bidithal leaned forward. 'They seek a master!' he hissed.

Ah, so Cotillion was right about the Chained One. 'One who is worthy,' Kalam replied. 'In other words, one who is meaner and tougher than they are. And in this oasis, they will find no such individual. And so, I fear, they will kill everyone.'

'You know nothing of this, assassin,' Bidithal murmured, leaning back. 'Nor of the power I now possess. As for not permitting you to leave here alive ... true enough, I suppose. You've revealed too much knowledge, and you are proving far less enthusiastic to my proposals than I would have hoped. An unfortunate revelation, but it no longer matters. My servants were scattered about earlier, you see, defending every approach, requiring time to draw them in, to arrange them between us. Ah, Slavemaster has arrived. By all means, have some wine. I am prepared to linger here for that. Once you are done, however, I must take my leave. I made a promise to Sha'ik, after all, and I mean to keep it. Should you, by some strange miracle, escape here alive, know that I will not oppose your efforts against Korbolo Dom and his cadre. You will have earned that much, at least.'

'Best leave now, then, Bidithal. I have no interest in wine this night.'

'As you wish.'

Darkness swept in to engulf the archpriest, and Kalam shivered at the uncanny familiarity of the sorcerous departure.

The wraiths attacked.

Both knives slashed out, and inhuman screams filled the chamber. As it turned out, his otataral weapon proved sufficient after all. That, and the timely arrival of a god.

Korbolo Dom seemed to have unleashed an army upon his own allies this night. Again and again, Karsa Orlong found his path blocked by eager killers. Their corpses were strewn in his wake. He had taken a few minor wounds from knives invested with sorcery, but most of the blood dripping from the giant warrior belonged to his victims.

He strode with his sword in both hands now, tip lowered and to one side. There had been four assassins hiding outside Heboric Ghost Hands's dwelling. After killing them, Karsa slashed a new doorway in the tent wall and entered, only to find the abode empty. Frustrated, he set out for the temple round. Leoman's pit was unoccupied as well, and appeared to have been so for some time.

Approaching Bidithal's temple, Karsa slowed his steps as he heard fierce fighting within. Shrill screams echoed. Raising his weapon, the Toblakai edged forward.

A figure was crawling out from the doorway on its belly, gibbering to itself. A moment later Karsa recognized the man. He waited until Slavemaster's desperate efforts brought him up against the Toblakai's feet. A disease-ravaged face twisted into view.

'He fights like a demon!' Silgar rasped. 'Both blades cut through the wraiths and leave them writhing in pieces! A god stands at his shoulder. Kill them, Teblor! Kill them both!'

Karsa sneered. 'I take no commands from you, Slavemaster, or have you forgotten that?'

'Fool!' Silgar spat. 'We are brothers in the House now, you and I. You are the Knight of Chains, and I am the Leper. The Crippled God has chosen us! And Bidithal, he has become the Magi——'

'Yes, Bidithal. He hides within?'

'No – he wisely fled, as I am doing. The Claw and his patron god are even now slaying the last of his shadow servants. You are the Knight – you possess your own patron, Karsa Orlong of the Teblor. Kill the enemy – it is
what you must do—'

Karsa smiled. 'And so I shall.' He reversed his grip on his sword and drove the point down between Silgar's shoulder blades, severing the spine then punching out through the sternum to bury itself a hand's width deep between two flagstones.

Vile fluids poured from the Slavemaster. His head cracked down on the stone, and his life was done. Leoman was right, long ago — a quick death would have been the better choice.

Karsa pulled the sword free. 'I follow no patron god,' he growled.

He turned from the temple entrance. Bidithal would have used sorcery to escape, drawing shadows about himself in an effort to remain unseen. Yet his passage would leave footprints in the dust.

The Toblakai stepped past the body of Silgar, the man who had once sought to enslave him, and began searching.

Twenty of Mathok's clan warriors accompanied Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas on his return to Leoman's encampment. Their journey was unopposed, although Corabb was certain hidden eyes followed their progress.

They rode up the slope to the hill's summit and were challenged by sentinels. A more welcoming sound Corabb could not imagine. Familiar voices, warriors he had fought alongside against the Malazans.

'It is Corabb!' He had been given a hook-bladed sword drawn from the Chosen One's armoury, and he now raised it high in salute as the picket guards emerged from their places of hiding. 'I must speak with Leoman! Where is he?'

'Asleep,' one of the sentinels growled. 'If you're lucky, Bhilan, your arrival, loud as it was, has awakened him. Ride to the centre of the summit, but leave your escort here.'

That brought Corabb up short. 'They are Mathok's own—'

'Leoman's orders. No-one from the oasis is allowed to enter our camp.'

Scowling, Corabb nodded and waved back his fellow horse warriors. 'Take no offence, friends,' he called, 'I beg you.' Without waiting to gauge their reaction, he dismounted and hurried to Leoman's tent.

The warleader was standing outside the flap, drinking deep from a waterskin. He was out of his armour, wearing only a thin, sweat-stained linen shirt.

Corabb halted before him. 'There is much to tell you, Leoman of the Flails.'

'Out with it, then,' Leoman replied when he'd finished drinking.

'I was your only messenger to survive to reach Sha'ik. She has had a change of heart – she now commands that you lead the Army of the Apocalypse come the morrow. She would have you, not Korbolo Dom, leading us to victory.'

'Would she now,' he drawled, then squinted and looked away. 'The Napan has his assassins between us and Sha'ik?'

'Aye, but they will not challenge our entire force – they would be mad to attempt such a thing.'

'True. And Korbolo Dom knows this—'

'He has not yet been informed of the change of command – at least he hadn't when I left. Although Sha'ik had issued a demand for his presence—'

'Which he will ignore. As for the rest, the Napan knows. Tell me, Corabb, do you think his Dogslayers will follow any other commander?'
‘They shall have no choice! The Chosen One has so ordered!’

Leoman slowly nodded. Then he turned back to his tent. ‘Break camp. We ride to Sha’ilk.’

Exultation filled Corabb’s chest. Tomorrow would belong to Leoman of the Flails. ‘As it should be,’ he whispered.

Kalam stepped outside. His clothes were in tatters, but he was whole. Though decidedly shaken. He had always considered himself one of the ablest of assassins, and he had drawn a blade against a veritable host of inimical, deadly foes over the years. But Cotillion had put him to shame.

No wonder the bastard’s a god. Hood’s breath, I’ve never before seen such skill. And that damned rope!

Kalam drew a deep breath. He had done as the Patron of Assassins had asked. He had found the source of the threat to the Realm of Shadow. Or at least confirmed a host of suspicions. This fragment of Kurald Emurlahn will be the path to usurpation . . . by none other than the Crippled God. The House of Chains had come into play, and the world had grown very fraught indeed.

He shook himself. Leave that to Cotillion and Ammanas. He had other, more immediate tasks to attend to this night. And the Patron of Assassins had been kind enough to deliver a pair of Kalam’s favourite weapons ...

His eyes lit upon the leprous corpse lying a half-dozen paces away, then narrowed. Kalam moved closer. Gods below, that is some wound. If I didn’t know better, I’d say from the sword of a T’lan Imass. The blood was thickening, soaking up dust from the flagstones.

Kalam paused to think. Korbolo Dom would not establish his army’s camp among the ruins of this city. Nor in the stone forest to the west. The Napan would want an area both clear and level, with sufficient room for banking and trenches, and open lines of sight.

East, then, what had once been irrigated fields for the city, long ago.

He swung in that direction and set out.

From one pool of darkness to the next, along strangely empty streets and alleys. Heavy layers of sorcery had settled upon this oasis, seeming to flow in streams – some of them so thick that Kalam found himself leaning forward in order to push his way through. A miasma of currents, mixed beyond recognition, and none of them palatable. His bones ached, his head hurt, and his eyes felt as if someone was stirring hot sand behind them.

He found a well-trodden track heading due east and followed it, staying to one side where the shadows were deep. Then saw, two hundred paces ahead, a fortified embankment.

Malazan layout. That, Napan, was a mistake.

He was about to draw closer when he saw the vanguard to a company emerge through the gate. Soldiers on foot followed, flanked by lancers.

Kalam ducked into an alley.

The troop marched past at half-pace, weapons muffled, the horses’ hoofs leather-socked. Curious, but the fewer soldiers in the camp the better, as far as he was concerned. It was likely that all but the reserve companies would have been ensconced in their positions overlooking the field of battle. Of course, Korbolo Dom would not be careless when it came to protecting himself.

He calls himself master of the Talon, after all. Not that Cotillion, who was Dancer, knows a damned thing about them. Sparing the revelation only a sneer.

The last of the soldiers filed past. Kalam waited another fifty heartbeats, then he set out towards the Dogsayer encampment.

The embankment was preceded by a steep-sided trench. Sufficient encumbrance to a charging army, but only
a minor inconvenience to a lone assassin. He clambered down, across, then up the far side, halting just beneath the crest-line.

There would be pickets. The gate was thirty paces on his left, lantern-lit. He moved to just beyond the light's range, then edged up onto the bank. A guard patrolled within sight on his right, not close enough to spot the assassin as he squirmed across the hard-packed, sun-baked earth to the far edge.

Another trench, this one shallower, and beyond lay the ordered ranks of tents, the very centre of the grid dominated by a larger command tent.

Kalam made his way into the camp.

As he had suspected, most of the tents were empty, and before long he was crouched opposite the wide street encircling the command tent.

Guards lined every side, five paces apart, assault crossbows cocked and cradled in arms. Torches burned on poles every ten paces, bathing the street in flickering light. Three additional figures blocked the doorway, grey-clad and bearing no visible weapons.

_Flesh and blood cordon . . . then sorcerous wards. Well, one thing at a time._

He drew out his pair of ribless crossbows. A Claw's weapons, screw-torqued, the metal blackened. He set the quarrels in their grooves and carefully cocked both weapons. Then settled back to give the situation some thought.

Even as he watched he saw the air swirl before the command tent's entrance, and a portal opened. Blinding white light, the flare of fire, then Kamist Reloe emerged. The portal contracted behind him, then winked out.

The mage looked exhausted but strangely triumphant. He gestured at the guards then strode into the tent. The three grey-clothed assassins followed the mage inside.

A hand light as a leaf settled on Kalam's shoulder, and a voice rasped, 'Eyes forward, soldier.'

He knew that voice, from more years back than he'd like to think. But _that bastard's dead. Dead before Surly took the throne._

'Granted,' the voice continued, and Kalam knew that acid-spattered face was grinning, 'no love's lost between me and the company I'm sharing... again. Figured I'd seen the last of every damn one of them ... and you. Well, never mind that. Need a way in there, right? Best we mount a diversion, then. Give us fifty heartbeats ... at least you can count those, Corporal.'

The hand lifted away.

Kalam Mekhar drew a deep, shaky breath. _What in Hood's name is going on here? That damned captain went renegade. They found his body in Malaz City the morning after the assassinations . . . or something closely approximating his body . . ._

He focused his gaze once more upon the command tent.

From beyond it a scream broke the night, then the unmistakable flash and earth-shaking thump of Moranth munitions.

Suddenly the guards were running.

Tucking one of the crossbows into his belt, Kalam drew out the otataral long-knife. He waited until only two Dogslayers were visible, both to the right of the entrance, facing the direction of the attack – where screams ripped the air, as much born of horror as from the pain of wounds – then surged forward.

Raising the crossbow in his left hand. The recoil thrumming the bones of his arm. The quarrel burrying itself in the back of the further guard. Long-knife thrusting into the nearer man, point punching through leather between plates of bronze, piercing flesh then sliding between ribs to stab the heart.
Blood sprayed as he tugged the weapon free and darted into the tent's doorway.

Wards collapsed around him.

Within the threshold he reloaded the crossbow and affixed it in the brace on his wrist – beneath the voluminous sleeves. Then did the same with the other one on his left wrist.

The main chamber before him held but a lone occupant, a grey-robed assassin who spun at Kalam's arrival, a pair of hooked Kethra knives flashing into guard position. The face within the hood was expressionless, a narrow, sun-darkened visage tattooed in the Pardu style, the swirling artistry broken by a far heavier sigil branded into the man's forehead – a talon.

The grey-clad assassin suddenly smiled. 'Kalam Mekhar. I suppose you don't remember me.'

In answer Kalam drew out his second long-knife and attacked.

Sparks bit the air as the blades clashed and whispered, the Pardu driven back two steps until, with a sweeping backslash, he leapt to the right and sidestepped round to give himself more space. Kalam maintained the pressure, weapons flashing as they darted out, keeping the Talon on the defensive.

He had skill with those heavy Kethra knives, and both quickness and strength. Kalam's blades took blocking blows that reverberated up the bones of his arms. Clearly, the Pardu was seeking to break the thinner weapons, and, well made as they were, nicks and notches were being driven into the edges.

Further, Kalam knew he was running out of time. The diversion continued, but now, along with the crack of sharpers ripping the air, waves of sorcery had begun rolling in deafening counterpoint. Whatever the nature of the squads attacking the Dogslayers, mages were giving answer.

Worse yet, this Talon didn't enter here alone.

Kalam suddenly shifted stance, extending the knife in his left hand and drawing his right hand back to take guard position. He led with the point, evading the parries, and, in increments, slowly retracted his left arm, beginning at the shoulder. The faintest pivoting of hips, drawing the lead leg back—

And the Pardu closed the distance with a single step.

Kalam's right hand shot across, beating aside both Kethra blades, simultaneously lunging high with his left hand.

The Pardu flung both weapons up to parry and trap the thrust.

And Kalam stepped in still closer, stabbing crossways with the long-knife in his right hand. Punching the tip into the man's lower belly.

A gush of fluids, the edge gouging along the spine, the point then plunging out the other side.

The parry and trap had torn the long-knife in his left hand from its grasp, flinging it to one side.

But the Talon was already sagging, folding over the belly wound and the weapon impaling him.

Kalam leaned closer. 'No,' he growled. 'I don't.'

He tugged his knife free and let the dying man fall to the layered rugs of the tent floor.

'A damned shame,' mused a voice near the back wall.

Kalam slowly turned. 'Kamist Reloe. I've been looking for you.'

The High Mage smiled. He was flanked by the other two Talons, one of whom held Kalam's second long-knife and was examining it curiously. 'We've been expecting a strike by the Claws,' Kamist Reloe said. 'Although an attack by long-dead ghosts was, I admit, not among our expectations. It is Raraku, you
understand. This damned land is . . . awakening. Well, never mind that. Soon, there will be ... silence.'

‘He holds an otataral weapon,’ the assassin on Kamist’s right said.

Kalam glanced down at the blood-smeared long-knife in his right hand. ‘Ah, well, that.’

‘Then,’ the High Mage sighed, ‘you two shall have to take him in the, uh, mundane way. Will you suffice?’

The one holding the long-knife flung it behind him and nodded. ‘We’ve watched. He has patterns ... and skill. Against either one of us singly we’d be in trouble. But against both of us?’

Kalam had to agree with the man’s assessment. He stepped back, and sheathed his weapon. ‘He’s probably right,’ he rumbled. With his other hand he drew out the acorn and tossed it on the floor. All three men flinched back as it bounced then rolled towards them. The innocuous object came to a halt.

One of the Talons snorted. Kicked it to one side.

Then the two assassins stepped forward, knives flickering.

Kalam raised both arms, twisted his wrists outward, then flexed them hard.

Both Talons grunted, then staggered backward, each impaled by a quarrel.

‘Careless of you,’ Kalam muttered.

Kamist shrieked, unveiling his warren.

The wave of sorcery that struck the High Mage caught him entirely unawares, coming from one side. Death-magic closed around him in a sizzling, raging web of black fire.

His shriek escalated. Then Kamist Reloe sprawled, the sorcery still flickering over his twitching, burned body.

A figure slowly emerged from where the Talon had kicked the acorn moments earlier, and crouched down beside Kamist Reloe. ‘It’s disloyalty that bothers us the most,’ he said to the dying High Mage. ‘We always answer it. Always have. Always will.’

Kalam recovered his second long-knife, eyes on the closed flaps on the chamber’s back wall. ‘He’s through there,’ he said, then paused and grinned. ‘Good to see you, Quick.’

Quick Ben glanced over and nodded.

The wizard was, Kalam saw, looking older. Worn down. Scars not written on his skin, but on his heart. He will, I suspect, have nothing good to tell me when all this is done. ‘Did you,’ he asked Quick Ben, ‘have anything to do with the diversion?’

‘No. Nor did Hood, although the hoary bastard’s arrived. This is all Raraku.’

‘So Kamist said, not that I understand either of you.’

‘I’ll explain later, friend,’ Quick Ben said, rising. He faced the back flap. ‘He has that witch Henaras with him, I think. She’s behind some fierce wards that Kamist Reloe raised.’

Kalam approached the doorway. ‘Leave those to me,’ he growled, unsheathing his otataral long-knife.

The room immediately beyond was small, dominated by a map table, on which was sprawled the corpse of Henaras. Blood was still flowing in streams down the table’s sides.

Kalam glanced back at Quick Ben and raised his brows.

The wizard shook his head.
The assassin gingerly approached, and his eyes caught something glimmering silver-white on the woman's chest.

A pearl.

'Seems the way is clear,' Kalam whispered.

Another flap slashed the wall opposite.

Using the points of his knives, Kalam prised it open.

A large high-backed chair filled the next chamber, on which was seated Korbolo Dom.

His blue skin was a ghastly grey, and his hands shook where they rested on the chair's ornate arms. When he spoke his voice was high and tight, jittery with fear. 'I sent an emissary to the Adjunct. An invitation. I am prepared to attack Sha'ik and her tribes – with my Dogslayers.'

Kalam grunted. 'If you think we've come with her answer, you'd be wrong, Korbolo.'

The Napan's eyes darted to Quick Ben. 'We assumed you were either dead with the rest of the Bridgeburners, or still on Genabackis.'

The wizard shrugged. 'Tayschrenn sent me ahead. Even so, he's brought the fleet across on mage-driven winds. Dujek Onearm and his legions reached Ehrlitan a week past—'

'What's left of those legions, you mean—'

'More than enough to complement the Adjunct's forces, I should think.'

Kalam stared between the two men. The Bridgeburners . . . dead? Whiskeyjack? Onearm's Host – gods below, what happened over there?

'We can salvage this,' Korbolo Dom said, leaning forward. 'All of Seven Cities, returned to the Empire. Sha'ik brought in chains before the Empress—'

'And for you and your soldiers a pardon?' Quick Ben asked. 'Korbolo Dom, you have truly lost your mind—'

'Then die!' the Napan shrieked, leaping forward, hands reaching for the wizard's throat.

Kalam stepped in and, knife reversed, struck Korbolo Dom hard against the side of the head.

The Napan staggered.

A second fist shattered his nose and sent him sprawling.

Quick Ben stared down at the man. 'Truss him up, Kalam. That diversion's over, from the silence outside – I'll find us a way out.'

Kalam began tying the unconscious man's hands. 'Where are we taking him?'

'I've a thought to that.'

The assassin glanced up at his friend. 'Quick? The Bridgeburners? Whiskeyjack?'

The hard, dark eyes softened. 'Dead. Barring Picker and a handful of others. There's a tale there, and I promise I will tell it in full ... later.'

Kalam stared down at Korbolo Dom. 'I feel like cutting throats,' he rasped.

'Not him. Not now.'

Oh, Whiskeyjack ...

There was time for ... everything. This night and for the day to come, Bidithal needed Sha'ik. And the Whirlwind Goddess. And perhaps, if all went well, there would be the opportunity for bargaining. Once the goddess's rage has cooled, annealed into beauty by victory – we can still achieve this.

But I know now what Febryl has done. I know what Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe plan for the dawn.

They could be stopped. The knives could be turned.

He hobbled as quickly as he could towards Sha'ik's palace. Ghosts flitted about on the edges of his vision, but his shadows protected him. In the distance he heard screams, detonations and sorcery – coming, he realized, from the Dogslayers’ camp. Ah, so that Claw's made it that far, has he? Both good and . . . troubling. Well, at the very least he'll keep Kamist occupied.

Of course, the danger posed by the roving assassins still existed, though that was diminishing the closer he got to Sha'ik's abode.

Still, the streets and alleys were disturbingly deserted.

He came within sight of the sprawling palace, and saw with relief the pools of torchlight surrounding it.

Counter the Napan's gambit – awaken the goddess to the threat awaiting her. Then hunt down that gnarled bhok'aral Febryl and see his skin stripped from his writhing flesh. Even the goddess — yes, even the goddess will have to recognize me. My power. When flanked by my new pets—

A hand shot out of the darkness and closed about Bidithal's neck. He was lifted into the air – flailing – then thrown hard to the ground. Blinded. Choking.

His shadow-servants swarmed to defend him.

A growl, the hissing swing of something massive that cut a sweeping path – and suddenly the wraiths were gone.

Slowly, Bidithal's bulging eyes made out the figure crouched above him.

Toblakai—

'You should have left her alone,' Karsa Orlong said quietly, his voice devoid of inflection. Behind and around the giant were gathering ghosts, chained souls.

We are both servants of the same god! You fool! Let me speak! I would save Sha'ik!

'But you didn't. I know, Bidithal, where your sick desires come from. I know where your pleasure hides – the pleasure you would take from others. Witness.'

Karsa Orlong set down his stone sword, then reached between Bidithal's legs.

A hand closed indiscriminately around all that it found.

And tore.

Until, with a ripping of tendons and shreds of muscle, a flood of blood and other fluids, the hand came away with its mangled prize.

The pain was unbearable. The pain was a rending of his soul. It devoured him.

And blood was pouring out, hot as fire, even as deathly cold stole across his skin, seeped into his limbs.

The scene above him blackened, until only Toblakai's impassive, battered face remained, coolly watching Bidithal's death.
Death? Yes. You fool, Toblakai—

The hand around his neck relaxed, drew away.

Involuntarily, Bidithal drew in an agonizing breath and made to scream—

Something soft and bloody was pushed into his mouth.

'For you, Bidithal. For every nameless girl-child you destroyed. Here. Choke on your pleasure.'

And choke he did. Until Hood's Gate yawned—

And there, gathered by the Lord of Death, waited demons who were of like nature to Bidithal himself, gleefully closing about their new victim.

A lifetime of vicious pleasure. An eternity of pain in answer.

For even Hood understood the necessity for balance.

Lostara Yil edged up from the sinkhole and squinted in an effort to pierce the gloom. A glance behind her revealed a starlit desert, luminous and glittering. Yet, ahead, darkness swathed the oasis and the ruined city within it. A short while earlier she had heard distant thumps, faint screams, but now silence had returned.

The air had grown bitter cold. Scowling, Lostara checked her weapons, then made to leave.

'Make no move,' a voice murmured from a pace or two off to her right.

Her head snapped round, then her scowl deepened. 'If you're here to watch, Cotillion, there's little to see. I woke Pearl, and he hardly swore at all, despite the headache. He's in there, somewhere—'

'Aye, he is, lass. But already he's returning ... because he can feel what's coming.'

'That's coming. Enough to make you hide here beside me?'

The shadow-shrouded god seemed to shrug. 'There are times when it is advisable to step back ... and wait. The Holy Desert itself senses the approach of an ancient foe, and will rise in answer if need be. Even more precarious, the fragment of Kuradal Emurlahn that the Whirlwind Goddess would claim is manifesting itself. The goddess is fashioning a portal, a gate — one massive enough to swallow this entire oasis. Thus, she too makes a play for Raraku's immortal heart. The irony is that she herself is being manipulated, by a far cleverer god, who would take this fragment for himself, and call it his House of Chains. So you see, Lostara Shadow Dancer, best we remain precisely where we are. For tonight, and in this place, worlds are at war.'

'It is nothing to Pearl and me,' she insisted, squinting hard into the gloom. 'We're here for Felisin—'

'And you have found her, but she remains beyond you. Beyond Pearl as well. For the moment...'

'Then we must needs but await the clearing of the path.'

'Aye. As I have advised, patience.'

Shadows swirled, hissed over sand, then the god was gone.

Lostara grunted. 'Goodbye to you as well,' she muttered, then drew her cloak tighter about herself and settled down to wait.

Assassins armed with crossbows had crept up behind him. Febryl had killed them, one after another, as soon as they arrived, with a host of most painful spells, and now his sorcerous web told him that there were no more. Indeed, Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe had been bearded in their den. By ghosts and worse — agents of the Malazan Empire.
Wide and bloody paths had carved messily across his web, leaving him blind here and there, but none stretched anywhere close to his position ... so far. And soon, the oasis behind him would become as a nightmare wakened into horrid reality, and Febryl himself would vanish from the minds of his enemies in the face of more immediate threats.

Dawn was but two bells away. While, behind him, darkness had devoured the oasis, the sky overhead and to the east was comparatively bright with the glitter of stars. Indeed, everything was proceeding perfectly.

The starlight also proved sufficient for Febryl to detect the shadow that fell over him.

'I never liked you much,' rumbled a voice above him.

Squealing, Febryl sought to dive forward.

But was effortlessly plucked and lifted high from the ground.

Then broken.

The snap of his spine was like brittle wood in the cold night air.

Karsa Orlong flung Febryl's corpse away. He glared up at the stars for a moment, drew a deep breath into his lungs, and sought to clear his mind.

Urugal's withered voice was screaming in his skull. It had been that voice, and that will, that had driven him step by step from the oasis.

The false god of the Uryd tribe wanted Karsa Orlong ... gone.

He was being pushed hard ... away from what was coming, from what was about to happen in the oasis.

But Karsa did not like being pushed.

He lifted his sword clear of his harness rings and closed both hands about the grip, lowering the point to hover just above the ground, then forced himself to turn about and face the oasis.

A thousand ghostly chains stretched taut behind him, then began pulling.

The Teblor growled under his breath and leaned forward. I am the master of these chains. I, Karsa Orlong, yield to none. Not gods, not the souls I have slain. I will walk forward now, and either resistance shall end, or the chains will be snapped.

Besides, I have left my horse tethered in the stone forest.

Twin howls tore the night air above the oasis, sudden and fierce as cracks of lightning.

Karsa Orlong smiled. Ah, they have arrived.

He lifted his sword's point slightly higher, then surged forward.

It would not do – it turned out – to have the chains sundered. The tension suddenly vanished, and, for this night at least, all resistance to Toblakai's will had ended.

He left the ridge and descended the slope, into the gloom once more.

Fist Gamet was lying on his cot, struggling to breathe as a tightness seized his throat. Thunder filled his head, in thrumming waves of pain radiating out from a spot just above and behind his right eye.

Pain such as he had never felt before, driving him onto his side, the cot creaking and pitching as nausea racked him, the vomit spraying onto the floor. But the emptying of his stomach offered no surcease from the agony in his skull.
His eyes were open but he was blind.

There had been headaches. Every day, since his fall from his horse. But nothing like this.

The barely healed knife-slash in his palm had reopened during his contortions, smearing sticky blood across his face and brow when he sought to claw the pain out from his head, and the wound now felt as if it was afire, scorching his veins.

Groaning, he clambered sideways from the cot and then halted, on his hands and knees, head hanging down, as waves of trembling shivered through him.

*I need to move. I need to act. Something. Anything.*

*I need—*

A time of blankness, then he found himself standing near the tent flap. Weighted in his armour, gauntlets covering his hands, helm on his head. The pain was fading, a cool emptiness rising in its wake.

He needed to go outside. He needed his horse.

Gamet strode from the tent. A guard accosted him but he waved the woman away and hurried towards the corrals.

*Ride. Ride out. It’s time.*

Then he was cinching the saddle of his horse, waiting for the beast to release its breath, then drawing it a notch tighter. A clever horse. Paran stables, of course. Fast and of almost legendary endurance. Impatient with incompetence, ever testing the rider’s claim to being in charge, but that was to be expected from such a fine breed.

Gamet swung himself into the saddle. It felt good to be riding once more. On the move, the ground whispering past as he rode down the back ramp, then round the jagged island and towards the basin.

He saw three figures ahead, standing at the ridge, and thought nothing strange as to their presence. *They are what will come. These three.*

Nil. Nether. The lad, Grub.

The last turned as Gamet reined in beside them. And nodded. ’The Wickans and Malazans are on the flanks, Fist. But your assault will be straight up the Dogslayers’ main ramp.’ And he pointed.

Footsoldiers and cavalry were massing in the basin, moving through the thick gloom. Gamet could hear the whisper of armour, feel the thud of countless horse hoofs. He saw banners and standards, hanging limp and ragged.

’Ride to them, Fist,’ Grub said.

And he saluted the child and set heels to his mount’s flanks.

Black and rust-red armour, visored helms with ornate cheek-guards, short thrusting javelins and kite shields, the rumble of countless booted feet – he rode alongside one column, casting an appraising eye over the companies of infantry.

Then a wing of cavalry swept round to engulf him. One rider rode close. A dragon-winged helm swivelled to face him. ’Ride with us, soldier?’

’I cannot,’ Gamet replied. ’I am the Fist. I must command.‘

’Not this night,’ the warrior replied. ’Fight at our sides, as the soldier you are. Remember the old battles? When all that was required was the guarding of the companions flanking you. Such will be this night. Leave the commanding to the lords. Ride with us in freedom. And glory.’
A surge of exultation swept through Gamet. The pain in his head was gone. He could feel his blood racing like fire in his muscles. He wanted this. Yes, he wanted this very thing.

Gamet unsheathed his sword, the sound an echoing rasp in the chill air.

His helmed companion laughed. 'Are you with us, soldier?'

'I am, friend.'

They reached the base of the cobbled ramp, slowing to firm up their formation. A broad wedge that then began assailing the slope, hoofs striking sparks off the stones.

The Dogslayers had yet to sound an alarm.

Fools. They've slept through it all. Or perhaps sorcery has deadened the sounds of our preparation. Ah, yes. Nil and Nether. They are still there, on the ridge the other side of the basin.

The company's standard bearer was just a few horses to Gamet's left. He squinted up at the banner, wondered that he had never seen it before. There was something of the Khundryl in its design, torn and frayed though it was. A clan of the Burned Tears, then – which made sense given the archaic armour his comrades were wearing. Archaic and half rotting, in fact. Too long stored in chests – moths and other vermin have assailed it, but the bronze looks sound enough, if tarnished and pitted. A word to the commanders later, I think ...

Cool, gauging thoughts, even as his proud horse thundered alongside the others. Gamet glared upward, and saw the crest directly before them. He lifted high his longsword and loosed a savage scream.

The wedge poured over the crest, swept out into the unaware ranks of Dogslayers, still huddled down in their trenches.

Screams on all sides, strangely muted, almost faint. Sounds of battle, yet they seemed a league distant, as if carried on the wind. Gamet swung his sword, his eyes meeting those of Dogslayers, seeing the horror writ there. Watching mouths open to shriek, yet hardly any sound came forth, as if the sands were swallowing everything, absorbing sound as eagerly as they did blood and bile.

Masses surged over the trenches, blackened swords swinging and chopping down. The ramp to the east had been overrun by the Wickans. Gamet saw the waving standards and grinned. Crow. Foolish Dog. Weasel.

Out of the impenetrably black sky descended butterflies, in swarms, to flit above the carnage in the trenches.

On the ramp to the west there was the flash of Moranth munitions, sending grim reverberations through the earth, and Gamet could watch the slaughter over there, a scene panoramic and dulled, as if he was looking upon a mural – a painting where ancient armies warred in eternal battle.

They had come for the Dogslayers. For the butcherers of unarmed Malazans, soldier and civilian, the stubborn and the fleeing, the desperate and the helpless. The Dogslayers, who had given their souls to betrayal.

The fight raged on, but it was overwhelmingly one-sided. The enemy seemed strangely incapable of mustering any kind of defence. They simply died in their trenches, or seeking to retreat they were run down after but a few strides. Skewered by lances, javelins. Trampled beneath chopping hoofs.

Gamet understood their horror, saw with a certain satisfaction the terror in their faces as he and his comrades delivered death.

He could hear the battle song now, rising and falling like waves on a pebbled shore, yet building towards a climax yet to come – yet to come, but soon. Soon. Yes, we've needed a song. We've waited a long time for such a song. To honour our deeds, our struggles. Our lives and our deaths. We've needed our own voice, so that our spirits could march, march ever onward.

To battle.

To war.
Manning these walls of crumbled brick and sand. Defending the bone-dry harbours and the dead cities that once blazed with ancient dreams, that once flickered life's reflection on the warm, shallow sea.

Even memories need to be defended.

Even memories.

He fought on, side by side with his dark warrior companions – and so grew to love them, these stalwart comrades, and when at last the dragon-helmed horse warrior rode up and reined in before him, Gamet whirled his sword in greeting.

The rider laughed once again. Reached up a blood-spattered, gauntleted hand, and raised the visor – to reveal the face of a dark-skinned woman, her eyes a stunning blue within a web of desert lines.

'There are more!' Gamet shouted – though even to his own ears his voice sounded far away. 'More enemies! We must ride!'

Her teeth flashed white as she laughed again. 'Not the tribes, my friend! They are kin. This battle is done – others will shed blood come the morrow. We march to the shores, soldier – will you join us?'

He saw more than professional interest in her eyes.

'I shall."

'You would leave your friends, Gamet Ul'Paran?'

'For you, yes.'

Her smile, and the laugh that followed, stole the old man's heart.

A final glance to the other ramps showed no movement. The Wickans to the east had ridden on, although a lone crow was wheeling overhead. The Malazans to the west had withdrawn. And the butterflies had vanished.

In the trenches of the Dogslayers, an hour before dawn, only the dead remained.

Vengeance. She will be pleased. She will understand, and be pleased.

As am I.

Goodbye, Adjunct Tavore.

Koryk slowly settled down beside him, stared northeastward as if seeking to discover what so held the man's attention. 'What is it?' he asked after a time. 'What are you looking at, Sergeant?'

Fiddler wiped at his eyes. 'Nothing ... or nothing that makes sense.'

'We're not going to see battle in the morning, are we?'

He glanced over, studied the young Seti's hard-edged features, wanting to see something in them, though he was not quite certain what. After a moment, he sighed and shrugged. 'The glory of battle, Koryk, dwells only in the bard's voice, in the teller's woven words. Glory belongs to ghosts and poets. What you hear and dream isn't the same as what you live – blur the distinction at your own peril, lad.'

'You've been a soldier all your life, Sergeant. If it doesn't ease a thirst within you, why are you here?'

'I've no answer to that,' Fiddler admitted. 'I think, maybe, I was called here.'

'That song Bottle said you were hearing?'

'Aye.'

'What does it mean? That song?'
'Quick Ben will have a better answer to that, I think. But my gut is whispering one thing over and over again. The Bridgeburners, lad, have ascended.'

Koryk made a warding sign and edged away slightly.

'Or, at least, the dead ones have. The rest of us, we're just ... malingering. Here in the mortal realm.'

'Expecting to die soon, then?'

Fiddler grunted. 'Wasn't planning on it.'

'Good, because we like our sergeant just fine.'

The Seti moved away. Fiddler returned his gaze to the distant oasis. Appreciate that, lad. He narrowed his eyes, but the darkness defied him. Something was going on there. Feels as if . . . as if friends are fighting. I can almost hear sounds of battle. Almost.

Suddenly, two howls rose into the night.

Fiddler was on his feet. 'Hood's breath!'

From Smiles: 'Gods, what was that?'

No. Couldn't have been. But...

And then the darkness above the oasis began to change.

The row of horse warriors rode up before them amidst swirling dust, the horses stamping and tossing heads in jittery fear.

Beside him, Leoman of the Flails raised a hand to halt his company, then gestured Corabb to follow as he trotted his mount towards the newcomers.

Mathok nodded in greeting. 'We have missed you, Leoman—'

'My shaman has fallen unconscious,' Leoman cut in. 'He chose oblivion over terror. What is going on in the oasis, Mathok?'

The warleader made a warding sign. 'Raraku has awakened. Ghosts have risen, the Holy Desert's very own memories.'

'And who is their enemy?'

Mathok shook his head. 'Betrayal upon betrayal, Leoman. I have withdrawn my warriors from the oasis and encamped them between Sha'ik and the Malazans. Chaos has claimed all else—'

'So you do not have an answer for me.'

'I fear the battle is already lost—'

'Sha'ik?'

'I have the Book with me. I am sworn to protect it.'

Leoman frowned.

Shifting on his saddle, Corabb glared northeastward. Preternatural darkness engulfed the oasis, and it seemed to swarm as if filled with living creatures, winged shadows, spectral demons. And on the ground beneath, he thought he could see the movement of masses of soldiery. Corabb shivered.

'To Y'Ghatan?' Leoman asked.
Mathok nodded. 'With my own tribe as escort. Leaving almost nine thousand desert warriors at your disposal ... for you to command.'

But Leoman shook his head. 'This battle will belong to the Dogslayers, Mathok. There is no choice left to me. I have not the time to greatly modify our tactics. The positions are set — she waited too long. You did not answer me, Mathok. What of Sha'ik?'

'The goddess holds her still,' the warleader replied. 'Even Korbolo Dom's assassins cannot get to her.'

'The Napan must have known that would happen,' Leoman muttered. 'And so he has planned ... something else.'

Mathok shook his head. 'My heart has broken this night, my friend.'

Leoman studied the old warrior for a time, then he nodded. 'Until Y'Ghatan, then, Mathok.'

'You ride to Sha'ik?'

'I must.'

'Tell her—'

'I will.'

Mathok nodded, unmindful of the tears glistening down his lined cheeks. He straightened suddenly in his saddle. 'Dryjhna once belonged to us, Leoman. To the tribes of this desert. The Book's prophecies were sewn to a far older skin. The Book was in truth naught but a history, a telling of apocalyptic events survived — not of those to come—'

'I know, my friend. Guard well the Book, and go in peace.'

Mathok wheeled his horse to face the west trail. An angry gesture and his riders followed as he rode into the gloom.

Leoman stared after them for a long moment.

Howls shattered the night.

Corabb saw his commander suddenly bare his teeth as he glared into the darkness ahead. *Like two beasts about to come face to face. Spirits below, what awaits us?*

'Weapons!' Leoman snarled.

The company thundered forward, along the trail Corabb had now traversed what seemed countless times.

The closer they drew to the oasis, the more muted the sound of their passage, as if the darkness was devouring all sound. Those howls had not been repeated, and Corabb was beginning to wonder if they had been real at all. *Perhaps not a mortal throat at all. An illusion, a cry to freeze all in their tracks—*

The vanguard entered a defile and suddenly quarrels sprouted from riders and horses. Screams, toppling warriors, stumbling horses. From further back in the column, the clash of swords and shields.

*Dogslayers!*

Somehow, Corabb and his horse found themselves plunging clear. A figure darted close to his left and he shrieked, raising his weapon.

'It's me, damn you!'

'Leoman!'

His commander's horse had been killed beneath him. He reached up.
Corabb clasped Leoman's arm and vaulted him onto his horse's back.

'Ride, Bhilan! Ride!'

Black-armoured horse warriors plunged through the low wall, massive axes whirling in their gauntleted hands.

Quick Ben yelped and dived for cover.

Cursing, Kalam followed, Korbolo Dom's bound body bouncing on his shoulders. He flung himself down beside the wizard as hoofs flashed over them, raining sand and bits of mortar.

Then the heavy cavalry was past.

Kalam pushed the Napan off his back and twisted onto his side to glare at Quick Ben. 'Who in Hood's name were those bastards?'

'We'd best lie low for a time,' the wizard muttered with a grimace, rubbing grit from his eyes. 'Raraku's unleashed her ghosts—'

'And are they the ones singing? Those voices are right inside my head—'

'Mine, too, friend. Tell me, had any conversations with a Tanno Spiritwalker lately?'

'A what? No. Why?'

'Because that is what you're hearing. If it was a song woven around these ancient ghosts we're seeing, well, we'd not be hearing it. In fact, we'd not be hearing much of anything at all. And we'd have been chopped into tiny pieces by now. Kalam, that Tanno song belongs to the Bridgeburners.'

What?

'Makes you wonder about cause and effect, doesn't it? A Tanno stole our tale and fashioned a song – but for that song to have any effect, the Bridgeburners had to die. As a company. And now it has. Barring you and me —'

'And Fiddler. Wait! Fid mentioned something about a Spiritwalker in Ehrlitan.'

'It would have had to have been direct contact. A clasping of hands, an embrace, or a kiss—'

'That bastard sapper – I remember he was damned cagey about something. A kiss? Remind me to give Fiddler a kiss next time I see him, one he'll never forget—'

'Whoever it was and however it happened,' Quick Ben said, 'the Bridgeburners have now ascended—'

'Ascended? What in the Queen's name does that mean?'

'Damned if I know, Kalam. She carries an otataral sword, after all. Maybe the mages she has with her sense something, but the darkness that's descended on this oasis is obscuring everything."

Kalam grunted. 'Any other good news to tell me, Quick?'
"The darkness is sorcery. Remember whenever Anomander Rake arrived some place with his warren unveiled? That weight, the trembling ground, the overwhelming pressure?"

'Don't tell me the Son of Darkness is coming—'

'I hope not. I mean, I don't think so. He's busy – I'll explain later. No, this is more, uh, primal, I think.'

'Those howls,' Kalam grated. 'Two hounds, Quick Ben. I had a run in with them myself. They're like the Shadow Hounds, only somehow worse—'

The wizard was staring across at him.

'Stop it, Quick. I don't like that look. I got away because I loosed a handful of azalan demons at them. Didn't stop those hounds, but it was enough for me to make good my escape.'

Quick Ben's brows slowly arched. "A handful of azalan demons," Kalam? And where have you been lately?"

'You ain't the only one with a few tales to tell.'

The wizard cautiously rose into a crouch, scanned the area on the other side of the crumbled wall. 'Two Hounds of Darkness, you said. The Deragoth, then. So, who broke their chains, I wonder?'

'That's just typical!' Kalam snapped. 'What don't you know?'

'A few things,' the wizard replied under his breath. 'For example, what are those hounds doing here?'

'So long as we stay out of their path, I couldn't care less—'

'No, you misunderstood.' Quick Ben nodded towards where his gaze was fixed on the clearing beyond. 'What are they doing here?'

Kalam groaned.

Their bristly hackles were raised above their strangely humped, massive shoulders. Thick, long necks and broad, flattened heads, the jaw muscles bulging. Scarred, black hides, and eyes that burned pure and empty of light.

As large as a steppe horse, but bulkier by far, padding with heads lowered into the flagstoned square. There was something about them that resembled a hyena, and a plains bear as well. A certain sly avidness merged with arrogant brutality.

They slowed, then halted, lifting glistening snouts into the air.

They had come to destroy. To tear life from all flesh, to mock all claims of mastery, to shatter all that stood in their path. This was a new world for them. New, yet once it had been old. Changes had come. A world of vast silences where once kin and foe alike had opened throats in fierce challenge.

Nothing was as it had been, and the Deragoth were made uneasy.

They had come to destroy.

But now hesitated.

With eyes fixed on the one who had arrived, who now stood before them, at the far end of the square.

_Hesitate. Yes._

Karsa Orlong strode forward. He addressed them, his voice low and rumbling. 'Urugal's master had . . . ambitions,' he said. 'A dream of mastery. But now he understands better, and wants nothing to do with you.' Then the Teblor smiled. 'So I do.'
Both hounds stepped back, then moved to open more space between them.

Karsa smiled. *You do not belong here.* 'You would let me pass?' He continued on. And I *have had my fill of strangers.* 'Do you remember the Toblakai, beasts? But they had been gentled. By civilization. By the soft trappings of foolish peace. So weakened that they could not stand before T'lan Imass, could not stand before Forkrul Assail and Jaghut. And now, they cannot stand before Nathii slavers.

'An awakening was needed, friends. Remember the Toblakai, if it comforts you.' He strode directly between the two hounds, as if he intended to accept their invitation to pass.

The hounds attacked.

As he knew they would.

Karsa dropped into a crouch that leaned far to his left, as he brought up the massive stone sword over his head, point sliding left – directly into the path of the hound charging from that side.

Striking it in the chest.

The heavy sternum cracked but did not shatter, and the rippled blade edge scored a bloody path down along the ribs.

Karsa's crouch then exploded after his weapon, his legs driving his shoulder forward and up to hammer the beast at the level of its collar bones.

Jaws snapped above the back of the Toblakai's neck, then the impact jolted through warrior and hound both.

And the latter's sword-gouged ribs splintered.

Jaws closed around Karsa's right leg just below the knee.

And he was lifted clear of the ground. Then thrown to one side, though the jaws did not loosen. The wrench snapped the sword from his hands.

Molars ground against bone, incisors shredded muscle. The second hound closed on Karsa, savagely shaking the leg in its jaws.

The first hound staggered away a few paces, left foreleg dragging, blood spilling out beneath it.

Karsa made no effort to pull away from the beast seeking to chew off his lower leg. Instead, he pushed himself upright on his one free leg and lunged into the hound. Arms wrapping around the rippling body behind the shoulders.

With a bellow, the Teblor lifted the hound. Hind legs kicked in wild panic, but he was already wrenching the entire beast over.

The jaws were torn loose even as Karsa drove the creature down onto its back.

Flagstones cracked with explosions of dust.

The Teblor then sank to his knees, straddling the writhing hound, and closed both hands around its throat.

A snarling frenzy answered him.

Canines ripped into his forearms, the jaws gnawed frantically, chewing free chunks of skin and flesh.

Karsa released one hand and pushed it against the hound's lower jaw.

Muscles contracted as two unhuman strengths collided.

Legs scored Karsa's body, the claws tearing through leathers and into flesh, but the Teblor continued pushing. Harder and harder, his other hand edging up to join in the effort.
The kicks went wild. Panicked.
Karsa both felt and heard a grinding pop, then the flat head of the hound cracked against the flagstones.
A strange keening sound twisted out from the throat.
And the warrior pulled his right hand back, closed it into a fist, and drove it down into the animal's throat.
Crushing trachea.
The legs spasmed and went limp.
With a roar, Karsa reared upright, dragging the hound by its neck, then hammering it down once more. A loud snap, a spray of blood and saliva.
He straightened, shook himself, his mane raining blood and sweat, then swung his gaze to where the other hound had been.
Only a blood trail remained.
Karsa staggered over to his sword, retrieved it, then set off on that glistening path.

Kalam and Quick Ben slowly rose from behind the wall and stared in silence after the giant warrior.
Shadows had begun swarming in the darkness. They gathered like capemoths to the carcass of the Deragoth, then sped away again as if in terror.
Kalam rolled his shoulders, then, long-knives in his hands, he approached the hound.
Quick Ben followed.
They studied the mangled carcass.
'Wizard...'
'Aye?'
'Let's drop off the Napan and get out of here.'
'A brilliant plan.'
'I just thought it up.'
'I like it very much. Well done, Kalam.'
'Like I've always told you, Quick, I ain't just a pretty face.'

The two swung about and, ignoring the shadows pouring out of the burgeoning shattered warren of Kurald Emurlahn, returned to where they had left Korbolo Dom.

'Friend?'
Heboric stared at the four-eyed, squat demon that had leapt onto the path in front of him. 'If we'd met, demon, I'm sure I would have remembered it.'

'Helpful explanation. Brother to L'oric. He lies in clearing twelve paces to your left. Hesitant revision. Fifteen paces. Your legs are nearly as short as mine.'
'Take me to him.'
The demon did not move. 'Friend?'
'More or less. We share certain flaws.'

The creature shrugged. 'With reservations. Follow.'

Heboric set off into the petrified forest after the shambling demon, his smile broadening as it prattled on.

'A priest with the hands of a tiger. Sometimes. Other times, human hands glowing depthless green. Impressed. Those tattoos, very fine indeed. Musing. I would have trouble tearing out your throat, I think. Even driven by hunger, as I always am. Thoughtful. A fell night, this one. Ghosts, assassins, warrens, silent battles. Does no-one in this world ever sleep?'

They stumbled into a small clearing.

L'oric's armour was stained with drying blood, but he looked well enough, seated cross-legged, his eyes closed, his breathing steady. On the dusty ground before him lay a spread of the Deck of Dragons.

Grunting, Heboric settled down opposite the High Mage. 'Didn't know you played with those.'

'I never do,' L'oric replied in a murmur. 'Play, that is. A Master has come to the Deck, and that Master has just sanctioned the House of Chains.'

Heboric's eyes widened. Then narrowed, and he slowly nodded. 'Let the gods rail, he or she had to do just that.'

'I know. The Crippled God is now as bound as is every other god.'

'In the game, aye, after so long outside it. I wonder if he'll one day come to regret his gambit.'

'He seeks this fragment of Kurald Emurlahn, and is poised to strike, though his chances are less now than they were at sunset.'

'How so?'

'Bidithal is dead.'

'Good. Who?'

'Toblakai.'

'Oh. Not good.'

'Yet Toblakai has become, I believe, the Knight in the House of Chains.'

'That is damned unfortunate ... for the Crippled God. Toblakai will kneel to no-one. He cannot afford to. He will defy all prediction—'

'He has already displayed that penchant this night, Ghost Hands, to the possible ruination of us all. Still, at the same time, I have come to suspect he is our only hope.' L'oric opened his eyes and stared across at Heboric. 'Two Hounds of Darkness arrived a short while ago – I could sense their presence, though fitfully, but could get no closer. Otataral, and the very darkness that shrouds them.'

'And why should Toblakai step into their path? Never mind, I can answer that myself. Because he's Toblakai.'

'Aye. And I believe he has already done so.'

'And?'

'And now, I believe, but one Deragoth remains alive.'

'Gods forbid,' Heboric breathed.
'Toblakai even now pursues it.'
'Tell me, what brought the hounds here? What or who has Toblakai just thwarted?'
'The cards are ambivalent on that, Destriant. Perhaps the answer is yet to be decided.'
'Relieved to hear some things remain so, truth be told.'
'Ghost Hands. Get Felisin away from this place. Greyfrog here will accompany you.'
'And you?'
'I must go to Sha'ik. No, say nothing until I finish. I know that you and she were once close – perhaps not in a pleasing manner, but close none the less. But that mortal child is soon to be no more. The goddess is about to devour her soul even as we speak – and once that is done, there shall be no return. The young Malazan girl you once knew will have ceased to exist. Thus, when I go to Sha'ik, I go not to the child, but to the goddess.'
'But why? Are you truly loyal to the notion of apocalypse? Of chaos and destruction?'
'No. I have something else in mind. I must speak with the goddess – before she takes Sha'ik's soul.'

Heboric stared at the High Mage for a long time, seeking to discern what L'oric sought from that vengeful, insane goddess.
'There are two Felisins,' L'oric then murmured, eyes half veiled. 'Save the one you can, Heboric Light Touch.'
'One day, L'oric,' Heboric growled, 'I will discover who you truly are.'

The High Mage smiled. 'You will find this simple truth – I am a son who lives without hope of ever matching my father's stride. That alone, in time, will explain all you need know of me. Go, Destriant. Guard her well.'

Ghosts pivoted, armour shedding red dust, and saluted as Karsa Orlong limped past. At least these ones, he reflected dully, weren't shackled in chains.

The blood trail had led him into a maze of ruins, an unused section of the city notorious for its cellars and pitfalls and precariously leaning walls. He could smell the beast. It was close and, he suspected, cornered.

Or, more likely, it had decided to make a stand, in a place perfectly suited for an ambush.

If only the slow, steady patter of dripping blood had not given away its hiding place.

Karsa kept his gaze averted from that alleyway of inky shadows five paces ahead and to his right. He made his steps uncertain, uneven with pain and hesitation, not all of it feigned. The blood between his hands and the sword's grip had grown sticky, but still threatened to betray his grasp on the weapon.

Shadows were shredding the darkness, as if the two elemental forces were at war, with the latter being driven back. Dawn, Karsa realized, was approaching.

He came opposite the alley.

And the hound charged.

Karsa leapt forward, twisting in mid-air to slash his sword two-handed, cleaving an arc into his wake.

The tip slashed hide, but the beast's attack had already carried it past. It landed on one foreleg, which skidded out from under it. The hound fell onto one shoulder, then rolled right over.

Karsa scrambled back to his feet to face it.
The beast crouched, preparing to charge once again.

The horse that burst out of a side alley caught both hound and Toblakai by surprise. That the panicked animal had been galloping blind was made obvious as it collided with the hound.

There had been two riders on the horse. And both were thrown from the saddle, straight over the hound.

The impact had driven the hound down beneath the wildly stamping hoofs. Somehow, the horse stayed upright, staggering clear with heavy snorts as if seeking to draw breath into stunned lungs. Behind it, the hound's claws gouged the cobbles as it struggled to right itself.

Snarling, Karsa lunged forward and plunged the sword's point into the beast's neck.

It shrieked, surged towards the Toblakai.

Karsa leapt away, dragging his sword after him.

Blood gushing from the puncture in its throat, the hound rose up on its three legs, weaving, head swaying as it coughed red spume onto the stones.

A figure darted out from the shadows. The spiked ball at the end of a flail hissed through the air, and thundered into the hound's head. A second followed, hammering down from above to audibly crack the beast's thick skull.

Karsa stepped forward. An overhead two-handed swing finally drove the hound from its wobbling legs.

Side by side, Leoman and Karsa closed in to finish it. A dozen blows later and the hound was dead.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas then stumbled into view, a broken sword in his hand.

Karsa wiped the gore from his blade then glared at Leoman. 'I did not need your help,' he growled.

Leoman grinned. 'But I need yours.'

Pearl staggered from the trench, clambering over sprawled corpses. Since his rather elegant assassination of Henaras, things had gone decidedly downhill – steeper than that trench behind me. Countless guards, then the ghostly army whose weapons were anything but illusory. His head still ached from Lostara's kiss – damned woman, just when I thought I'd figured her out . . .

He'd been cut and slashed at all the way through that damned camp, and now stumbled half blind towards the ruins.

The darkness was being torn apart on all sides. Kurald Emurlahn was opening like death's own flower, with the oasis at its dark heart. Beneath the sorcerous pressure of that manifestation, it was all he could do to pitch headlong down the trail.

So long as Lostara stayed put, they might well salvage something out of all this.

He came to the edge and paused, studying the pit where he'd left her. No movement. She was either staying low or had left. He padded forward.

* I despise nights like these. Nothing goes as planned—*

Something hard struck him in the side of his head. Stunned, he fell and lay unmoving, his face pressed against the cold, gritty ground.

A voice rumbled above him. 'That was for Malaz City. Even so, you still owe me one.'

'After Henaras?' Pearl mumbled, his words puffing up tiny clouds of dust. 'You should be owing me one.'

'Her? Not worth counting.'
Something thumped heavily to the ground beside Pearl. That then groaned.

‘All right,’ the Claw sighed – *more dust, a miniature Whirlwind* – ‘I owe you one, then.’

‘Glad we’re agreed. Now, make some more noises. Your lass over there’s bound to take a look ... eventually.’

Pearl listened to the footfalls pad away. Two sets. *The wizard was in no mood to talk, I suppose.*

*To me, that is.*

_I believe I am sorely humbled._

Beside him, the trussed shape groaned again.

Despite himself, Pearl smiled.

To the east, the sky paled.

And this night was done.
The whirlwind goddess had once been a raging storm of wind and sand. A wall surrounding the young woman who had once been Felisin of House Paran, and who had become Sha’ik, Chosen One and supreme ruler of the Army of the Apocalypse.

Felisin had been her mother’s name. She had then made it her adopted daughter’s name. Yet she herself had lost it. Occasionally, however, in the deepest hours of night, in the heart of an impenetrable silence of her own making, she caught a glimpse of that girl. As she once had been, the smeared reflection from a polished mirror. Round-cheeked and flushed, a wide smile and bright eyes. A child with a brother who adored her, who would toss her about on one knee as if it was a bucking horse, and her squeals of fear and delight would fill the chamber.

Her mother had been gifted with visions. This was well known. A respected truth. And that mother’s youngest daughter had dreamed that one day she too would find that talent within her.

But that gift only came with the goddess, with this spiteful, horrific creature whose soul was far more parched and withered than any desert. And the visions that assailed Sha’ik were murky, fraught things. They were, she had come to realize, not born of any talent or gift. They were the conjurings of fear.

A goddess’s fear.

And now the Whirlwind Wall had closed, retracted, had drawn in from the outside world to rage beneath Sha’ik’s sun-darkened skin, along her veins and arteries, careening wild and deafening in her mind.

Oh, there was power there. Bitter with age, bilious with malice. And whatever fuelled it bore the sour taste of betrayal. A heart-piercing, very personal betrayal. Something that should have healed, that should have numbed beneath thick, tough scar tissue. Spiteful pleasure had kept the wound open, had fed its festering heat, until hate was all that was left. Hate for ... someone, a hate so ancient it no longer possessed a face.

In moments of cold reason, Sha’ik saw it for what it was. Insane, raised to such extremity that she understood that whatever had been the crime against the goddess, whatever the source of the betrayal, it had not earned such a brutal reaction. The proportions had begun wrong. From the very start. Leading her to suspect that the proclivity for madness had already existed, dark flaws marring the soul that would one day claw its way into ascendancy.

*Step by step, we walk the most horrendous paths. Stride tottering along the edge of an unsuspected abyss. Companions see nothing amiss. The world seems a normal place. Step by step, no different from anyone else – not from the outside. Not even from the inside. Apart from that tautness, that whisper of panic. The vague confusion that threatens your balance.*

Felisin, who was Sha’ik, had come to comprehend this.

For she had walked that same path.

*Hatred, sweet as nectar.*

*I have walked into the abyss.*

*I am as mad as that goddess. And this is why she chose me, for we are kindred souls . . .*
Then what is this ledge to which I still cling so desperately? Why do I persist in my belief that I can save myself? That I can return . . . find once more the place where madness cannot be found, where confusion does not exist.

The place . . . of childhood.

She stood in the main chamber, the chair that would be a throne behind her, its cushions cool, its armrests dry. She stood, imprisoned in a stranger's armour. She could almost feel the goddess reaching out to engulf her on all sides – not a mother's embrace, no, nothing like that at all. This one would suffocate her utterly, would drown out all light, every glimmer of self-awareness.

Her ego is armoured in hatred. She cannot look in, she can barely see out. Her walk is a shamble, cramped and stiff, a song of rusty fittings and creaking straps. Her teeth gleam in the shadows, but it is a rictus grin.

_Felisin Paran, hold up this mirror at your peril._

Outside stole the first light of dawn.

And Sha'ik reached for her helm.

L'oric could just make out the Dogslayer positions at the tops of the cobbled ramps. There was no movement over there in the grey light of dawn. It was strange, but not surprising. The night just done would make even the hardest soldier hesitant to raise a gaze skyward, to straighten from a place of hiding to begin the mundane tasks that marked the start of a new day.

Even so, there was something strange about those trenches.

He strode along the ridge towards the hilltop where Sha'ik had established her forward post to observe the battle to come. The High Mage ached in every bone. His muscles shouted pain with every step he took.

He prayed she was there.

Prayed the goddess would deign to hear his words, his warning, and, finally, his offer.

All hovered on the cusp. Darkness had been defeated ... somehow. He wondered at that, but not for long – there was no time for such idle musings. This tortured fragment of Kurald Emurlahn was awakening, and the goddess was about to arrive, to claim it for herself. To fashion a throne. To devour Raraku.

Ghosts still swirled in the shadows, warriors and soldiers from scores of long-dead civilizations. Wielding strange weapons, their bodies hidden beneath strange armour, their faces mercifully covered by ornate visors. They were singing, although that Tanno song had grown pensive, mournful, sighing soft as the wind. It had begun to rise and fall, a susurration that chilled L'oric.

_Who will they fight for? Why are they here at all? What do they want?_

The song belonged to the Bridgeburners. Yet it seemed the Holy Desert itself had claimed it, had taken that multitude of ethereal voices for itself. And every soul that had fallen in battle in the desert's immense history was now gathered in this place.

_The cusp._

He came to the base of the trail leading up to Sha'ik's hill. There were desert warriors huddled here and there, wrapped in their ochre telabas, spears thrust upright, iron points glistening with dew as the sun's fire broke on the east horizon. Companies of Mathok's light cavalry were forming up on the flats to L'oric's right. The horses were jittery, the rows shifting uneven and restless. The High Mage could not see Mathok anywhere among them – nor, he realized with a chill, could he see the standards of the warleader's own tribe.

He heard horses approach from behind and turned to see Leoman, one of his officers, and Toblakai riding up towards him.
The Toblakai's horse was a Jhag, L'oric saw, huge and magnificent in its primal savagery, loping collected and perfectly proportionate to the giant astride its shoulders.

And that giant was a mess. Preternatural healing had yet to fully repair the terrible wounds on him. His hands were a crimson ruin. One leg had been chewed by vicious, oversized jaws.

Toblakai and his horse were dragging a pair of objects that bounced and rolled on the ends of chains, and L'oric's eyes went wide upon seeing what they were.

*He's killed the Deragoth. He's taken their heads.*

'L'oric!' Leoman rasped as he drew rein before him. 'Is she above?'

'I don't know, Leoman of the Flails.'

All three dismounted, and L'oric saw Toblakai favouring his mangled leg. A *hound's jaws did that.* And then he saw the stone sword on the giant's back. *Ah, he is indeed the one, then. I think the Crippled God has made a terrible mistake . . .*

*Gods, he killed the Deragoth.*

'Where is Febryl hiding?' Leoman asked as the four of them began the ascent.

Toblakai answered. 'Dead. I forgot to tell you some things. I killed him. And I killed Bidithal. I would have killed Ghost Hands and Korbolo Dom, but I could not find them.'

L'oric rubbed a hand across his brow, and it came away wet and oily. Yet he could still see his breath.

Toblakai went on, inexorably. 'And when I went into Korbolo's tent, I found Kamist Reloe. He'd been assassinated. So had Henaras.'

L'oric shook himself and said to Leoman, 'Did you receive Sha'ik's last commands? Shouldn't you be with the Dogslayers?'

The warrior grunted. 'Probably. We've just come from there.'

'They're all dead,' Toblakai said. 'Slaughtered in the night. The ghosts of Raraku were busy – though none dared oppose me.' He barked a laugh. 'As Ghost Hands could tell you, I have ghosts of my own.'

L'oric stumbled on the trail. He reached up and gripped Leoman's arm. 'Slaughtered? All *of them?*

'Yes, High Mage. I'm surprised you didn't know. We still have the desert warriors. We can still win this, just not here and not now. Thus, we need to convince Sha'ik to leave—'

'That won't be possible,' L'oric cut in. 'The goddess is coming, is almost here. It's too late for that, Leoman. Moments from being too late for everything—'

They clambered over the crest.

And there stood Sha'ik.

Helmed and armoured, her back to them as she stared southward.

L'oric wanted to cry out. For he saw what his companions could not see. I'm *not in time. Oh, gods below—* And then he leapt forward, his warren's portal flaring around him – and was gone.

The goddess had not lost her memories. Indeed, rage had carved their likenesses, every detail, as mockingly solid and real-seeming as those carved trees in the forest of stone. And she could caress them, crooning her hatred like a lover's song, lingering with a touch promising murder, though the one who had wronged her was, if not dead, then in a place that no longer mattered.
The hate was all that mattered now. Her fury at his weaknesses. Oh, others in the tribe played those games often enough. Bodies slipped through the furs from hut to hut when the stars fell into their summer alignment, and she herself had more than once spread her legs to another woman's husband, or an eager, clumsy youth.

But her heart had been given to the one man with whom she lived. That law was sacrosanct.

Oh, but he'd been so sensitive. His hands following his eyes in the fashioning of forbidden images of that other woman, there in the hidden places. He'd used those hands to close about his own heart, to give it to another – without a thought as to who had once held it for herself.

Another, who would not even give her heart in return – she had seen to that, with vicious words and challenging accusations. Enough to encourage the others to banish her for ever.

But not before the bitch killed all but one of her kin.

Foolish, stupid man, to have given his love to that woman.

Her rage had not died with the Ritual, had not died when she herself– too shattered to walk – had been severed from the Vow and left in a place of eternal darkness. And every curious spirit that had heard her weeping, that had drawn close in sympathy – well, they had fed her hungers, and she had taken their powers. Layer upon layer. For they too had been foolish and stupid, wayward and inclined to squander those powers on meaningless things. But she had a purpose.

The children swarmed the surface of the world. And who was their mother? None other than the bitch who had been banished.

And their father?

Oh yes, she went to him. On that last night. She did. He reeked of her when they dragged him into the light the following morning. Reeked of her. The truth was there in his eyes.

A look she would – could – never forget.

Vengeance was a beast long straining at its chains. Vengeance was all she had ever wanted.

Vengeance was about to be unleashed.

And even Raraku could not stop it. The children would die.

_The children will die. I will cleanse the world of their beget, the proud-eyed vermin born, one and all, of that single mother. Of course she could not join the Ritual. A new world waited within her._

_And now, at last, I shall rise again. Clothed in the flesh of one such child, I shall kill that world._

She could see the path opening, the way ahead clear and inviting. A tunnel walled in spinning, writhing shadows.

It would be good to walk again.

To feel warm flesh and the heat of blood.

To taste water. Food.

To breathe.

To kill.

Unmindful and unhearing, Sha’ik made her way down the slope. The basin awaited her, that field of battle. She saw Malazan scouts on the ridge opposite, one riding back to the encampment, the others simply watching.

It was understood, then. As she had known it would be.
Vague, distant shouts behind her. She smiled. *Of course, in the end, it is the two warriors who first found me. I was foolish to have doubted them. And I know, either one would stand in my stead.*

*But they cannot.*

*This fight belongs to me. And the goddess.*

'Enter.'

Captain Keneb paused for a moment, seeking to collect himself, then he strode into the command tent.

She was donning her armour. A mundane task that would have been easier with a servant at hand, but that, of course, was not Tavore's way.

Although, perhaps, that was not quite the truth. 'Adjunct.'

'What is it, Captain?'

'I have just come from the Fist's tent. A cutter and a healer were summoned at once, but it was far too late. Adjunct Tavore, Gamet died last night. A blood vessel burst in his brain – the cutter believes it was a clot, and that it was born the night he was thrown from his horse. I am . . . sorry.'

A pallor had come to her drawn, plain face. He saw her hand reach down to steady herself against the table edge. 'Dead?'

'In his sleep.'

She turned away, stared down at the accoutrements littering the table. 'Thank you, Captain. Leave me now, and have T'amber—'

There was a commotion outside, then a Wickan youth pushed in. 'Adjunct! Sha'ik has walked down into the basin! She challenges you!'

After a long moment, Tavore nodded. 'Very well. Belay that last order, Captain. You both may go.' She turned to resume strapping on her armour.

Keneb gestured the youth ahead and they strode from the tent.

Outside, the captain hesitated. It's *what Gamet would do . . . isn't it?*

'Will she fight her?' the Wickan asked.

He glanced over. 'She will. Return to Temul, lad. Either way, we have a battle ahead of us this day.' He watched the young warrior hurry off.

Then swung to face the modest tent situated twenty paces to his left. There were no guards stationed before its flap. Keneb halted before the entrance. 'Lady T'amber, are you within?'

A figure emerged. Dressed in hard leathers – light armour, Keneb realized with a start – and a longsword strapped to her hip. 'Does the Adjunct wish to begin her morning practice?'

Keneb met those calm eyes, the colour of which gave the woman her name. They seemed depthless. He mentally shook himself. 'Gamet died last night. I have just informed the Adjunct.'

The woman's gaze flicked towards the command tent. 'I see.'

'And in the basin between the two armies, Sha'ik now stands ... waiting. It occurred to me, Lady, that the Adjunct might appreciate some help with her armour.'

To his surprise she turned back to her tent. 'Not this morning, Captain. I understand your motives ... but no. Not this morning. Good day, sir.'
Then she was gone.

Keneb stood motionless in surprise. All right, then, so I do not understand women.

He faced the command tent once more, in time to see the Adjunct emerge, tightening the straps on her gauntlets. She was helmed, the cheek guards locked in place. There was no visor covering her eyes – many fighters found their vision too impaired by the slits – and he watched her pause, lifting her gaze to the morning sky for a moment, before she strode forward.

He gave her some distance, then followed.

L’oric clawed his way through the swirling shadows, scraped by skeletal branches and stumbling over gnarled roots. He had not expected this. There had to be a path, a way through this blackwood forest.

That damned goddess was here. Close. She had to be – if he could but find the trail.

The air was sodden and chill, the boles of the trees leaning this way and that, as if an earthquake had just shaken the ground. Wood creaked overhead to some high wind. And everywhere flitted wraiths, lost shadows, closing on the High Mage then darting away again. Rising from the humus like ghosts, hissing over his head as he staggered on.

And then, through the trees, the flicker of fire.

Gasping, L’oric ran towards it.

It was her. And the flames confirmed his suspicion. An Imass, trailing the chains of Tellann, the Ritual shattered – oh, she has no place here, no place at all.

Chthonic spirits swarmed her burning body, the accretions of power she had gathered unto herself over hundreds of thousands of years. Hatred and spite had twisted them all into malign, vicious creatures.

Marsh water and mould had blackened the limbs of the Imass. Moss covered the torso like dangling, knotted fur. Ropes of snarled, grey hair hung down, tangled with burrs. From her scorched eye sockets, living flames licked out. The bones of her cheeks were white, latticed in cracks from the heat.

Toothless, the heavy lower jaw hanging – barely held in place by rotting strips of tendon and withered muscle.

The goddess was keening, a wavering, eerie cry that did not pause for breath, and it seemed to L’oric that she was struggling.

He drew closer.

She had stumbled into a web of vines, the twisted ropes entangling her arms and legs, wrapped like serpents about her torso and neck. He wondered that he had not seen them earlier, then realized that they were flickering, one moment there, the other gone – although no less an impediment for their rhythmic disappearance – and they were changing...

Into chains.

Suddenly, one snapped. And the goddess howled, redoubled her efforts.

Another broke, whipping to crack against a tree.

L’oric edged forward. ‘Goddess! Hear me! Sha’ik – she is not strong enough for you!’

‘My – my – my child! Mine! I stole her from the bitch! Mine!’

The High Mage frowned. Who? What bitch? ‘Goddess, listen to me, please! I offer myself in her stead! Do you understand?’
Another chain broke.

And a voice spoke low behind L'oric. 'Interfering bastard.'

He spun, but too late, as a wide-bladed knife was driven deep between his ribs, tearing a savage path to his heart.

Or where his heart should have been, had L'oric been human.

The serrated tip missed, sliding in front of the deep-seated organ, then jammed into the side of the sternum.

L'oric groaned and sagged.

The killer dragged his knife free, crouched and pulled L'oric's head back by the jaw. Reached down with the blade.

'Never mind that, fool!' hissed another voice. 'She's breaking the chains!'

L'oric watched the man hesitate, then growl and move away.

The High Mage could feel blood filling his chest. He slowly turned onto his side, and could feel the warm flow seep down from the wound. The change in position gave him a mostly unobscured view of the goddess——

—and the assassins now closing in on her.

Sorcery streamed from their knives, a skein of death-magics.

The goddess shrieked as the first knife was driven into her back.

He watched them kill her. A prolonged, brutal butchering. Korbolo's Talons, his chosen assassins, who had been waiting in ambush, guided here by Febryl – no-one else could have managed that path – and abetted by the sorcerous powers of Kamist Reloe, Henaras and Fayelle. She fought back with a ferocity near to match, and soon three of the four assassins were dead – torn limb from limb. But more chains now ensnared the goddess, dragging her down, and L'oric could see the fires dying in her eye sockets, could see spirits writhe away, suddenly freed and eager to flee. And the last killer darted in, hammering down with his knife. Through the top of the skull. A midnight flash, the detonation flinging the killer back. Both skull and blade had shattered, lacerating the Talon's face and chest. Blinded and screaming, he reeled back, tripped over a root and thumped to the ground.

L'oric listened to the man moaning.

Chains snaked over the fallen body of the goddess, until nothing visible was left of her, the black iron links heaped and glistening.

Whatever high wind had lashed the treetops now fell away, leaving only silence.

_How all wanted this shattered warren. This fraught prize. But Toblakai killed Febryl. He killed the two Deragoth._

_He killed Bidithal._

_And as for Korbolo Dom – something tells me the Empress will soon speak to him in person. The poor bastard._

Beneath the High Mage, his lifeblood soaked the moss.

It came to him, then, that he was dying.

Twigs snapped nearby.

'I'm hardly surprised. You sent your familiar away, didn't you? Again.'
L'oric twisted his head around, stared upward, and managed a weak smile. 'Father.'

'I don't think much has changed in your room, son, since you left it.'

'Dusty, I would think.'

Osric grunted. 'The entire keep is that, I would hazard. Haven't been there in centuries.'

'No servants?'

'I dismissed them ... about a thousand years ago.'

L'oric sighed. 'I'd be surprised if the place is still standing.'

Osric slowly crouched down beside his son, the sorcerous glow of Denul now surrounding him. 'Oh, it still stands, son. I always keep my options open. An ugly cut you have there. Best healed slowly.'

L'oric closed his eyes. 'My old bed?'

'Aye.'

'It's too short. It was when I left, anyway.'

'Too bad he didn't cut off your feet, then, L'oric.'

Strong arms reached under him and he was lifted effortlessly.

Absurdly – for a man my age – he felt at peace. In his father's arms.

'Now,' Osric said, 'how in Hood's name do we get out of here?'

The moment passed.

She stumbled, barely managing to right herself. Behind the iron mesh, she blinked against the hot, close air. All at once, the armour seemed immeasurably heavy. A surge of panic – the sun was roasting her alive beneath these plates of metal.

Sha'ik halted. Struggled to regain control of herself.

_Myself. Gods below... she is gone._

She stood alone in the basin. From the ridge opposite a lone figure was descending the slope. Tall, unhurried, the gait achingly familiar.

The ridge behind Tavore, and those on every battered island of ancient coral, was now lined with soldiers.

The Army of the Apocalypse was watching as well, Sha'ik suspected, though she did not turn about.

_Sh is gone. I have been... abandoned._

_I was Sha'ik, once. Now, I am Felisin once more. And here, walking towards me, is the one who betrayed me. My sister._

She remembered watching Tavore and Ganoes playing with wooden swords. Beginning on that path to deadly familiarity, to unthinking ease wielding the weight of that weapon. Had the world beyond not changed – had all stood still, the way children believed it would – she would have had her turn. The clack of wood, Ganoes laughing and gently instructing her – there was joy and comfort to her brother, the way he made teaching subservient to the game's natural pleasures. But she'd never had the chance for that.

No chance, in fact, for much of anything that could now return to her, memories warm and trusting and reassuring.
Instead, Tavore had dismembered their family. And for Felisin, the horrors of slavery and the mines.

*But blood is the chain that can never break.*

Tavore was now twenty strides away. Drawing out her otataral sword.

*And, though we leave the house of our birth, it never leaves us.*

Sha'ik could feel the weight of her own weapon, dragging hard enough to make her wrist ache. She did not recall unsheathing it.

Beyond the mesh and through the slits of the visor, Tavore strode ever closer, neither speeding up nor slowing.

*No catching up. No falling back. How could there be? We are ever the same years apart. The chain never draws taut. Never slackens. Its length is prescribed. But its weight, oh, its weight ever varies.*

She was lithe, light on her feet, achingly economical. She was, for this moment, perfect.

*But, for me, the blood is heavy. So heavy.*

And Felisin struggled against it — that sudden, overwhelming weight. Struggled to raise her arms — unthinking of how that motion would be received.

*Tavore, it's all right—*

A thunderous clang, a reverberation jolting up her right arm, and the sword's enervating weight was suddenly gone from her hand.

Then something punched into her chest, a stunning blossom of cold fire piercing through flesh, bone — and then she felt a tug from behind, as if something had reached up, clasped her hauberk and yanked on it — but it was just the point, she realized. The point of Tavore's sword, as it drove against the underside of the armour shielding her back.

Felisin looked down to see that rust-hued blade impaling her.

Her legs gave way and the sword suddenly bowed to her weight.

But she did not slide off that length of stained iron.

Her body held on to it, releasing only in shuddering increments as Felisin fell back, onto the ground.

Through the visor's slit, she stared up at her sister, a figure standing behind a web of black, twisted iron wire that now rested cool over her eyes, tickling her lashes.

A figure who now stepped closer. To set one boot down hard on her chest — a weight that, now that it had arrived, seemed eternal — and dragged the sword free.

Blood.

*Of course. This is how you break an unbreakable chain.*

*By dying.*

*I just wanted to know, Tavore, why you did it. And why you did not love me, when I loved you. I — I think that's what I wanted to know.*

The boot lifted from her chest. But she could still feel its weight.

*Heavy. So very heavy . . .*

*Oh, Mother, look at us now.*
Karsa Orlong's hand snapped out, caught Leoman before the man fell, then dragged him close. 'Hear me, friend. She is dead. Take your tribes and get out of here.'

Leoman lifted a hand and passed it across his eyes. Then he straightened. 'Dead, yes. I'm sorry, Toblakai. It wasn't that. She' – his face twisted – 'she did not know how to fight!'

'True, she did not. And now she's dead, and the Whirlwind Goddess with her. It is done, friend. We have lost.'

'More than you know,' Leoman groaned, pulling away.

In the basin below, the Adjunct was staring down at Sha'ik's corpse. From both armies lining the ridges, silence. Karsa frowned. 'The Malazans do not cheer.'

'No,' Leoman snarled, turning to where Corabb waited with the horses. 'They probably hate the bitch. We ride to Y'Ghatan, Toblakai—'

'Not me,' Karsa growled.

His friend paused and then nodded without turning around, and vaulted onto his horse. He took the reins from Corabb then glanced over at Toblakai. 'Fare well, my friend.'

'And you, Leoman of the Flails.'

'If L'oric returns from wherever he went, tell him ...' His voice trailed away, then he shrugged. 'Take care of him if he needs help.'

'I shall, but I do not think we will see him again.'

Leoman nodded. Then he said to Corabb, 'Tell the warchiefs to scatter with their tribes. Out of Raraku as fast as they can manage it—'

'Out of the Holy Desert, Leoman?' Corabb asked.

'Can't you hear it? Never mind. Yes. Out. Rejoin me on the western road – the ancient one that runs straight.'

Corabb saluted, then pulled his horse round and rode off.

'You too, Toblakai. Out of Raraku—'

'I will,' Karsa replied, 'when I am done here, Leoman. Now, go – officers are riding to the Adjunct. They will follow with an attack—'

'Then they're fools,' Leoman spat.

Karsa watched his friend ride off. Then strode to his own mount. He was tired. His wounds hurt. But some issues remained unsettled, and he needed to take care of that.

The Teblor swung himself onto Havok's back.

Lostara walked down the slope, the cracked ground crunching underfoot. At her side marched Pearl, breathing hard beneath the weight of Korbolo Dom's bound, limp form.

Tavore still stood alone on the flats, a few paces from Sha'ik's body. The Adjunct's attention had been fixed on the Dogslayer trenches, and on the lone, ragged standard rising from the highest ground at the central ramp's summit.

A standard that had no right being here. No right existing at all.
Coltaine's standard, the wings of the Crow Clan.

Lostara wondered who had raised it, where it had come from, then decided she didn't want to know. One truth could not be ignored, however. *They're all dead. The Dogslayers. All. And the Adjunct did not need to even raise a hand to achieve that.*

She sensed her own cowardice and scowled. Skittering away, again and again, from thoughts too bitter with irony to contemplate. Their journey to the basin had been nightmarish, as Kurald Emurlahn swarmed the entire oasis, as shadows warred with ghosts, and the incessant rise and fall of that song grew audible enough for Lostara to sense, if not hear. A song still climbing in crescendo.

But, at the feet of... *of everything.* A simple, brutal fact.

They had come too late.

Within sight, only to see Tavore batter Sha'ik's weapon out of her hands, then thrust that sword right through her ... *name it, Lostara Yil, you damned coward. Name it! Her sister. Through her sister. There. It's done, dragged out before us.*

She would not look at Pearl, could say nothing. Nor did he speak.

*We are bound, this man and I. I didn't ask for this. I don't want it. I'll never be without it. Oh, Queen forgive me...*

Close enough now to see Tavore's face beneath the helm, an expression stern – almost angry – as she turned to watch their approach.

Officers were riding down, though slowly.

There would be time, Lostara realized, for a private conversation.

She and Pearl halted six paces from the Adjunct.

The Claw dumped Korbolo Dom onto the ground between them. 'He won't wake up any time soon,' he said, taking a deep breath, then sighing and looking away.

'What are you two doing here?' the Adjunct asked. 'Did you lose the trail?'

Pearl did not glance at Lostara, but simply shook his head in answer to Tavore's question. A pause, then, 'We found her, Adjunct. With deep regret... Felisin is dead.'

'Are you certain?'

'Yes, Adjunct.' He hesitated, then added, 'I can say one thing for certain, Tavore. She died quickly.'

Lostara's heart felt ready to explode at Pearl's quiet words. Jaws clenching, she met the Adjunct's eyes, and slowly nodded.

Tavore stared at them both for a long moment, then lowered her head. 'Well, there is mercy in that, I suppose.'

And then sheathed her sword, turned away and began walking towards her approaching officers.

Under her breath, so low that only Pearl could hear her, Lostara said, 'Yes, I suppose there is...'

Pearl swung to her suddenly. 'Here comes Tene Baralta. Stall him, lass.' He walked over to Sha'ik's body. 'The warrens are clear enough ... I hope.' He bent down and tenderly picked her up, then faced Lostara once more. 'Yes, she's a heavier burden than you might think.'

'No, Pearl, I don't think that. Where?'

The Claw's smile lanced into her heart. 'A hilltop ... you know the one.'
Lostara nodded. 'Very well. And then?'

'Convince them to get out of Raraku, lass. As fast as they can. When I'm done . . . ' he hesitated.

'Come and find me, Pearl,' she growled. 'Or else I'll come looking for you.'

A flicker of life in his weary eyes. 'I will. I promise.'

She watched his gaze flit past her shoulder and she turned. Tavore was still twenty paces from the riders, who had all but Baralta halted their horses. 'What is it, Pearl?'

'Just watching her. . . walking away,' he replied. 'She looks so . . .'

'Alone?'

'Yes. That is the word, isn't it. See you later, lass.'

She felt the breath of the warren gust against her back, then the day's heat returned. Lostara hitched her thumbs in her belt, and waited for Tene Baralta.

Her once-commander would have wanted Sha'ik's body. A trophy for this day. He would be furious. 'Well,' she muttered, 'that's just too damned bad.'

Keneb watched her approach. There was none of the triumph there he thought he would see. Indeed, she looked worn down, as if the falling of spirit that followed every battle had already come to her, the deathly stillness of the mind that invited dire contemplation, that lifted up the host of questions that could never be answered.

She had sheathed her sword without cleansing it, and Sha'ik's blood had run crooked tracks down the plain scabbard.

Tene Baralta rode past her, on his way, Keneb suspected, to Sha'ik's body. If he said anything to the Adjunct in passing, she made no reply.

'Fist Blistig,' she announced upon arriving. 'Send scouts to the Dogslayer ramps. Also, a detachment of guards – the Claw have delivered to us Korbolo Dom.'

Ah, so that was what that man was carrying. Keneb glanced back to where the duel had taken place. Only the woman stood there now, over the prone shape that was the Napan renegade, her face turned up to Tene Baralta, who remained on his horse and seemed to be berating her. Even at this distance, something told Keneb that Baralta's harangue would yield little result.

'Adjunct,' Nil said, 'there is no need to scout the Dogslayer positions. They are all dead.'

Tavore frowned. 'Explain.'

'Raraku's ghosts, Adjunct.'

Nether spoke up. 'And the spirits of our own slain. Nil and I – we were blind to it. We'd forgotten the ways of . . . of seeing. The cattle dog, Adjunct. Bent. It should have died at Coltaine's feet. At the Fall. But some soldiers saved it, saw to the healing of its wounds.'

'A cattle dog? What are you talking about?' Tavore demanded, revealing, for the very first time, an edge of exasperation.

'Bent and Roach,' Nil said. 'The only creatures still living to have walked the Chain the entire way. Two dogs.'

'Not true,' Temul said from behind the two Wickan shamans. 'This mare. It belonged to Duiker.'

Nil half turned to acknowledge the correction, then faced Tavore once more. 'They came back with us,
'The dogs.'

He nodded. 'And the spirits of the slain. Our own ghosts, Adjunct, have marched with us. Those that fell around Coltaine at the very end. Those that died on the trees of Aren Way. And, step by step, more came from the places where they were cut down. Step by step, Adjunct, our army of vengeance grew.'

'And yet you sensed nothing?'

'Our grief blinded us,' Nether replied.

'Last night,' Nil said, 'the child Grub woke us. Led us to the ridge, so that we could witness the awakening. There were legions, Adjunct, that had marched this land a hundred thousand years ago. And Pormqual's crucified army and the legions of the Seventh on one flank. The three slaughtered clans of the Wickans on the other. And still others. Within the darkness last night, Tavore, there was war.'

'Thus,' Nether said, smiling, 'you were right, Adjunct. In the dreams that haunted you from the very first night of this march, you saw what we could not see.'

'It was never the burden you believed it to be,' Nil added. 'You did not drag the Chain of Dogs with you, Adjunct Tavore.'

'Didn't I, Nil?' A chilling half-smile twisted her thin-lipped mouth, then she looked away. 'All those ghosts ... simply to slay the Dogslayers?'

'No, Adjunct,' Nether answered. 'There were other ... enemies.'

'Fist Gamet's ghost joined them,' Nil said.

Tavore's eyes narrowed sharply. 'You saw him?'

Both Wickans nodded, and Nether added, 'Grub spoke with him.'

The Adjunct shot Keneb a querying look.

'He can be damned hard to find,' the captain muttered, shrugging. 'As for talking with ghosts ... well, the lad is, uh, strange enough for that.'

The Adjunct's sigh was heavy.

Keneb's gaze caught movement and he swung his head round, to see Tene Baralta riding back in the company of two soldiers wearing little more than rags. Both were unshaven, their hair long and matted. Their horses bore no saddles.

The Fist reined in with his charges. His face was dark with anger. 'Adjunct. That Claw has stolen Sha'ik's body!'

Keneb saw the woman approaching on foot, still twenty paces distant. She looked ... smug.

Tavore ignored Tene Baralta's statement and was eyeing the two newcomers. 'And you are?' she asked.

The elder of the two saluted. 'Captain Kindly, Adjunct, of the Ashok Regiment. We were prisoners in the Dogslayer camp. Lieutenant Pores and myself, that is.'

Keneb started, then leaned forward on his saddle. Yes, he realized, through all that filth ... 'Captain,' he said in rough greeting.

Kindly squinted, then grimaced. 'Keneb.'

Tavore cleared her throat, then asked, 'Are you two all that's left of your regiment, Captain?'
'No, Adjunct. At least, we don't think so—'
'Tell me later. Go get cleaned up.'
'Aye, Adjunct.'
'One more question first,' she said. 'The Dogs whatever...'
Kindly made an involuntary warding gesture. 'It was not a pleasant night, Adjunct.'
'You bear shackle scars.'
Kindly nodded. 'Just before dawn, a couple of Bridgeburners showed up and burned out the locks.'
'What?'
The captain waved for his lieutenant to follow, said over one shoulder, 'Don't worry, they were already dead.'
The two rode into the camp.
Tavore seemed to shake herself, then faced Keneb. 'You two know each other? Will that prove problematic, Captain?'
'No.'
'Good. Then he won't resent your promotion to Fist. Now ride to your new legion. We will follow the fleeing tribes. If we have to cross this entire continent, I will see them cornered, and then I will destroy them. This rebellion will be ashes on the wind when we are done. Go, Fist Keneb.'
'Aye, Adjunct.' And he gathered his reins.
'Weapons out!' Temul suddenly shouted.
And all spun to see a rider cantering down from the hill where Sha'ik had first appeared.
Keneb's eyes thinned, even as he drew his sword. There was something wrong ... a skewing of scale ...
A small squad from Blistig's legion had been detailed as guard to the Adjunct, and they now moved forward. Leading them was one of Blistig's officers – none other, Keneb realized, than Squint. The slayer of Coltaine, who was now standing stock still, studying the approaching horse warrior.
'That,' he growled, 'is a Thelomen Toblakai! Riding a damned Jhag horse!' Crossbows were levelled.
'What's that horse dragging?' asked the woman who had just arrived on foot – whom Keneb now recognized, belatedly, as one of Tene Baralta's officers.
Nether suddenly hissed, and she and her brother flinched back as one.
Heads. From some demonic beasts –
Weapons were readied.
The Adjunct lifted a hand. 'Wait. He's not drawn his weapon—'
'It's a stone sword,' Squint rasped. 'T'lan Imass.'
'Only bigger,' one of the soldiers spat.
No-one spoke as the huge, blood-spattered figure rode closer.
To halt ten paces away.
Tene Baralta leaned forward and spat onto the ground. 'I know you,' he rumbled. 'Bodyguard to Sha'ik—'

'Be quiet,' the Toblakai cut in. 'I have words for the Adjunct.'

'Speak, then,' Tavore said.

The giant bared his teeth. 'Once, long ago, I claimed the Malazans as my enemies. I was young. I took pleasure in voicing vows. The more enemies the better. So it was, once. But no longer. Malazan, you are no longer my enemy. Thus, I will not kill you.'

'We are relieved,' Tavore said drily.

He studied her for a long moment.

During which Keneb's heart began to pound hard and fast in his chest.

Then the Toblakai smiled. 'You should be.'

With that he wheeled his Jhag horse round and rode a westerly path down the length of the basin. The huge hound heads bounced and thumped in their wake.

Keneb's sigh was shaky.

'Excuse my speaking,' Squint rasped, 'but something tells me the bastard was right.'

Tavore turned and studied the old veteran. 'An observation,' she said, 'I'll not argue, soldier.'

Once more, Keneb collected his reins.

Surmounting the ridge, Lieutenant Ranal sawed hard on the reins, and the horse reared against the skyline.

'Gods take me, somebody shoot him.'

Fiddler did not bother to turn round to find out who had spoken. He was too busy fighting his own horse to care much either way. It had Wickan blood, and it wanted his. The mutual hatred was coming along just fine.

'What is that bastard up to?' Cuttle demanded as he rode alongside the sergeant. 'We're leaving even Gesler's squad behind – and Hood knows where Borduke's gone to.'

The squad joined their lieutenant atop the ancient raised road. To the north stretched the vast dunes of Raraku, shimmering in the heat.

Ranal wheeled his mount to face his soldiers. Then pointed west. 'See them? Have any of you eyes worth a damn?'

Fiddler leaned to one side and spat grit. Then squinted to where Ranal was pointing. A score of riders. Desert warriors, likely a rearguard. They were at a loping canter. 'Lieutenant,' he said, 'there's a spider lives in these sands. Moves along under the surface, but drags a strange snake-like tail that every hungry predator can't help but see. Squirming away along the surface. It's a big spider. Hawk comes down to snatch up that snake, and ends up dissolving in a stream down that spider's throat—'

'Enough with the damned horse-dung, Sergeant,' snapped Ranal. 'They're there because they were late getting out of the oasis. Likely too busy looting the palace to notice that Sha'ik had been skewered, the Dogslayers were dead and everyone else was bugging out as fast as their scrawny horses could take 'em.' He glared at Fiddler. 'I want their heads, you grey-whiskered fossil.'

'We'll catch them sooner or later, sir,' Fiddler said. 'Better with the whole company—'

'Then get off that saddle and sit your backside down here on this road, Sergeant! Leave the fighting to the rest of us! The rest of you, follow me!'
Ranal kicked his lathered horse into a gallop.

With a weary gesture, Fiddler waved the marines on, then followed on his own bucking mare.

'Got a pinched nerve,' Koryk called out as he cantered past.

'Who, my horse or the lieutenant?'

The Seti grinned back. 'Your horse ... naturally. Doesn't like all that weight, Fid.'

Fiddler reached back and readjusted the heavy pack and the assembled lobber crossbow. 'I'll pinch her damned nerve,' he muttered. 'Just you wait.'

It was past midday. Almost seven bells since the Adjunct cut down Sha'ik. Fiddler found himself glancing again and again to the north – to Raraku, where the song still rushed out to embrace him, only to fall away, then roll forward once more. The far horizon beyond that vast basin of sand, he now saw, now held up a bank of white clouds.

*Now that don't look right...*

Sand-filled wind gusted suddenly into his face.

'They've left the road!' Ranal shouted.

Fiddler squinted westward. The riders had indeed plunged down the south bank, were cutting out diagonally – straight for a fast-approaching sandstorm. *Gods, not another sandstorm...* This one, he knew, was natural. The kind that plagued this desert, springing up like a capricious demon to rage a wild, cavorting path for a bell or two, before vanishing as swiftly as it had first appeared.

He rose up on his saddle. 'Lieutenant! They're going to ride into it! Use it as cover! We'd better not—'

'Flap that tongue at me one more time, Sergeant, and I'll tear it out! You hear me?'

Fiddler subsided. 'Aye, sir.'

'Full pursuit, soldiers!' Ranal barked. 'That storm'll slow them!'

*Oh, it will slow them, all right...*

Gesler glared into the blinding desert. 'Now who,' he wondered under his breath, 'are they?'

They had drawn to halt when it became obvious that the four strange riders were closing fast on an intercept course. Long-bladed white swords flashing over their heads. Bizarre, gleaming white armour. White horses. White everything.

'They're none too pleased with us,' Stormy rumbled, running his fingers through his beard.

'That's fine,' Gesler growled, 'but they ain't renegades, are they?'

'Sha'ik's? Who knows? Probably not, but even so...'

The sergeant nodded. 'Sands, get up here.'

'I am,' the sapper snapped.

'What's your range, lad, with that damned thing?'

'Ain't sure. No chance to try it yet. Fid's is anywhere from thirty to forty paces with a cusser – which is ugly close——'

'All right. Rest of you, dismount and drive your horses down the other side. Truth, hold on good to their reins
down there – if they bolt we're done for.'

'Saw Borduke and his squad south of here,' Pella ventured.

'Aye, as lost as we are – and you can't see 'em now, can you?'

'No, Sergeant.'

'Damn that Ranal. Remind me to kill him when we next meet.'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

The four attackers were tall bastards. Voicing eerie warcries now as they charged towards the base of the hill.

'Load up, lad,' Gesler muttered, 'and don't mess up.'

The lobber had been copied from Fiddler's own. It looked decent, at least as far as lobbers went – *which ain't far enough. Thirty paces with a cusser. Hood roast us all...*

And here they came. Base of the slope, horses surging to take them up the hill.

A heavy thud, and something awkward and grey sailed out and down.

*A cusser – holy f—* 'Down! Down! Down!'

The hill seemed to lift beneath them. Gesler thumped in the dust, coughing in the spiralling white clouds, then, swearing, he buried his head beneath his arms as stones rained down.

Some time later, the sergeant clambered to his feet.

On the hill's opposite side, Truth was trying to run in every direction at once, the horses trailing loose reins as they pelted in wild panic.

'Hood's balls on a skillet!' Gesler planted his hands on his hips and glared about. The other soldiers were picking themselves up, shaken and smeared in dust. Stormy closed on Sands and grabbed him by the throat.

'Not too hard, Corporal,' Gesler said as Stormy began shaking the sapper about. 'I want him alive for my turn. And dammit, make sure he ain't got any sharpeners on his body.'

That stopped Stormy flat.

Gesler walked to the now pitted edge of the hill and looked down. 'Well,' he said, 'they won't be chasing us any more, I'd say.'

'Wonder who they were?' Pella asked.

'Armour seems to have weathered the blast – you could go down and scrape out whatever's left inside 'em ... on second thought, never mind. We need to round up our horses.' He faced the others. 'Enough pissing about, lads. Let's get moving.'

Lying on the smoking edge of the crater, sprayed in horseflesh and deafened by the blast, Jorrude groaned. He was a mass of bruises, his head ached, and he wanted to throw up – but not until he pried the helm from his head.

Nearby in the rubble, Brother Enias coughed. Then said, 'Brother Jorrude?'

'Yes?'

'I want to go home.'

Jorrude said nothing. It would not do, after all, to utter a hasty, heartfelt agreement, despite their present
circumstance. ‘Check on the others, Brother Enias.’

‘Were those truly the ones who rode that ship through our realm?’

‘They were,’ Jorrude answered as he fumbled with the helm’s straps. ‘And I have been thinking. I suspect they were ignorant of Liosan laws when they travelled through our realm. True, ignorance is an insufficient defence. But one must consider the notion of innocent momentum.’

From off to one side, Malachar grunted. ‘Innocent momentum?’

‘Indeed. Were not these trespassers but pulled along – beyond their will – in the wake of the draconian T’lan Imass bonecaster? If an enemy we must hunt, then should it not be that dragon?’

‘Wise words,’ Malachar observed.

‘A brief stay in our realm,’ Jorrude continued, ‘to re-supply and requisition new horses, along with repairs and such, seems to reasonably obtain in this instance.’

‘Truly judged, brother.’

From the other side of the crater sounded another cough.

At least, Jorrude dourly reflected, they were all still alive.

It’s all the dragon’s fault, in fact. Who would refute that?

They rode into the sandstorm, less than fifty strides behind the fleeing horse warriors, and found themselves floundering blind in a maelstrom of shrieking winds and whipping gravel.

Fiddler heard a horse scream.

He drew hard on his own reins, the wind hammering at him from all sides. Already he’d lost sight of his companions. This is wide-eyed stupid.

Now, if I was the commander of those bastards, I’d—

And suddenly figures flashed into view, scimitars and round shields, swathed faces and ululating warcries. Fiddler threw himself down against his horse’s withers as a heavy blade slashed, slicing through sand-filled air where his head had been a moment earlier.

The Wickan mare lunged forward and to one side, choosing this precise moment to buck its hated rider from the saddle.

With profound success.

Fiddler found himself flying forward, his bag of munitions rolling up his back, then up over his head.

Still in mid-air, but angling down to the ground, he curled himself into a tight ball – though he well knew, in that instant, that there was no hope of surviving. No hope at all. Then he pounded into the sand, and rolled – to see, upside-down, a huge hook-bladed sword spinning end over end across his own wake. And a stumbling horse. And its rider, a warrior thrown far back on his saddle – with the munition bag wrapped in his arms.

A surprised look beneath the ornate helm – then rider, horse and munitions vanished into the whirling sands.

Fiddler clambered to his feet and began running. Sprinting, in what he hoped – what he prayed – was the opposite direction.

A hand snagged his harness from behind. ‘Not that way, you fool!’ And he was yanked to one side, flung to the ground, and a body landed on top of him.

The sergeant’s face was pushed into the sand and held there.
Corabb bellowed. The bulky, heavy sack was hissing in his arms. As if filled with snakes. It had clunked hard against his chest, arriving like a flung boulder out of the storm, and he'd time only to toss his sword away and raise both arms.

The impact threw him onto the horse's rump, but his feet stayed in the stirrups.

The bag's momentum carried it over his face, and the hissing filled his ears.

Snakes!

He slid on his back down one side of the mount's heaving hindquarters, letting the bag's weight pull his arms with it. Don't panic! He screamed.

Snakes!

The bag tugged in his hands as it brushed the ground.

He held his breath, then let go.

Tumbling clunks, a burst of frenzied hissing – then the horse's forward charge carried him blissfully away.

He struggled to right himself, his leg and stomach muscles fiercely straining, and finally was able to grasp the horn and pull himself straight.

One pass, Leoman had said. Then wheel and into the storm's heart.

He'd done that much. One pass. Enough.

Time to flee.

Corabb Bhilan Thun'alas leaned forward, and bared muddy teeth.

Spirits below, it is good to be alive!

The detonation should have killed Fiddler. There was fire. Towering walls of sand. The air concussed, and his breath was torn from his lungs even as blood spurted from his nose and both ears.

And the body lying atop him seemed to wither in shreds.

He'd recognized the voice. It was impossible. It was ... infuriating.

Hot smoke rolled over them.

And that damned voice whispered, 'Can't leave you on your own for a Hood-damned minute, can I? Say hello to Kalam for me, will ya? I'll see you again, sooner or later. And you'll see me, too. You'll see us all.' A laugh. 'Just not today. Damned shame 'bout your fiddle, though.'

The weight vanished.

Fiddler rolled over. The storm was tumbling away, leaving a white haze in its wake. He groped with his hands.

A terrible, ragged moan ripped from his throat, and he lifted himself onto his knees. 'Hedge!' he screamed. 'Damn you! Hedge!'

Someone jogged into view, settled down beside him. 'Slamming gates, Fid – you're Hood-damned alive!'

He stared at the man's battered face, then recognized it. 'Cuttle? He was here. He – you're covered in blood'
'Aye. I wasn't as close as you. Luckily. 'Fraid I can't say the same for Ranal. Someone had taken down his horse. He was stumbling around.'

'That blood—'

'Aye,' Cuttle said again, then flashed a hard grin. 'I'm wearing Ranal.'

Shouts, and other figures were closing in. Every one of them on foot.

'—killed the horses. Bastards went and—'

'Sergeant! You all right? Bottle, get over here—'

'Killed the—'

'Be quiet, Smiles, you're making me sick. Did you hear that blast? Gods below—'

Cuttle clapped Fiddler on one shoulder, then dragged him to his feet.

'Where's the lieutenant?' Koryk asked.

'Right here,' Cuttle answered, but did not elaborate.

He's wearing Ranal.

'What just happened?' Koryk asked.

Fiddler stared at his squad. All here. That's a wonder.

Cuttle spat. 'What happened, lad? We got slapped down. That's what happened. Slapped down hard.'

Fiddler stared at the retreating storm. Aw, shit. Hedge.

'Here comes Borduke's squad!'

'Find your horses, everyone,' Corporal Tarr said. 'Sergeant's been knocked about. Collect whatever you can salvage – we gotta wait for the rest of the company, I reckon.'

Good lad.

'Look at that crater,' Smiles said. 'Gods, Sergeant, you couldn't have been much closer to Hood's Gate and lived, could you?'

He stared at her. 'You've no idea how right you are, lass.'

And the song rose and fell, and he could feel his heart matching that cadence. Ebb and flow. Raraku has swallowed more tears than can be imagined. Now comes the time for the Holy Desert to weep. Ebb and flow, his blood's song, and it lived on.

It lives on.

They had fled in the wrong direction. Fatal, but unsurprising. The night had been a shambles. The last survivor of Korbolo Dom's cadre of mages, Fayelle rode a lathered horse in the company of thirteen other Dogsayers down the channel of a long-dead river, boulders and banks high on either side.

Herself and thirteen battered, bloodied soldiers. All that was left.

The clash with Leoman had begun well enough, a perfectly sprung ambush. And would have ended perfectly, as well.

If not for the damned ghosts.
Ambush turned over, onto its back like an upended tortoise. They'd been lucky to get out with their lives, these few. These last.

Fayelle well knew what had happened to the rest of Korbolo’s army. She had felt Henaras's death. And Kamist Reloe’s.

And Raraku was not finished with them. Oh no. Not at all finished.

They reached a slope leading out of the defile.

She had few regrets—

Crossbow quarrels whizzed down. Horses and soldiers screamed. Bodies thumped onto the ground. Her horse staggered, then rolled onto its side. She’d no time to kick free of the stirrups, and as the dying beast pinned her leg its weight tore the joint from her hip, sending pain thundering through her. Her left arm was trapped awkwardly beneath her as her own considerable weight struck the ground – and bones snapped.

Then the side of her head hammered against rock.

Fayelle struggled to focus. The pain subsided, became a distant thing. She heard faint pleas for mercy, the cries of wounded soldiers being finished off.

Then a shadow settled over her.

'I've been looking for you.'

Fayelle frowned. The face hovering above her belonged to the past. The desert had aged it, but it nevertheless remained a child's face. *Oh, spirits below. The child. Sinn. My old ... student...*

She watched the girl raise a knife between them, angle the point down, then set it against her neck.

Fayelle laughed. 'Go ahead, you little horror. I'll wait for you at Hood's Gate ... and the wait won't be long—'

The knife punched through skin and cartilage.

Fayelle died.

Straightening, Sinn swung to her companions. They were, one and all, busy gathering the surviving horses.

Sixteen left. The Ashok Regiment had fallen on hard times. Thirst and starvation. Raiders. This damned desert.

She watched them for a moment, then something else drew her gaze.

Northward.

Cord.

'A cord!' Cord bellowed. 'Double up! Now!'

A hand closed on her shoulder. Shard leaned close. 'You ride with me.'

'Ebron!'

'I hear you,' the mage replied to Cord's bellow. 'And I'll do what I can with these blown mounts, but I ain't guaranteeing—'

'Get on with it! Bell, help Limp onto that horse – he's busted up that knee again!'
Sinn cast one last glance at Fayelle's corpse. She'd known, then. What was coming.

I should be dancing. The bloodied knife fell from her hands.

Then she was roughly grasped and pulled up onto the saddle behind Shard.

The beast's head tossed, and it shook beneath them.

'Queen take us,' Shard hissed, 'Ebron's filled these beasts with fire.'

We'll need it...

And now they could hear the sound, a roar that belittled even the Whirlwind Wall in its fullest rage.

Raraku had risen.

To claim a shattered warren.

The Wickan warlocks had known what was coming. Flight was impossible, but the islands of coral stood high—higher than any other feature this side of the escarpment—and it was on these that the armies gathered.

To await what could be their annihilation.

The north sky was a massive wall of white, billowing clouds. A cool, burgeoning wind thrashed through the palms around the oasis.

Then the sound reached them.

A roar unceasing, building, of water, cascading, foaming, tumbling across the vast desert.

The Holy Desert, it seemed, held far more than bones and memories. More than ghosts and dead cities.

Lostara Yil stood near the Adjunct, ignoring the baleful glares Tene Baralta continued casting her way. Wondering ... if Pearl was on that high ground, standing over Sha'ilk's grave ... if that ground was in fact high enough.

She wondered, too, at what she had seen these past months. Visions burned into her soul, fraught and mysterious, visions that could still chill her blood if she allowed them to rise before her mind's eye once more. Crucified dragons. Murdered gods. Warrens of fire and warrens of ashes.

It was odd, she reflected, to be thinking these things, even as a raging sea was born from seeming nothing and was sweeping towards them, drowning all in its path.

Odder, still, to be thinking of Pearl. She was hard on him, viciously so at times. Not because she cared, but because it was fun. No, that was too facile, wasn't it? She cared indeed.

What a stupid thing to have let happen.

A weary sigh close beside her. Lostara scowled without turning. 'You're back.'

'As requested,' Pearl murmured.

Oh, she wanted to hit him for that.

'The task is ... done?'

'Aye. Consigned to the deep and all that. If Tene Baralta still wants her, he'll have to hold his breath.'

She looked then. 'Really? The sea is already that deep? Then we're—'

'No. High and dry, actually. The other way sounded more ... poetic.'
‘I really hate you.’

He nodded. ‘And you’ll have plenty of time in which to luxuriate in it.’

‘You think we’ll survive this?’

‘Yes. Oh, we’ll get our feet wet, but these were islands even back then. This sea will flood the oasis. It will pound up against the raised road west of here – since it was the coastal road back then. And wash up close to the escarpment, maybe even reach it.’

‘That’s all very well,’ she snapped. ‘And what will we be doing, stuck here on these islands in the middle of a landlocked sea?’

Infuriatingly, Pearl simply shrugged. ‘A guess? We build a flotilla of rafts and bind them together to form a bridge, straight to the west road. The sea will be shallow enough there anyway, even if that doesn’t work as well as it should – but I have every confidence in the Adjunct.’

The wall of water then struck the far side of the oasis, with the sound of thunder. Palms waved wildly, then began toppling.

‘Well, now we know what turned that other forest to stone,’ Pearl said loudly over the thrashing roar of water —

That now flowed across the ruins, filling the Dogsleman trenches, tumbling down into the basin.

And Lostara could see that Pearl was right. Its fury was already spent, and the basin seemed to swallow the water with a most prodigious thirst.

She glanced over to study the Adjunct.

Impassive, watching the seas rise, one hand on the hilt of her sword.

_Oh, why does looking at you break my heart?_

The sands were settling on the carcasses of the horses. The three squads sat or stood, waiting for the rest of the legion. Bottle had walked up to the road to see the source of the roar, had come staggering back with the news.

A sea.

A damned sea.

And its song was in Fiddler’s soul, now. Strangely warm, almost comforting.

One and all, they then turned to watch the giant rider and his giant horse thunder along that road, heading westward. Dragging something that kicked up a lot of dust.

The image of that stayed with Fiddler long after the clouds of dust had drifted off the road, down the near side of the slope.

Could have been a ghost.

But he knew it wasn’t.

Could have been their worst enemy.

But if he was, it didn’t matter. Not right now.

A short while later there was a startled shout from Smiles, and Fiddler turned, in time to see two figures stride out from a warren.

Despite everything, he found himself grinning.
Old friends, he realized, were getting harder to find.

Still, he knew them, and they were his brothers.

Mortal souls of Raraku. Raraku, the land that had bound them together. Bound them all, as was now clear, beyond even death.

Fiddler was unmindful of how it looked, of what the others thought, upon seeing the three men close to a single embrace.

The horses clambered up the slope to the ridge. Where their riders reined them in, and one and all turned to stare at the yellow, foaming seas churning below. A moment later a squat four-eyed demon scrabbled onto the summit to join them.

The Lord of Summer had lent wings to their horses – Heboric could admit no other possibility, so quickly had they covered the leagues since the night past. And the beasts seemed fresh even now. As fresh as Greyfrog. Though he himself was anything but.

'What has happened?' Scillara wondered aloud.

Heboric could only shake his head.

'More importantly,' Felisin said, 'where do we go now? I don't think I can sit in the saddle much longer—'

'I know how you feel, lass. We should find somewhere to make camp—'

The squeal of a mule brought all three around.

A scrawny, black-skinned old man was riding up towards them, seated cross-legged atop the mule. 'Welcome!' he shrieked – a shriek because, even as he spoke, he toppled to one side and thumped hard onto the stony trail. 'Help me, you idiots!'

Heboric glanced at the two women, but it was Greyfrog who moved first.

'Food!'

The old man shrieked again. 'Get away from me! I have news to tell! All of you! Is L'oric dead? No! My shadows saw everything! You are my guests! Now, come prise my legs loose! You, lass. No, you, the other lass! Both of you! Beautiful women with their hands on my legs, my thighs! I can't wait! Do they see the avid lust in my eyes? Of course not, I'm but a helpless wizened creature, potential father figure—'

Cutter stood in the tower's uppermost chamber, staring out of the lone window. Bhok'arala chittered behind him, pausing every now and then to make crooning, mournful sounds.

He'd woken alone.

And had known, instantly, that she was gone. And there would be no trail for him to follow.

Iskaral Pust had conjured up a mule and ridden off earlier. Of Mogora there was, mercifully, no sign.

Thoroughly alone, then, for most of this day.

Until now.

'There are countless paths awaiting you.'

Cutter sighed. 'Hello, Cotillion. I was wondering if you'd show up ... again.'

'Again?'
'You spoke with Apsalar. Here in this very chamber. You helped her decide.'

'She told you?'

He shook his head. 'Not entirely.'

'Her decision was hers to make, Cutter. Hers alone.'

'It doesn't matter. Never mind. Odd, though. You see countless paths. Whilst I see ... none worth walking.'

'Do you seek, then, something worthy?'

Cutter slowly closed his eyes, then sighed. 'What would you have me do?'

'There was a man, once, whose task was to guard the life of a young girl. He did the best he could – with such honour as to draw, upon his sad death, the attention of Hood himself. Oh, the Lord of Death will look into a mortal's soul, given the right circumstances. The, uh, the proper incentive. Thus, that man is now the Knight of Death—'

'I don't want to be Knight of anything, nor for anyone, Cotillion—'

'The wrong track, lad. Let me finish my tale. This man did the best he could, but he failed. And now the girl is dead. She was named Felisin. Of House Paran.'

Cutter's head turned. He studied the shadowed visage of the god. 'Captain Paran? His—'

'His sister. Look down upon the path, here, out the window, lad. In a short time Iskaral Pust will return. With guests. Among them, a child named Felisin—'

'But you said—'

'Before Paran's sister ... died, she adopted a waif. A sorely abused foundling. She sought, I think – we will never know for certain, of course – to achieve something ... something she herself had no chance, no opportunity, to achieve. Thus, she named the waif after herself.'

'And what is she to me, Cotillion?'

'You are being obstinate, I think. The wrong question.'

'Oh, then tell me what is the right question.'

'What are you to her?'

Cutter grimaced.

'The child approaches in the company of another woman, a very remarkable one, as you – and she – will come to see. And with a priest, sworn now to Treach. From him, you will learn ... much of worth. Finally, a demon travels with these three humans. For the time being...'

'Where are they going? Why stop here, as Iskaral's guests?'

'Why, to collect you, Cutter.'

'I don't understand.'

'Symmetry, lad, is a power unto itself. It is the expression, if you will, of nature's striving for balance. I charge you with protecting Felisin's life. To accompany them on their long, and dangerous, journey.'

'How epic of you.'

'I think not,' Cotillion snapped.
Silence, for a time, during which Cutter regretted his comment.

Finally, the Daru sighed. 'I hear horses. And Pust... in one of his nauseating diatribes.'

Cotillion said nothing.

'Very well,' Cutter said. 'This Felisin... abused, you said. Those ones are hard to get to. To befriend, I mean. Their scars stay fresh and fierce with pain—'

'Her adopted mother did well, given her own scars. Be glad, lad, that she is the daughter, not the mother. And, in your worst moments, think of how Baudin felt.'

'Baudin. The elder Felisin's guardian?'

'Yes.'

'All right,' Cutter said. 'It will do.'

'What will?'

'This path. It will do.' He hesitated, then said, 'Cotillion. This notion of ... balance. Something has occurred to me—'

Cotillion's eyes silenced him, shocked him with their unveiling of sorrow ... of remorse. The patron of assassins nodded. 'From her ... to you. Aye.'

'Did she see that, do you think?'

'All too clearly, I'm afraid.'

Cutter stared out the window. 'I loved her, you know. I still do.'

'So you do not wonder why she has left.'

He shook his head, unable to fight back the tears any more. 'No, Cotillion,' he whispered. 'I don't.'

The ancient coast road long behind him, Karsa Orlong guided Havok northward along the shore of the new inland sea. Rain clouds hung over the murky water to the east, but the wind was pushing them away.

He studied the sky for a moment, then reined in on a slight rise studded with boulders and slipped down from the horse's back. Walking over to a large, flat-topped rock, the Teblor unslung his sword and set it point downward against a nearby boulder, then sat. He drew off his pack and rummaged in an outside pocket for some salted bhederin, dried fruit, and goat cheese.

Staring out over the water, he ate. When he was done, he loosened the pack's straps and dragged out the broken remains of the T'lan Imass. He held it up so that 'Siballe's withered face looked out upon the rippling waves.

'Tell me,' Karsa said, 'what do you see?'

'My past.' A moment of silence, then, 'All that I have lost...'

The Teblor released his grip and the partial corpse collapsed into a cloud of dust. Karsa found his waterskin and drank deep. Then he stared down at 'Siballe. 'You once said that if you were thrown into the sea, your soul would be freed. That oblivion would come to you. Is this true?'

'Yes.'

With one hand he lifted her from the ground, rose and walked to the sea's edge.

'Wait! Teblor, wait! I do not understand!'
Karsa's expression soured. 'When I began this journey, I was young. I believed in one thing. I believed in glory. I know now, Siballe, that glory is nothing. Nothing. This is what I now understand.'

'What else do you now understand, Karsa Orlong?'

'Not much. Just one other thing. The same cannot be said for mercy.' He raised her higher, then swung her body outward.

It struck the water in the shallows. And dissolved into a muddy bloom, which the waves then swept away.

Karsa swung about. Faced his sword of stone. He then smiled. 'Yes. I am Karsa Orlong of the Uryd, a Teblor. Witness, my brothers. One day I will be worthy to lead such as you. Witness.'

Sword once more slung on his back, Havok once more solid beneath him, the Toblakai rode from the shoreline. West, into the wastes.
EPILOGUE

And now here I sit,
on my brow a circlet of fire,
and this kingdom
I rule
is naught but the host
of my life's recollections,
unruly subjects,
so eager for insurrection,
to usurp the aged man
from his charred throne
and raise up
younger versions
one by one.

The Crown of Years
Fisher kel Tat

By any standards, she was a grim woman.

Onrack the Broken watched her stand in the centre of the chamber and cast a harsh, appraising eye upon the disposition of her young killers. The grimace that twisted her handsome features suggested that she found nothing awry. Her gaze fell at last upon the Tiste Edur, Trull Sengar, and the grimace shifted into a scowl.

'Must we watch our backs as well, with you here?'

Seated on the hewn floor, his back to an equally rough wall, Trull Sengar shrugged. 'I see no easy way of convincing you that I am worthy of your trust, Minala. Apart from weaving for you my lengthy and rather unpleasant story.'

'Spare me,' she growled, then strode from the room.

Trull Sengar glanced over at Onrack and grinned. 'No-one wants to hear it. Well, I am not surprised. Nor am I even stung. It is a rather squalid tale—'

'I will hear your story,' Onrack replied.

Near the entrance, Ibra Gholan's neck creaked as the T'lan Imass looked back over one shoulder to regard Onrack for a moment, before returning to his position guarding the approach.

Trull Sengar barked a laugh. 'This is ideal for an unskilled weaver of tales. My audience comprises a score of children who do not understand my native tongue, and three expressionless and indifferent undead. By tale's end, only I will be weeping ... likely for all the wrong reasons.'

Monok Ochem, who was standing three paces back from Ibra Gholan, slowly pivoted until the bonecaster faced Onrack. 'You have felt it, then, Broken One. And so you seek distraction.'

Onrack said nothing.

'Felt what?' Trull Sengar asked.
‘She is destroyed. The woman who gave Onrack her heart in the time before the Ritual. The woman to whom he avowed his own heart ... only to steal it back. In many ways, she was destroyed then, already begun on her long journey to oblivion. Do you deny that, Onrack?’

‘Bonecaster, I do not.’

‘Madness, of such ferocity as to defeat the Vow itself. Like a camp dog that awakens one day with fever in its brain. That snarls and kills in a frenzy. Of course, we had no choice but to track her down, corner her. And so shatter her, imprison her within eternal darkness. Or so we thought. Madness, then, to defy even us. But now, oblivion has claimed her soul at last. A violent, painful demise, but none the less...’ Monok Ochem paused, then cocked its head. ‘Trull Sengar, you have not begun your tale, yet already you weep.’

The Tiste Edur studied the bonecaster for a long moment, as the tears ran down his gaunt cheeks. 'I weep, Monok Ochem, because he cannot.'

The bonecaster faced Onrack once more. 'Broken One, there are many things you deserve ... but this man is not among them.' He then turned away.

Onrack spoke. 'Monok Ochem, you have travelled far from the mortal you once were, so far as to forget a host of truths, both pleasant and unpleasant. The heart is neither given nor stolen. The heart surrenders.'

The bonecaster did not turn round. 'That is a word without power to the T'lan Imass, Onrack the Broken.'

‘You are wrong, Monok Ochem. We simply changed the word to make it not only more palatable, but also to empower it. With such eminence that it devoured our souls.'

‘We did no such thing,’ the bonecaster replied.

‘Onrack's right,’ Trull Sengar sighed. ‘You did. You called it the Ritual of Tellann.’

Neither Monok Ochem nor Ibra Gholan spoke.

The Tiste Edur snorted. ‘And you've the nerve to call Onrack broken.’

There was silence in the chamber then, for some time.

But Onrack's gaze remained fixed on Trull Sengar. And he was, if he was anything, a creature capable of supreme patience. To grieve is a gift best shared. As a song is shared.

Deep in the caves, the drums beat. Glorious echo to the herds whose thundering hoofs celebrate what it is to be alive, to run as one, to roll in life’s rhythm. This is how, in the cadence of our voice, we serve nature’s greatest need.

Facing nature, we are the balance.

Ever the balance to chaos.

Eventually, his patience was rewarded.

As he knew it would be.

This ends the fourth tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen
GLOSSARY

ASCENDANTS

Anomander Rake: Son of Darkness
Apsalar: Lady of Thieves
Beru: Lord of Storms

BRIDGEBURNERS

Burn: The Sleeping Goddess
Cotillion: The Rope, Patron of Assassins, High House Shadow
Dessembrae: Lord of Tears
Draconus: an Elder God and forger of the sword Dragnipur
D’rek: The Worm of Autumn
Fener: the Bereft
Gedderone: Lady of Spring and Rebirth
Hood: King of High House Death
Jhess: Queen of Weaving
K’rul: an Elder God of the Warrens
Mael: an Elder God of the Seas
Mowri: Lady of Beggars, Slaves and Serfs
Nerruse: Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Winds
Oponn: Twin Jesters of Chance
Osserc/Osseric/Osric: Lord of the Sky
Poliel: Mistress of Pestilence and Disease
Queen of Dreams: Queen of High House Life
Shadowthrone: Ammanas, King of High House Shadow
Sister of Cold Nights: an Elder Goddess
Soliel: Lady of Health
The Azath: the Houses
The Crippled God: The Chained One, Lord of High House of Chains
The Deragoth: of the First Empire of Dessimbelackis
The Seven Hounds of Darkness
The Whirlwind Goddess
Togg and Fanderay: The Wolves of Winter
Treach/Trake: The Tiger of Summer and Lord of War

THE GODS OF THE TEBLOR (The Seven Faces in the Rock)

Urugal the Woven
'Siballe the Unfound
Beroke Soft Voice
Kahlb the Silent Hunter
Thenik the Shattered
Halad the Giant
Imroth the Cruel

ELDER PEOPLES

Tiste Andii: Children of Darkness
Tiste Edur: Children of Shadow
Tiste Liosan: Children of Light
T'lan Imass
Eres/Eres'al
Trell
Jaghut
Forkrul Assail
K'Chain Che'Malle
The Eleint
The Barghast
The Thelomen Toblakai
The Teblor

THE WARRENS

Kurald Galain: The Elder Warren of Darkness
**Kurald Emurlahn:** The Elder Warren of Shadow, the Shattered Warren

**Kurald Thyrllan:** The Elder Warren of Light

**Omtose Phellack:** The Elder Jaghut Warren of Ice

**Tellann:** The Elder Imass Warren of Fire

**Starvald Demelain:** The Eleint Warren

**Thyr:** The Path of Light

**Denul:** The Path of Healing

**Hood's Path:** The Path of Death

**Serc:** The Path of the Sky

**Meansas:** The Path of Shadow and Illusion

**D'riss:** The Path of the Earth

**Ruse:** The Path of the Sea

**Rashan:** The Path of Darkness

**Mockra:** The Path of the Mind

**Telas:** The Path of Fire

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**THE DECK OF DRAGONS**

**High House Life**

King

Queen (Queen of Dreams)

Champion

Priest

Herald

Soldier

Weaver

**High House Death**

King (Hood)

Queen

Knight (once Dassem Ultor, now Baudin)

Magi

Herald

Soldier
Spinner
Mason
Virgin

**High House Light**
King
Queen
Champion (Osseric)
Priest
Captain
Soldier
Seamstress
Builder
Maiden

**High House Dark**
King
Queen
Knight (Anomander Rake)
Magi
Captain
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Wife

**High House Shadow**
King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)
Queen
Assassin (The Rope/Cotillion)
Magi
Hound

**High House of Chains**
The King in Chains
The Consort (Poliel?)
Reaver (Kallor?)
Knight (Toblakai)
The Seven of the Dead Fires (The Unbound)
Cripple
Leper
Fool

Unaligned
Oponn
Obelisk (Burn)
Crown
Sceptre
Orb
Throne
Chain

Master of the Deck (Ganoes Paran)

PLACES IN 'HOUSE OF CHAINS':

SEVEN CITIES

Aren: a Holy City
Balahn: a small village north of Aren
Ehrlitan: a Holy City north of Raraku
Erougimon: a tel north of Aren
G’danisban: a city east of Raraku
Jhag Odhan: the wastes west of Seven Cities
Lato Revae: a city west of Raraku
Sarpachiya: a city west of Raraku
Thalas River: west of Raraku
The Oasis: Holy Desert Raraku
The Whirlwind Warren
Vathar Crossing: site of battle on Chain of Dogs
Y’Ghatan: self-styled First Holy City

GENABACKIS
Culvern: a town
Genabarhis: a city
Laederon Plateau
Malybridge: a town
Malyn Sea
Malynntaeas: a city
Ninsano Moat: a town
Silver Lake
Tanys: a town
Drift Avalii: an island southwest of the continent of Quon Tali
The Nascent: a flooded world
The First Days of the Sundering of Emurlahn
The Edur Invasion, the Age of Scabandari Bloodeye
The Time of the Elder Gods

From the twisting, smoke-filled clouds, blood rained down. The last of the sky keeps, flame-wreathed and pouring black smoke, had surrendered the sky. Their ragged descent had torn furrows through the ground as they struck and broke apart with thunderous reverberations, scattering red-stained rocks among the heaps of corpses that covered the land from horizon to horizon.

The great hive cities had been reduced to ash-layered rubble, and the vast towering clouds above each of them that had shot skyward with their destruction – clouds filled with debris and shredded flesh and blood – now swirled in storms of dissipating heat, spreading to fill the sky.

Amidst the annihilated armies the legions of the conquerors were reassembling on the centre plain, most of which was covered in exquisitely fitted flagstones – where the impact of the sky keeps had not carved deep gouges – although the reassertion of formations was hampered by the countless carcasses of the defeated. And by exhaustion. The legions belonged to two distinct armies, allies in this war, and it was clear that one had fared far better than the other.

The blood mist sheathed Scabandari’s vast, iron-hued wings, as he swept down through the churning clouds, blinking nictitating membranes to clear his ice blue draconian eyes. Banking in his descent, the dragon tilted his head to survey his victorious children. The grey banners of the Tiste Edur legions wavered fitfully above the gathering warriors, and Scabandari judged that at least eighteen thousand of his shadow-kin remained. For all that, there would be mourning in the tents of the First Landing this night. The day had begun with over two hundred thousand Tiste Edur marching onto the plain. Still ... it was enough.

The Edur had clashed with the east flank of the K’Chain Ch’Malle army, prefacing their charge with waves of devastating sorcery. The enemy’s formations had been assembled to face a frontal assault, and they had proved fatally slow to turn to the threat on their flank. Like a dagger, the Edur legions had driven to the heart of the K’Chain Che’Malle army.

Below, as he drew closer, Scabandari could see, scattered here and there, the midnight banners of the Tiste Andii. A thousand warriors left, perhaps less. Victory was a more dubious claim for these battered allies. They had engaged the K’ell Hunters, the elite blood kin armies of the three Matrons. Four hundred thousand Tiste Andii, against sixty thousand K’ell Hunters. Additional companies of both Andii and Edur had assailed the sky keeps, but these had known they were going to their own deaths, and their sacrifices had been pivotal in this day’s victory, for the sky keeps had been prevented in coming to the aid of the armies on the plain below. By themselves, the assaults on the four sky keeps had yielded only marginal efficacy, despite the short-tails being few in number – their ferocity had proved devastating – but sufficient time had been purchased in Tiste blood for Scabandari and his Soletaken draconian brother to close on the floating fortresses, unleashing upon them the warrens of Starvald Demelain, and Kurald’s Emurlahn and Galain.

The dragon swept downwards to where a jumbled mountain of K’Chain Che’Malle carcasses marked the last stand of one of the Matrons. Kuradal Emurhaln had slaughtered the defenders, and wild shadows still flitted about like wraiths on the slopes. Scabandari spread his wings, buffeting the steamy air, then settled stop the reptilian bodies.

A moment later he sembled into his Tiste Edur form. Skin the shade of hammered iron, long grey hair unbound, a gaunt, aquiline face with hard, close-set eyes. A down-turned, broad mouth that bore no lines of laughter. High, unlined brow, diagonally scarred livid white against the dusky skin. He wore a leather harness bearing his two-handed sword, a brace of long-knives at his hip, and from his shoulders hung a scaled cape – the hide of a Matron, fresh enough to still glisten with natural oils.

He stood, a tall figure sheathed in droplets of blood, watching the legions assemble. Edur officers glanced his way, then began directing their troops.
Scabandari faced northwest then, eyes narrowing on the billowing clouds. A moment later a vast bone-white dragon broke through. If anything larger than Scabandari himself when veered into draconian form. Also sheathed in blood – and much of it his own, for Silchas Ruin had come to the aid of his Andii kin against the K'ell Hunters.

Scabandari watched his ally approach, stepping back only when the huge dragon settled onto the hilltop to then quickly semble. A head or more taller than the Tiste Edur Soletaken, yet terribly gaunt, muscles bound like rope beneath smooth, almost translucent skin. Talons from some raptor gleamed from the warrior's thick, long white hair. The red of his eyes seemed feverish, so brightly did they glow. Silchas Ruin bore wound, sword-slashes across his body. Most of his upper armour had fallen away, revealing his chest where the blue-green of his veins and arteries tracked branching paths beneath the thin, hairless skin. His legs were slick with blood, as were his arms. The twin scabbards at his hips were empty – he had broken both weapons, despite the weavings of sorcery invested in them. His had been a desperate battle.

Scabandari bowed his head in greeting. 'Silchas Ruin, brother of mine. Most stalwart of allies. Behold the plain – we are victorious.'

The albino Tiste Andii's pallid face twisted in a silent snarl.

'My legions were late in coming to your aid,' Scabandari said. 'And for that, my heart breaks at your losses. Even so, we now hold the gate, do we not? The path to this world belongs to us, and the world itself lies before us ... to plunder, to carve for our people worthy empires.'

Ruin's long-fingered, stained hands twitched, and he faced the plain below. The Edur legions had reformed into a rough ring around the last surviving Andii. 'Death fouls the air,' Silchas Ruin growled. 'I can barely draw it to speak.'

'There will be time enough for making new plans later,' Scabandari said.

'My people are slaughtered. You now surround us, but your protection is far too late.'

'Symbolic, then, my brother. There are other Tiste Andii on this world – you said so yourself. You must needs only find that first wave, and your strength will return. More, others will come. My kind and yours both, fleeing our defeats.'

Silchas Ruin's scowl deepened. 'This day's victory is a bitter alternative.'

'The K'Chain Che'Malle are all but gone – we know this. We have seen the many other dead cities. Now, only Morn remains, and that on a distant continent – where the short-tails even now break their chains in bloody rebellion. A divided enemy is an enemy quick to fall, my friend. Who else in this world has the power to oppose us? Jaghut? They are scattered and few. Imass? What can weapons of stone achieve against our iron?' He was silent a moment, then continued, 'The Forkruhl Assail seem unwilling to pass judgement on us. And each year there seem to be fewer and fewer of them in any case. No, my friend, with this day's victory, this world lies before our feet. Here, you shall not suffer from the civil wars that plague Kurald Galain. And I and my followers shall escape the rivening that now besets Kurald Emurlahn—'

Silchas Ruin snorted. 'A rivening by your own hand, Scabandari.'

He was still studying the Tiste forces below, and so did not see the flash of rage that answered his offhand remark, a flash that vanished a heartbeat later, Scabandari's expression returning once more to equanimity. 'A new world for us, brother.'

'A Jaghut stands atop a ridge to the north,' Silchas Ruin said. 'Witness to the war. I did not approach, for I sensed the beginning of a ritual. Omtose Phellack.'

'Do you fear that Jaghut, Silchas Ruin?'

'I fear what I do not know, Scabandari ... Bloodeye. And there is much to learn of this realm and its ways.'

'Bloodeye.'
'You cannot see yourself,' Ruin said, 'but I give you this name, for the blood that now stains your ... vision.'

'Rich, Silchas Ruin, coming from you.' Then Scabandari shrugged and walked to the north edge of the heap, stepping carefully on the shifting carcasses. 'A Jaghut, you said...’ He swung about, but Silchas Ruin's back was to him, as the Tiste Andii stared down upon his few surviving followers on the plain below.

'Omtose Phellack, the Warren of Ice.' Ruin said without turning. 'What does he conjure, Scabandari Bloodeyey? I wonder...’

The Edur Soletaken walked back towards Silchas Ruin.

He reached down to the outside of his left boot and drew out a shadow-etched dagger. Sorcery played on the iron.

A final step, then the dagger was driven into Ruin's back.

The Tiste Andii spasmed, then roared—

Even as the Edur legions turned suddenly on the Andii, rushing inward from all sides to deliver the day's final slaughter.

Magic wove writhing chains about Silchas Ruin, and the albino Tiste Andii toppled.

Scabandari Bloodeye crouched down over him. 'It is the way of brothers, alas,' he murmured. 'One must rule. Two cannot. You know the truth of that. Big as this world is, Silchas Ruin, sooner or later there would be war between the Edur and the Andii. The truth of our blood will tell. Thus, only one shall command the gate. Only the Edur shall pass. We will hunt down the Andii who are already here – what champion can they throw up to challenge me? They are as good as dead. And so it must be. One people. One ruler.' He straightened, as the last cries of the dying Andii warriors echoed from the plain below. 'Aye, I cannot kill you outright – you are too powerful for that. Thus, I will take you to a suitable place, and leave you to the roots, earth and stone of its mangled grounds...’

He then veered into his draconean form. An enormous taloned foot closed about the motionless form of Silchas Ruin, and Scabandari Bloodeye rose into the sky, wings thundering.

The tower was less than a hundred leagues to the south, only its low battered wall enclosing the yard revealing that it was not of Jaghut construction, that it had arisen beside the three Jaghut towers of its own accord, in answer to a law unfathomable to god and mortal alike. Arisen ... to await the coming of those whom it would imprison for eternity. Creatures of deadly power.

Such as the Soletaken Tiste Andii, Silchas Ruin, third and last of Mother Dark's three children.

Removing from his path Scabandari Bloodeye's last worthy opponent among the Tiste.

Mother Dark's three children.

Three names ...

Andarist, who long ago surrendered his power in answer to a grief that could never heal. All unknowing that the hand that delivered that grief was mine.

Anomandaris Dragnipurake, who broke with his Mother and with his kind. Who then vanished before I could deal with him. Vanished, likely never to be seen again.

And now, Silchas Ruin, who in a very short time will know the eternal prison of the Azath.

Scabandari Bloodeeye was pleased. For his people. For himself. This world he would conquer. Only the first Andii settlers could pose any challenge to his claim.

A champion of the Tiste Andii in this realm? I can think of no-one... no-one with the power to stand before me...
It did not occur to Scabandari Bloodeye to wonder where, of the three sons of Mother Dark, the one who had vanished might have gone.

But even that was not his greatest mistake ...

On a glacial berm to the north, the lone Jaghut began weaving the sorcery of Omtose Phellack. He had witnessed the devastation wrought by the two Soletaken Eleint and their attendant armies. Little sympathy was spared for the K'Chain Che'Malle. They were dying out anyway, for a myriad host of reasons, none of which concerned the Jaghut overmuch. Nor did the intruders worry him. He had long since lost his capacity for worry. Along with fear. And, it must be admitted, wonder.

He felt the betrayal when it came, the distant bloom of magic and the spilling of ascendant blood. And the two dragons were now one.

Typical.

And then, a short while later, in the time when he rested between weavings of his ritual, he sensed someone approaching him from behind. An Elder god, come in answer to the violent rift torn between the realms. As expected. Still... which god? K'rul? Draconus? The Sister of Cold Nights? Osseric? Kilmandaros? Sechul Lath? Despite his studied indifference, curiosity finally forced him to turn to look upon the newcomer.

Ah, unexpected . . . but interesting.

Mael, Elder Lord of the Seas, was wide and squat, skin a deep blue, fading to pale gold at throat and bared belly. Lank blonde hair hung unbound from his broad, almost flat pate. And in Mael's amber eyes, sizzling rage.

'Gothos,' Mael rasped, 'what ritual do you invoke in answer to this?'

The Jaghut scowled. 'They've made a mess. I mean to cleanse it.'

'Ice,' the Elder god snorted. 'The Jaghut answer to everything.'

'And what would yours be, Mael? Flood, or ... flood?'

The Elder god faced south, the muscles of his jaw bunching. 'I am to have an ally. Kilmandaros. She comes from the other side of the rent.'

'Only one Tiste Soletaken is left,' Gothos said. 'Seems he struck down his companion, and even now delivers him into the keeping of the Azath Tower's crowded yard.'

'Premature. Does he think the K'Chain Che'Malle his only opposition in this realm?'

The Jaghut shrugged. 'Probably.'

Mael was silent for a time, then he sighed and said, 'With your ice, Gothos, do not destroy all of this. Instead, I ask that you ... preserve.'

'Why?'

'I have my reasons.'

'I am pleased for you. What are they?''

The Elder god shot him a dark look. 'Impudent bastard.'

'Why change?''

'In the seas, Jaghut, time is unveiled. In the depths ride currents of vast antiquity. In the shallows whisper the future. The tides flow between them in ceaseless exchange. Such is my realm. Such is my knowledge. Seal this
devastation in your damned ice, Gothos. In this place, freeze time itself. Do this, and I will accept an indebtedness to you ... which one day you might find useful.'

Gothos considered the Elder god's words, then nodded. 'I might at that. Very well, Mael. Go to Kilmandaros. Swat down this Tiste Eleint and scatter his people. But do it quickly.'

Mael's eyes narrowed. 'Why?'

'Because I sense a distant awakening – but not, alas, as distant as you would like.'

'Anomander Rake.'

Gothos nodded.

Mael shrugged. 'Anticipated. Osseric moves to stand in his path.'

The Jaghut's smile revealed his massive tusks. 'Again?'

The Elder god could not help but grin in answer.

And though they smiled, there was little humour on that glacial berm.

* * *

1133rd Year of Burn's Sleep
Year of the White Veins in the Ebony
Three years before the Letherii Seventh Closure

He awoke with a bellyful of salt, naked and half-buried in white sand amidst the storm's detritus. Seagulls cried overhead, their shadows wheeling across the rippled beach. Cramps spasming his gut, he groaned and slowly rolled over.

There were more bodies on the beach, he saw. And wreckage. Chunks and rafts of fast-melting ice rustled in the shallows. Crabs scuttled in their thousands.

The huge man lifted himself to his hands and knees. And then vomited bitter fluids onto the sands. Pounding throbs wracked his head, fierce enough to leave him half-blind, and it was some time before he finally rocked back to sit up and glared once more at the scene around him.

A shore where no shore belonged.

And the night before, mountains of ice rising up from the depths, one — the largest of them all – reaching the surface directly beneath the vast floating Meckros city. Breaking it apart as if it were a raft of sticks. He had seen nothing like it. Meckros histories recounted nothing remotely like the devastation he had seen wrought. Sudden and virtually absolute annihilation of a city that was home to twenty thousand. Disbelief still tormented him, as if his own memories held impossible images, the conjuring of a fevered brain.

But he knew he had imagined nothing. He had but witnessed.

And, somehow, survived.

The sun was warm, but not hot. The sky overhead was milky white rather than blue. And the seagulls, he now saw, were something else entirely. Reptilian, pale-winged.

He staggered to his feet. The headache was fading, but shivers now swept through him, and his thirst was a raging demon trying to claw up his throat.

The cries of the flying lizards changed pitch and he swung to face inland.

Three creatures had appeared, clambering through the pallid tufts of grass above the tide-line. No higher than
his hip, black-skinned, hairless, perfectly round heads and pointed ears. Bhoka'ral – he recalled them from his youth, when a Meckros trading ship had returned from Nemil – but these seemed to be muscle-bound versions, at least twice as heavy as those pets the merchants had brought back to the floating city. They made directly for him.

He looked round for something to use as a weapon, finding a piece of driftwood that would serve as a club. Hefting it, he waited as the bhoka'ral drew closer.

They halted, yellow-shot eyes staring up at him.

Then the middle one gestured.

_Come._ There was no doubting the meaning of that all-too-human beckoning.

The man scanned once more the strand – none of the bodies he could see were moving, and the crabs were feeding unopposed. He stared up once more at the strange sky, then stepped towards the three creatures.

They backed away and led him up to the grassy verge.

Those grasses were as nothing he had ever seen before, long tubular triangles, razor-edged – as he discovered once he passed through them to find his low legs crisscrossed in cuts. Beyond, a level plain stretched inland, bearing only the occasional tuft of the same grass. The ground in between was salt-crusted and barren. A few chunks of stone dotted the plain, no two alike and all oddly angular, unweathered.

In the distance stood a lone tent.

The bhoka'ral guided him towards it.

As they drew near, he saw threads of smoke drifting out from the peak and slitted flap that marked the doorway.

His escort halted and another wave directed him to the entrance. Shrugging, he crouched and crawled inside.

In the dim light sat a shrouded figure, hood disguising its features. A brazier was before it, from which heady fumes drifted. Beside the entrance stood a crystal bottle, some dried fruit and a loaf of dark bread.

'The bottle holds spring water,' the figure rasped in the Meckros tongue. 'Please, take time to recover from your ordeal.'

He grunted his thanks and quickly took the bottle.

Thirst blissfully slackened, he reached for the bread. 'I thank you, stranger,' he rumbled, then shook his head. 'That smoke makes you swim before my eyes.'

A hacking cough that might have been laughter, then something resembling a shrug. 'Better than drowning. Alas, it eases my pain. I shall not keep you long. You are Withal, the Swordmaker.'

The man started, then his broad brow knotted. 'Aye, I am Withal, of the Third Meckros city – which is now no more.'

'A tragic event. You are the lone survivor... through my own efforts, though it much strained my powers to intervene.'

'What place is this?'

'Nowhere, in the heart of nowhere. A fragment, prone to wander. I give it what life I can imagine, conjured from memories of my home. My strength returns, although the agony of my broken body does not abate. Yet listen, I have talked and not coughed. That is something.' A mangled hand appeared from a ragged sleeve and scattered seeds onto the brazier's coals. They spat and popped and the smoke thickened.

'Who are you?' Withal demanded.
'A fallen god ... who has need of your skills. I have prepared for your coming, Withal. A place of dwelling, a forge, all the raw materials you will need. Clothes, food, water. And three devoted servants, whom you had already met—'

'The bhoka'ral?' Withal snorted. 'What can—'

'Not bhoka'ral, mortal. Although perhaps they once were. These are Nacht. I have named them Rind, Mape and Pule. They are of Jaghut fashioning, capable of learning all that you require of them.'

Withal made to rise. 'I thank you for the salvation, Fallen One, but I shall take my leave of you. I would return to my own world—'

'You do not understand, Withal,' the figure hissed. 'You will do as I say here, or you will find yourself begging for death. I now own you, Swordmaker. You are my slave and I am your master. The Meckros own slaves, yes? Hapless souls stolen from island villages and such on your raids. The notion is therefore familiar to you. Do not despair, however, for once you have completed what I ask of you, you shall be free to leave.'

Withal still held the club, the heavy wood cradled on his lap. He considered.

A cough, then laughter, then more coughing, during which the god raised a staying hand. When the hacking was done, he said, 'I advise you to attempt nothing untoward, Withal. I have plucked you from the seas for this purpose. Have you lost all honour? Oblige me in this, for you would deeply regret my wrath.'

'What would you have me do?'

'Better. What would I have you do, Withal? Why, only what you do best. Make me a sword.'

Withal grunted. 'That is all?'

The figure leaned forward. 'Ah well, what I have in mind is a very particular sword ...'

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